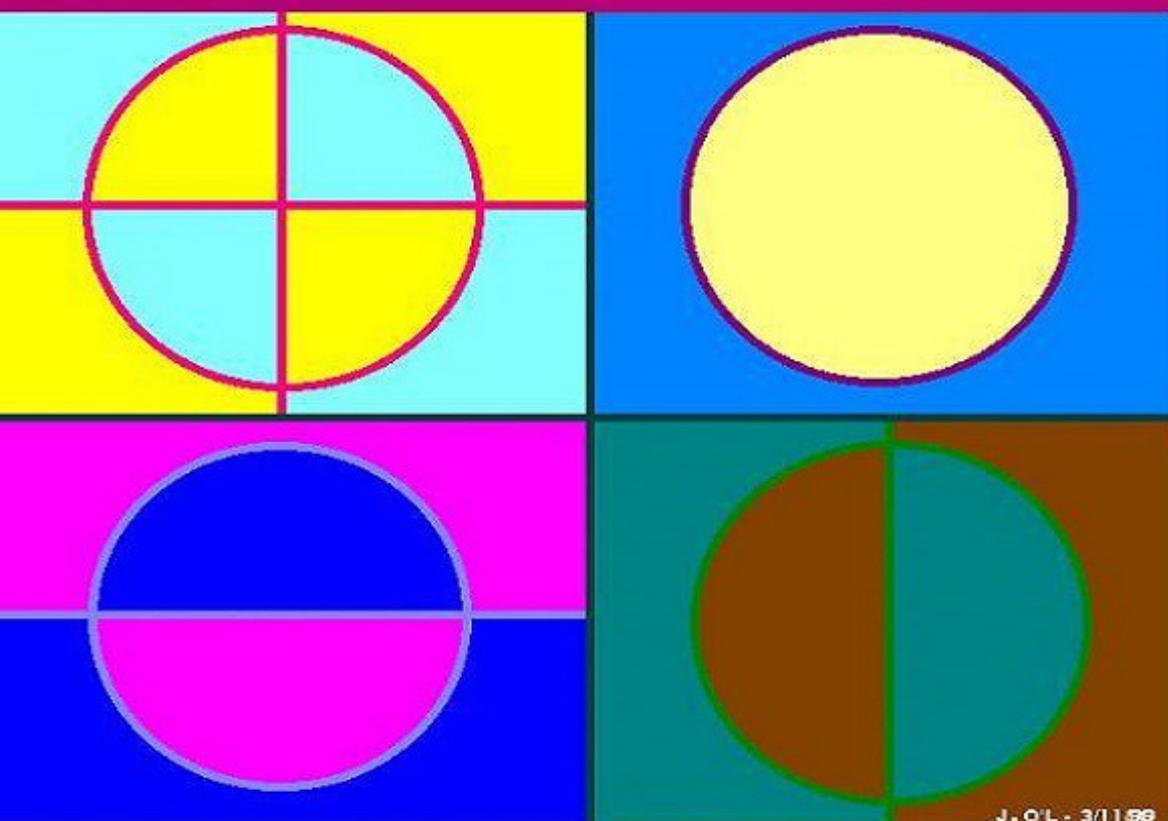


Thwarted Ambitions

John O'Loughlin



J.O.L. - 3/11/89

THWARTED AMBITIONS

By

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Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Prose

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CHAPTER ONE

"Will it look anything like me when it's finished?" the writer Andrew Doyle casually inquired of the man seated at the easel, whose slender body was partly obscured by the canvas upon which he was still busily applying large dollops of deep rich paint.

"Yes, I dare say it will," Robert Harding replied. "At least, it'll look more like you than anyone else."

"Thank goodness for that!" the thirty-year-old Irishman sighed. "One can never be too sure nowadays."

There ensued a short pause, before the artist asked: "Do you object to Expressionist interpretations, then?"

"Only when they distort one's image unfavourably," quipped Andrew. "As long as you don't purposely make me out to be worse-looking than I really am ..."

