

THE MAN
IN THE
PICTURE



SUSAN HILL

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PROLOGUE



THE STORY was told to me by my old tutor, Theo Parmitter, as we sat beside the fire in his college rooms one bitterly cold January night. There were still real fires in those days, the coals brought up by the servant in huge brass scuttles. I had travelled down from London to see my old friend, who was by then well into his eighties, hale and hearty and with a mind as sharp as ever, but crippled by severe arthritis so that he had difficulty leaving his rooms. The college looked after him well. He was one of a dying breed, the old Cambridge bachelor for whom his college was his family. He had lived in this handsome set for over fifty years and he would be content to die here. Meanwhile a number of us, his old pupils from

several generations back, made a point of visiting him from time to time, to bring news and a breath of the outside world. For he loved that world. He no longer went out into it much but he loved the gossip – to hear who had got what job, who was succeeding, who was tipped for this or that high office, who was involved in some scandal.

I had done my best to entertain him most of the afternoon and through dinner, which was served to us in his rooms. I would stay the night, see a couple of other people and take a brisk walk round my old stamping grounds, before returning to London the following day.

But I should not like to give the impression that this was a sympathy visit to an old man from whom I gained little in return. On the contrary, Theo was tremendous company, witty, acerbic, shrewd, a fund of stories which were not merely the rambling reminiscences of an old man. He was a wonderful conversationalist – people, even the youngest Fellows, had always vied to sit next to him at dinner in hall.



Now, it was the last week of the vacation and the

college was quiet. We had eaten a good dinner, drunk a bottle of good claret, and we were stretched out comfortably in our chairs before a good fire. But the winter wind, coming as always straight off the Fens, howled round and occasionally a burst of hail rattled against the glass.

Our talk had been winding down gently for the past hour. I had told all my news, we had set the world to rights between us, and now, with the fire blazing up, the edge of our conversation had blunted. It was delightfully cozy sitting in the pools of light from a couple of lamps and for a few moments I had fancied that Theo was dozing.

But then he said, 'I wonder if you would care to hear a strange story?'

'Very much.'

'Strange and somewhat disturbing.' He shifted in his chair. He never complained of it but I suspected that the arthritis gave him considerable pain. 'The right sort of tale for such a night.'

I glanced across at him. His face, caught in the flicker of the firelight, had an expression so serious – I would almost say deathly serious – that I was startled. 'Make of it what you will, Oliver,' he said quietly, 'but I assure you of this, the story is true.'

He leaned forward. 'Before I begin, could I trouble you to fetch the whisky decanter nearer?'

I got up and went to the shelf of drinks, and as I did so, Theo said, 'My story concerns the picture to your left. Do you remember it at all?'

He was indicating a narrow strip of wall between two bookcases. It was in heavy shadow. Theo had always been known as something of a shrewd art collector with some quite valuable old-master drawings and eighteenth-century water-colours, all picked, he had once told me, for modest sums when he was a young man. I do not know much about paintings, and his taste was not really mine. But I went over to the picture he was pointing out.

'Switch on the lamp there.'

Although it was a somewhat dark oil painting, I now saw it quite well and looked at it with interest. It was of a Venetian carnival scene. On a landing stage beside the Grand Canal and in the square behind it, a crowd in masks and cloaks milled around among entertainers – jugglers and tumblers and musicians and more people were climbing into gondolas, others already out on the water, the boats bunched together, with the gondoliers clashing

poles. The picture was typical of those whose scenes are lit by flares and torches which throw an uncanny glow here and there, illuminating faces and patches of bright clothing and the silver ripples on the water, leaving other parts in deep shadow. I thought it had an artificial air but it was certainly an accomplished work, at least to my inexperienced eye.

I switched off the lamp and the picture, with its slightly sinister revellers, retreated into its corner of darkness again.

‘I don’t think I ever took any notice of it before,’ I said now, pouring myself a whisky. ‘Have you had it long?’

‘Longer than I have had the right to it.’

Theo leaned back into his deep chair so that he too was now in shadow. ‘It will be a relief to tell someone. I have never done so and it has been a burden. Perhaps you would not mind taking a share of the load?’

