

(An old-fashioned doorbell sounds. FAIRCHILD walks briskly to answer it. MATTHEW and DANIEL enter.)

FAIRCHILD
May I help you?

DANIEL
We're from The London Chronicle and we're here to see Lady Falkland.

MATTHEW
She's expecting us.

(FAIRCHILD bows formally and moves towards the sitting area.)

FAIRCHILD
Please be seated. Would you care for some ratafia?

MATTHEW
Ratafia? I say, I didn't know there was anybody left who still drank that stuff.

FAIRCHILD
(repressively)
Her ladyship is particularly partial to the spirit. I shall fetch some water.

(FAIRCHILD exits.)

DANIEL
I think you've offended the old chap.

MATTHEW
But it's really ghastly stuff!

DANIEL
Well, you didn't have to make your distaste for it so clear.

MATTHEW
I'll be damned if I'll pander to the sensibilities of a man wearing coat-tails in the middle of the day.

DANIEL
No, but you must pander to the sensibilities of the old lady if we're to leave here with a story that makes any sense at all.

MATTHEW
Sense and Sensibility – aha!

DANIEL
Jane Austen? Ah well, I suppose it's an improvement upon the Barbara Cartland references. Have you got the notes?

MATTHEW
(taking a notebook out of his briefcase)

They're right here. Painted in Venice in 1762, vanished from Venice in 1893, last spotted at Falkland House in London by His Excellency Giovanni Pesaro in 2010, only recognised through Donato's inferior copy of it – I think that about covers it.

DANIEL

Sounds like we're all set.

MATTHEW

I don't understand why it's such a big deal, though. Do you think the Italians secretly suspect that it was painted by Michelangelo?

DANIEL

That's a clever theory, Matthew. Michelangelo died almost two hundred years before it was painted, so if they do suspect that it's a very big deal indeed!

MATTHEW

(clearing his throat sheepishly)

Well then, Daniel, I don't see why the old lady won't just give it up.

(Clanking heels are heard approaching the room.)

DANIEL

(standing up)

I think we're about to find out.

(LADY FALKLAND enters with a flourish.)

LADY FALKLAND

Gentlemen!

(LADY FALKLAND pauses with theatrical effect, a proud smile hovering on her lips, so that MATTHEW and DANIEL can take in the magnificence of her presence. MATTHEW's jaw drops open slightly. Even DANIEL is momentarily stunned.)

LADY FALKLAND

I am so sorry to have kept you waiting.

(LADY FALKLAND extends her hand and DANIEL approaches her, extending his own hand. LADY FALKLAND eyes him compellingly, so he kisses her hand. LADY FALKLAND turns to MATTHEW, who tries to recover from his amazement and clumsily performs the same office.)

LADY FALKLAND

Come, let us be comfortable! This modern preoccupation with exercise is so bourgeois.

(LADY FALKLAND sits down in the armchair that was previously occupied by MATTHEW, who fumbles around in his confusion until DANIEL firmly indicates another less comfortable chair to him.)

DANIEL

We are so grateful to you for taking the time to meet with us.