"You needn't worry about that!" declared Harding reassuringly, a large pair of dark-brown eyes momentarily focusing on his sitter's impassive face. "It's usually the opposite tendency I have to guard against. For it's precisely the tendency to make people out to be better-looking than they really are which seems to appeal to so many of them, ensuring me a guaranteed sale at the expense of artistic truth!"

"And you don't like to flatter them?" the writer knowingly ventured.

"Not if my integrity as an artist suffers in consequence!" Harding averred. "For I don't relish being dictated to by wealthy patrons."

Andrew Doyle had to smile. "Well, you needn't worry about that where I'm concerned," he said. "I can only just afford to pay the price you're asking."

"Which, in any case, is a special concession," affirmed the artist, some liberal brushwork just audible beneath his rather deep baritone voice. "If it wasn't

for the fact you're my next-door neighbour, I'd charge you at least twice as much."

"What, three-hundred quid?" gasped Andrew unbelievably.

"Maybe more."

At which remark there came a gentle stirring to their left, as Carol Jackson, current girlfriend of the man who spoke it, was heard to comment: "He's a born capitalist!" – a statement which duly drew both men's attention to her scantily-clad reclining form. "If it wasn't for the fact that I normally profit from him, I'd have no hesitation in considering him a ruthless shark."

"Oh, come now!" protested Harding jokingly, a mock appearance of outraged innocence momentarily taking possession of his handsome thirty-three-year-old face. "I never charge above my worth, not even where people whom I personally dislike the look of are concerned."

Andrew Doyle fidgeted nervously in his chair. "And are there many of those?" he asked.

"Too many, I'm afraid!" replied Harding bluntly. "Three-quarter-witted aristocrats, half-witted bourgeoisie, and quarter-witted proletarians, to name but ..."

"I sincerely hope that I'm not classifiable in the latter category!" interposed Carol, her acerbic tone-of-voice betraying an emotional sharpness partly intended to avenge her on her lover's previous protest. "I should hate to think that you have such a low opinion of my mind."

"Not that low, honey," the artist admitted. "But certainly lower than my opinion of your body. After all, it's the latter which really matters, isn't it?"

Miss Jackson refrained from commenting on this evidently rhetorical question, but conceded Harding the privilege of a wry smile, which could be interpreted as a tacit confirmation of the fact. Yes, it was first and foremost as a body that she expected to be respected, considering the degree of its sexual attractiveness. A high opinion of her mind from a man like him would simply have detracted, in her view, from its standing, made her feel too

masculine, too equal. It was usually through her body that she obtained her chief pride in life, both as a lover and, no less significantly, as a model. And that body, or at any rate three-quarters of it, was very conspicuously on show today – thanks, in part, to the exceptionally fine weather.

"No, I don't particularly mind a woman being half-witted when she's attractive," Harding resumed, following a reflective pause. "It's when she's ugly that I take offence. My aesthetic sensibilities are then somewhat grossly offended."

"As I can well imagine," chuckled Andrew, before turning an admiring eye away from the sensuous sunbather on the ground and refocusing his attention on the artist. "An attractive female doesn't have to be too intelligent, does she?"

"Not for my purposes," admitted Harding, with a sly wink. "Yet, to tell you the truth, I've known some who did. Exceptions to the rule, of course, but attractive *and* highly intelligent, would you believe? Quite a problem, my friend."

Andrew Doyle felt both puzzled and intrigued. "In what way?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, in a number of ways actually," the artist declared. "But chiefly as regards my art." He brushed away at the canvas awhile, his gaze slightly abstracted, before adding: "They'd criticize or make fun of it on the pretext that it was too decadent or too arcane or too simple or too traditional or too derivative or too commonplace or too ... something or other."

"And was it?"

"How should I know?" Harding exclaimed. "I never bothered to inquire why. So far as I'm concerned my work is what it has to be, irrespective of the current fashion. But these cursed clever females knew better, of course. They'd have expected me to knuckle under to the latest aesthetic conventions at a moment's notice, the drop of a fashionable hat, so to speak. Never mind one's personal psychology or class/race integrity. Just keep-up with the artistic trends."