I had never heard him speak in this way, never known him sound so deathly serious, but of course I did not hesitate to say that I would do anything he wished, never imagining what taking, as he called it, ‘a share of the load’ would cost me.

ONE



MY STORY really begins some seventy years ago, in my boyhood. I was an only child and my mother died when I was three. I have no memory of her. Nowadays, of course, my father might well have made a decent fist of bringing me up himself, at least until he met a second wife, but times were very different then, and although he cared greatly for me, he had no idea how to look after a boy scarcely out of nappies, and so a series of nurses and then nannies were employed. I have no tale of woe, of cruelty and harm at their hands. They were all kindly and well-meaning enough, all efficient, and though I remember little of them, I feel a general warmth towards them and the way they steered me into young boyhood. But my

mother had had a sister, married to a wealthy man with considerable land and properties in Devon, and from the age of seven or so I spent many holidays with them and idyllic times they were. I was allowed to roam free, I enjoyed the company of local boys – my aunt and uncle had no children but my uncle had an adult son from his first marriage, his wife having died giving birth – and of the surrounding tenant farmers, the villagers, the ploughmen and blacksmiths, grooms and hedgers and ditchers. I grew up healthy and robust as a result of spending so much time outdoors. But when I was not about the countryside, I was enjoying a very different sort of education indoors. My aunt and uncle were cultured people, surprisingly widely and well read and with a splendid library. I was allowed the run of this as much as I was allowed the run of the estate and I followed their example and became a voracious reader. But my aunt was also a great connoisseur of pictures. She loved English watercolours but also had a broad, albeit traditional, taste for the old masters, and though she could not afford to buy paintings by the great names, she had acquired a good collection of minor artists. Her husband took little interest in this area, but he was more than

happy to fund her passion, and seeing that I showed an early liking for certain pictures about the place, Aunt Mary jumped at the chance of bringing someone else up to share her enthusiasm. She began to talk to me about the pictures and to encourage me to read about the artists, and I very quickly understood the delight she took in them and had my own particular favourites among them. I loved some of the great seascapes and also the watercolours of the East Anglia school, the wonderful skies and flat fens – I think my taste in art had a good deal to do with my pleasure in the outside world. I could not warm to portraits or still lifes – but nor did Aunt Mary and there were few of them about. Interiors and pictures of churches left me cold and a young boy does not understand the charms of the human figure. But she encouraged me to be open to everything, not to copy her taste but to develop my own and always to wait to be surprised and challenged as well as delighted by what I saw.

I owe my subsequent love of pictures entirely to Aunt Mary and those happy, formative years. When she died, just as I was coming up to Cambridge, she left me many of the pictures you see around you now and others, too, some of which I sold in order

to buy different ones – as I know she would have wished me to do. She was an unsentimental woman and she would have wanted me to keep my collection alive, to enjoy the business of acquiring new when I had tired of the old.

In short, for some twenty years or more I became quite a picture dealer, going to auctions regularly and in the process of having fun at the whole business building up more capital than I could ever have enjoyed on my academic salary. In between my forays into the art world, of course, I worked my way slowly up the academic ladder, establishing myself here in the college and publishing the books you know. I missed my regular visits to Devon once my aunt and uncle were dead, and I could only make sure I maintained my ties to a country way of life by regular walking holidays.



I have sketched in my background and you now know a little more about my love of pictures. But what happened one day you could never guess and perhaps you will never believe the story. I can only repeat what I assured you of at the start. It is true.

TWO



T WAS A BEAUTIFUL day at the beginning of the Easter vacation and I had gone up to London for a couple of weeks, to work in the Reading Room of the British Museum and to do some picture dealing. On this particular day there was an auction, with viewing in the morning, and from the catalogue I had picked out a couple of old-master drawings and one major painting which I particularly wanted to see. I guessed that the painting would go for a price far higher than I could afford but I was hopeful of the drawings and I felt buoyant as I walked from Bloomsbury down to St James's, in the spring sunshine. The magnolias were out, as were the cherry blossom, and set against the white stucco of the eighteenth-century terraces they were gay enough