"Which you presumably refused to do?" Andrew conjectured.

Robert Harding sighed and vaguely nodded his large head. "Only when it was necessary for me to follow my personal bent and do what I felt had to be done," he confirmed. "Although there were times, I have to admit, when I was ahead of them – relatively rare as those times were! But even then I was subject to criticism or mockery from the more intelligent women, who were of the express opinion that I'd done the wrong thing, departed from art altogether, mixed-up too many diverse styles, gone too far ahead, and so on. Whatever I did, I just couldn't win. So in the end I gave-up collecting highly intelligent women and reverted – or perhaps I should say progressed – to collecting only moderately intelligent ones, who didn't know enough about modern art to unduly exasperate me with their opinions, and who very rarely commented upon my creative faults or presumed shortcomings."

"I see," said Andrew, whose sitter's impassivity was slightly ruffled by a trace of ironic amusement at Harding's expense, since it seemed to him that the artist was exaggerating his misfortunes for the sake of a little masculine sympathy. After all, weren't some women intelligent enough to keep quiet about matters which might give offence to any man with whom they had intimate or, at any rate, regular connections? He'd known a few who were, anyway. Rather than making them critical of one's literary or aesthetic predilections, their intelligence sufficed to keep them discreet, to inhibit the formulation of rash or superficial judgements, opinions, etc., which might have upset their lover and had a detrimental, if not fatal, effect upon their relationship. Perhaps Harding had lacked the good fortune to encounter such females? Perhaps, on the other hand, he'd no real use for them, since possessing an instinctive ability or subconscious need to attract the other sort – a sort whose above-average intelligence required that they adopt a condescending and, at times, positively hostile opinion of his work? It wasn't for Andrew to arrive at any definite conclusions on that score, but he half-suspected, from what he already knew about his next-door neighbour, that there might well be more than a grain of masochistic truth in the latter assumption! Even Carol Jackson, whose predominantly sensual nature apparently precluded her from placing any great pride in her intellect, struck one as being somewhat imperious, if not downright rude, at times. Attractive she might be, but it was hardly in Andrew Doyle's sensitive and fundamentally self-respecting nature to consider attractiveness an excuse for impertinence! On the contrary, he would automatically have revolted against

any female who exploited her good looks or sexual standing in what, to him, seemed such an ignominious fashion. Experience had more than adequately taught him that he had no patience for women who were rude. They simply offended him.

Towards four o'clock the artist opted for a late-afternoon tea break, thereby giving his subject an opportunity to stretch his legs by strolling around the elongated back garden in which he'd been patiently, even stoically, sitting for the greater part of the day. Apart from the presence of a couple of old apple trees, a few lilac bushes, and a narrow bed of roses along the length of the fence adjoining his property, the garden in question contained little to suggest that its owner had any real interest in gardening, since it was of such a simple and straightforward appearance. What interest Harding might have had in his garden appeared to be confined to keeping it in trim, not to encouraging it to blossom! This artist was fundamentally a negative gardener – in other words, one whose only motivation for cutting the grass or pruning the rose bushes or removing the weeds was to prevent his garden from becoming a kind of mini-jungle. As for pride in the garden or gardening *per se*, he would evidently have considered it *infra dignum*, since too much the artist or aesthete to desire being associated, in his imagination, with the philistine status of a mere gardener!

Following their tea interval the delicate business of portrait painting and sitting was resumed with fresh resolve, the artist assuring his handsome client that he would soon be through with the task to-hand, which had now taken him the best part of a week.

"And when you've finally completed it?" Andrew asked, curious to learn what Harding's next project would be.

"I'll be able to start work on a portrait of Henry Grace," the latter revealed.

"Who's he?"

Harding looked up from the canvas with an expression of genuine surprise on his flushed face. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of *him*?" he gasped.

"I'm afraid not," confessed Andrew, a faint but perceptible blush betraying his sudden psychic discomfiture in response to Harding's well-nigh incredulous

expression.

"Well, he's one of the leading art critics of our time," the artist duly affirmed.
"Famous throughout the greater part of the Western world."

"Really?" Andrew exclaimed, as an enthusiasm for fresh knowledge suddenly usurped the domain of his emotional unease.... Not that it was a knowledge he valued particularly highly, since, by natural inclination, far more interested in artists than in art critics. But, even so, the addition of Henry Grace to his small store of names such as Charles Baudelaire, André Breton, Herbert Read, Kenneth Clark, Anthony Blunt, and Edward Lucie-Smith was not without at least some significance to him, in that he now possessed a rudimentary knowledge of approximately seven art critics, past and present. Admittedly, seven was a small number compared with the hundreds of artists who'd claimed a place, no matter how humbly, amid his teeming brain cells. But it was a growing number nonetheless! Had he not known so much about so many artists, he would certainly have felt more ashamed of himself, where Harding's manifest surprise was concerned. But the fact of one's knowledge in one context usually precludes feelings of shame at one's ignorance in another, especially when the latter is ordinarily regarded by one as of less interest or value anyway. However, being an artist, Harding doubtless had cause to lay claim to a greater knowledge of art critics, so it was understandable that he made such a show of surprise at Andrew's expense, even though, unbeknown to himself, the latter's ignorance was perfectly justified. Alas, our egotistical habit of projecting ourselves into the world around us, including the human world, is not one that we can easily shake off or dispense with! We measure others according to our own standards, no matter how insular or limited those standards may happen to be!

"Yes, it will be the first time I've been granted the privilege of painting the portrait of a really eminent critic," Harding rejoined, as soon as it became clear to him that the other man had nothing to add to his initial exclamation, "so, for once, albeit with due respect to yourself, I'm quite looking forward to knuckling down to the job. It will be interesting to hear his comments on the subject."

"How did you receive the commission, if that's the right word?" asked Andrew.

"Simply through Mr Grace himself, who rang me, a few weeks ago, to ask whether I'd consider doing his portrait," Harding matter-of-factly replied. "Naturally, I immediately leaped at the chance with an unequivocal 'Yes!' I mean, I couldn't really refuse him, could I? Not after he'd written so eloquently and eulogistically of a couple of my recent paintings in *The Arts Review*, the previous week. I was flattered, to say the least. A friend of his standing in the art world wouldn't be without its advantages, provided, however, that one could actually secure his friendship."

Andrew Doyle offered the artist a diffident smile. "And do you believe you can?" he asked.

"To some extent I believe I already have," Harding affirmed. "But a lot will obviously depend on what happens when he comes over here next week, as promised, and I knuckle down to the arduous task of reproducing, with minor variations, his famous face on canvas. If we can strike-up an interesting conversation in the process, it could well transpire that his faith in my professional abilities will be cemented by a friendship which may well prove to my lasting advantage. It would only take a few more favourable reviews, and perhaps even a book on my work, for me to become internationally famous – of that I'm quite convinced! For his influence in the West, and particularly Britain, is quite considerable – in fact, so considerable that a really good write-up from him, in one or other of the more prestigious arts magazines, would boost my professional reputation overnight."

"Just as a really bad write-down from him would ruin it," Carol declared with severity, from her reclining posture to his right.

"So I'm aware, honey," Harding conceded, frowning slightly. "But the chances of that happening to me are, to say the least, pretty remote."

"Oh, I'm not for one moment suggesting it *would* happen to you," Carol rejoined, gently raising herself on one elbow. "Although it *has* happened to some people, hasn't it?"

"So I gather," conceded Harding, who was suddenly feeling more than a shade annoyed by his girlfriend's light sarcasm – a sarcasm, alas, with which he was all-too-well acquainted by now!

"Anyone you personally know?" Andrew asked him.

"No, to tell you the truth, I don't know all that many people in the art world, not even among the artists themselves, because I never go out of my way to establish contact with others," Harding bluntly replied.

"Not unless they're important to you," Carol sarcastically remarked.

Robert Harding had to smile, albeit weakly. "Few of them ever are, at least not in my experience," he rejoined. "But Henry Grace could be. He's one of the few critics with influence and, with a little luck, I may be able to induce him to wield some of it on my behalf."

"Particularly if you grant him a special concession," Carol suggested, her attention shifting from the artist to the canvas and back again, as though to link them. "You need only knock the price down from, say, five-hundred quid to about two-hundred-and-fifty quid to soften him up a bit. He'd almost certainly appreciate the gesture."

A tinge of embarrassment swept across Harding's clean-shaven face, though he quickly did his best to stifle it beneath a little forced laugh. "I *had* thought of that," he confessed, scarcely bothering to look in Carol's direction. "But I don't want to make my desire to win his support too obvious. Besides, he might get offended."

"I rather doubt it," the model murmured through lips which had already broken into an ironic smile. "I expect he'd be only too delighted to learn that you were offering him his portrait at a knock-down rate on the strength of your professional admiration for him. It would be a good way of establishing, if not furthering, your friendship."

"Yes, I entirely agree!" chimed-in Andrew, feeling he ought to offer the artist some encouragement by way of justifying his own special concession. After all, it wouldn't do to think that he was the sole exception.

Harding was slightly touched by this unexpected contribution from his sitter.

"Well, I shall certainly bear it in mind," he promised. "Although it'll obviously depend on how we get-on during the forthcoming sessions. If my case transpires to being hopeless I'll have no alternative but to charge him the

full amount, if only to compensate for any personal inconvenience. It remains to be seen." And with that said, a silence supervened between them all which wasn't broken until, giving vent to an exclamation of triumph some twenty minutes later, the artist stood up and announced to his sitter that the portrait was at last completed. "You like it?" he asked, as, abandoning his seat, Andrew apprehensively walked over to witness the result.

"Yes, I'm relieved to say I do," the writer admitted, following a brief inspection of its moderately Expressionist outlines. "It's definitely more like me than anyone else."

"I told you it would be," Harding rejoined, his thin lips curving into a self-satisfied smile. "Although it does flatter you rather more than I'd intended."

"Oh, come now!" protested Andrew half-jokingly. But he was unable to prevent himself from blushing.

CHAPTER TWO

It took a couple of days for Andrew Doyle to get used to the presence of his portrait, hanging in the study of his ground-floor flat. Frankly its existence there struck him as somewhat pretentious, elevating him out-of-all-proportion to his actual status. Gradually, however, he became less conscious of that and more resigned to living with it as a matter of course. Whether or not other people would approve of the work ... was a matter of complete indifference to him, as was its presence on the wall above his writing desk. Now that the temptation to have his relatively youthful face transposed to canvas had been realized, he could forget all about the experience and turn his attention towards matters of more importance to himself. He might even be able to sell the portrait to a wealthy and admiring collector one day – assuming he ever became sufficiently famous to be in such a privileged position! For the time being, however, it would have to remain where it was, sightlessly staring out onto the back garden.

As for Robert Harding, there was as yet little that Andrew really knew about him; though, to judge by the paintings he'd seen next door, not to mention the one he'd recently purchased, it was evident that his neighbour, besides having a talent for self-publicity, was a talented and versatile artist, who could develop quite interesting potentialities if time permitted.... Not that time was completely on his side as regards the age in which he lived – an age when traditional representational art, no less than traditional representational literature or music, was steadily on the decline and, to all appearances, could hardly be expected to pick up again. At least that was how matters generally stood, though there were, however, a few notable exceptions – works of art which approximated to egocentric greatness in an age of post-egocentric simplicity and even naiveté, whether in respect of the superconscious or of the subconscious. But even that was better than no art at all, if one had a taste for art in general. And even post-egocentric art, conceived, say, in terms of Abstract Expressionism or Post-Painterly Abstraction, was only such in relation to traditional art, where a balance held good between the sensual and the spiritual, the physical and the mental, and dualistic man was aptly reflected in his representational creations. Nowadays, however, that balance had been tipped so much in favour of the spiritual, even with a new disparity between progressive and regressive manifestations of it, that a kind of

transcendent rather than Christian art prevailed, in testimony to a later stage of evolution, wherein the abstract predominated over the concrete. Doubtless there was a limit to just how abstract such art could become before it reached a peak, one way or the other, and this limit, signified, in the most radically progressive examples by a monochrome canvas, had arguably already been presented to the public, thereby signalling the unofficial end of painterly art. For once one had attained to the highest and most radical abstraction there could be no going back to a less abstract approach to painting, no returning to the concrete, even if contrary approaches to abstraction were still possible! Progress in art couldn't be reversed simply because one had a nostalgia for earlier trends. Art wasn't a game that was one thing one moment and a completely different, unrelated thing the next! On the contrary, it was a very definite procedure which progressed from age to age through the requisite transformations laid down by both artistic precedent and the fundamental nature of the age itself. If it didn't, in some measure, reflect the age into which it had been born, no matter how many contradictions that age may have inherited from the past, it wasn't genuine art but, rather, a sham carried out by aesthetic philistines who simply wanted to please themselves and imagined, in consequence, that art could be completely irresponsible, turning its back on the problems and overriding concerns of the age in the name of an ivory-tower isolationism which would inevitably reduce it, or whatever they produced, to the comparatively contemptible level of an amateur pastime – devoid of social or moral significance!

Thus modern painterly art, in attaining to an abstract climax, was drawing to a close, refusing to turn away from the logic inherent in its development towards increased spiritualization, and thereby desert its primary responsibility in response to and furtherance of the developing transcendental nature of the age. A number of the artists involved with this responsibility could certainly have gratified themselves – not least of all financially – by adopting a more traditional approach to art and thereupon painting works which the ignorant or mediocre could have recognized as 'genuine art' – three-dimensional perspective and a credible balance between the concrete and the abstract, with the appropriate traditionally-approved colour schemes thrown-in for good measure. But for a variety of reasons, not excepting their responsibility to society or, more correctly, to themselves as artists, they refused to do so, resolutely sticking to the dictates of the age, with its abstract predilections. And even if some of them didn't possess these talents primarily because they were heirs of the Industrial Revolution and the large-scale

urbanization which had resulted from it – in other words, because the environments in which they'd matured were inimical to the life of the soul, with its emphasis on the sensuous and the emotional – then their transcendental allegiance to the dictates of the age was still the most important consideration, rendering the ability or inability to paint in traditional terms largely if not completely irrelevant. If the ignorant or cynical wished to think otherwise, so be it! But their desire to see 'real art' instead of 'modern art', at the latest and most genuine exhibitions, would never be realized, neither now nor in the future. The urban environment was fundamentally against it.

But where did Robert Harding fit-in to all these thoughts that flitted through Andrew Doyle's mind, in a plethora of paradoxical contradictions, as he sat in his study, one morning about a week after the completion of his portrait, and indifferently gazed out, through his closed french windows, on to the garden, now freshly bathed in sunlight? Certainly there was much more to Harding's art than the execution of semi-Expressionist portraits – passably accomplished though they were. On the few occasions when he'd sat in his neighbour's studio or wandered around, from room to room, out of idle curiosity, he'd noticed examples of Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Op, and even Surrealism on various of the walls – each work testifying to the artist's awareness of contemporary or, at any rate, modern trends ... as largely bearing, thought Andrew, on a petty-bourgeois intelligentsia who necessarily fought shy of photography, with its communistic and, hence, objective bias for social realism more symptomatic, it seemed to him, of a proletarian humanism. If portrait painting was one of Harding's creative lines, it could hardly be described as the only one; though, lately, it had evidently usurped the domain of his other painterly concerns and rendered them at least temporarily redundant. How long he would continue to paint portraits was anyone's guess, but it seemed not unlikely that his recent decision to do so was in part sparked off by a growing discontent with the bi-polar trend of modern art towards increased abstraction, and by a desire, in consequence, to return it to a more concrete and possibly traditional mode of painting such as might, besides offering him greater financial reward, gratify his penchant for form, for unity and coherence. Whether he'd eventually grow disillusioned with or tired of this, however, remained to be seen. But he showed no signs of doing so at present. On the contrary, the very fact that he had asked his new neighbour, of only moderate literary fame, whether he'd like his portrait done and, when this worthy individual had modestly declined, well-nigh

insisted on it, on the pretext that it would be to his subsequent professional advantage to be seen on canvas, suggested an urgency of intent bordering on the ridiculous, so imperative must have been his need to find someone, no matter how socially insignificant, on whom to practise. Doubtless the preoccupation afforded him by Andrew Doyle's subsequent, if rather unenthusiastic, consent prevented him from being either idle or, worse still, relapsing into a non-representational mode of art which, for some as-yet-unspecified reason, he preferred to avoid. That more than likely being the case, it was obviously in his personal interests to carry on from where he'd left off and execute a number of other such works – works which would, in some measure, unburden him of the contradictory pressures and responsibilities of being modern. For it did seem that the aesthete in Harding, which Andrew had recognized and been obliged to acknowledge on their first meeting, little over a month ago, was in earnest rebellion against the latest developments in art which, in their utter and disarming simplicity, scorned the traditional criteria of aesthetics as though they had never existed.

Not that Harding had intimated to him of any such rebellion at the time, nor, for that matter, subsequently, since he was far too discreet to risk exposing himself to opposition, ideologically or otherwise, from a person he as yet knew very little about and wanted, for the aforementioned reasons, to exploit.

All the same, it wasn't too difficult for Andrew Doyle to put two-and-two together and adduce, from Harding's reticence and general aestheticism, the likelihood of a conservative if not reactionary turn-of-mind where uncritical fidelity to the more progressive contemporary trends in art was concerned. Even his considerable knowledge of Christian art, a knowledge embracing almost everything of any value from approximately the 12th–19th centuries, spoke eloquently on behalf of an unsatisfied aestheticism and preference for traditional values, for a return, in short, to that compromise between sensuality and spirituality which had characterized the era of egocentric art. An unequivocal admission of this fact might have rendered him vulnerable to critical attack and rejection by one who, on first setting foot in his house, had expressed tentative approval of an Abstract Expressionist canvas, after the manner of de Kooning, hanging in the entrance hall. Yet for reasons only vaguely hinted at, and then unconsciously, he'd refrained from any such admission and, instead, pandered to Andrew's tastes to the extent he could.

Nevertheless it was evident, from the first, that a kind of spiritual friction existed between the two men which no amount of duplicity or neighbourly

deference could entirely cloak – a friction which led the writer to critically reflect upon a number of things that had passed between them, during the course of the afternoon in question, and not least of all where politics and religion were concerned. For although neither of them had 'come out', as it were, about their respective beliefs and allegiances on those counts, nevertheless it was fairly evident, from various statements and casual asides Harding had let drop during the course of their conversation, that they were by no means of a kindred disposition but, rather, of an unequal if not downright antagonistic one! Still, neighbours were neighbours, and the fact that they were both professionals of approximately the same age – Andrew being a mere three years younger than the painter – was conducive towards the establishment of a cordial, not to say optimistic, acquaintanceship. How they'd respond to each other in due course when, through familiarity, they became a little less guarded in their conversation, remained to be seen; though Andrew already harboured some misgivings as to the prospect of a genuine friendship, based on religious and political affinities, subsequently developing. Even that remark Harding had casually let slip, during the final afternoon of his sitter's ordeal the previous week, about being obliged to paint three-quarter witted aristocrats, half-witted bourgeoisie, and quarter-witted proletarians had, unbeknown to himself, provided the writer's sensitive imagination with further clues as to the political mentality of his new neighbour, causing him to reflect upon the probability of an allegiance, consciously or unconsciously, to the upper classes, in contrast to any socialistic bias which would have favoured the people.... Not that the descending scale-of-values, evidently improvised on the spur-of-the-moment, was without at least some applicability to the general intellectual or imaginative differences which undoubtedly existed between the classes in question. But, even so, a remark like that could easily be interpreted in terms of fascism or even royalism. Yet Harding, with his aestheticism and expansive knowledge of Christian art, was unlikely to be a fascist, even if the possessor, consciously or unconsciously, of fascist tendencies. No, in all probability, he was simply a bourgeois aesthete, as most young aesthetes tended to be these days. And that doubtless went some way towards explaining why he was in rebellion, willy-nilly, against the trend of modern art towards increased abstraction, and had consequently reverted to painting portraits, to reinstating the concrete to the extent he could. The bourgeois in him had taken fright at the progressive spiritualization of art, but to save face or, at any rate, prevent this realization from breaking through the thin barrier of moral integrity with which he protected his conscience, the aesthete had

conveniently come to the fore and recoiled from the simplicities of the latest abstractions in the name of 'genuine art', to thereupon initiate a return to portraiture, with its sensuous form.

Yes, that was how it seemed to Andrew Doyle, as he reflected on the probable motives for Harding's abandonment of painterly abstraction, an abstraction which, in any case, he'd never appeared to practise too ardently or convincingly, if the original paintings on display in his house were anything by which to judge! On the contrary, the first impression a number of them had made on Andrew was hardly such as to suggest that their creator possessed a profound and intimate knowledge of modern art! Rather, that he managed a perfunctory attempt at emulating it. The result, one felt, was more a pastiche than a genuine outpouring of progressive sentiment, a thin veneer of modernism over the essentially reactionary and conservative nature of the artist's soul. Perhaps a brave attempt at camouflaging his true loyalties? But not a particularly convincing one! His return to portraiture must have come as something of a relief.

The sudden sound of someone laughing from the direction of the artist's back garden caused Andrew to start from his morose speculations, at Harding's expense, and wonder who it could be? Then he remembered that Henry Grace had been expected to put in a few appearances, next door, for the sake of his portrait, this week, and wondered whether it mightn't be him? Apparently, it was in the nature of Harding to paint in his garden when the weather permitted, and today, being so clear and warm, was evidently no obstacle to his *pleinair* predilections but, rather, a strong encouragement to them. Whether or not he'd already painted part of the new portrait in his studio would have no bearing, seemingly, on any subsequent decision to paint outdoors. For he somehow managed to change from one light to another without any professional qualms or undue technical difficulties. The only possible obstruction to this environmental resilience would come, if at all, from his sitter, who might object to being exposed to the sun for too long, or of having to endure stiff breezes, etc. But such objections were apparently few-and-far-between, a majority of sitters evidently preferring the superficial beauty and apparent cleanliness of Harding's back garden to the profound ugliness and essential stuffiness of his studio.

With curiosity aroused, Andrew silently opened his french windows and tiptoed out into the garden, availing himself of the cover afforded by the tall

lattice-fence which divided his strip of turf from Harding's. Although the laughter had evaporated, a little sporadic conversation could be heard instead, which was punctuated, every few seconds, by enigmatic silences or subdued humming. Tiptoeing up as close as possible to the fence without running the risk of detection, he peered through a narrow gap in the lattice at the scene beyond, where Harding was indeed at work on the art critic. For at that moment the sound of a woman's voice saying: "Do you know, Henry, I really can't remember the last time you drank champagne," was distinctly audible above a protracted bout of subdued humming which issued from the direction of the man in question.

"Can't you, my dear?" Mr Grace responded in a vaguely commiserating tone-of-voice.

"Not unless it was at Raymond's, that time in '76," the lady conjectured.

Andrew Doyle swivelled his eyes over to the right to get a look at the physical source of the female voice which, until then, had simply eluded him. He could just discern, through the tangle of rose bushes the other side of his fence, the outlines of a profiled head with short grey hair freshly tinted a pale purplish hue. With further optical manoeuvrings it was just about possible for him to follow the length of her lightly dressed body from the top of her head down to the tips of her toes, as she reclined, without sunglasses, in a bright-green deck chair which Harding had evidently brought out into the garden on her account. She must have been in her late forties or early fifties, judging by the colour of her hair and the mature timbre of her voice.

"Yes, it may well have been," Mr Grace admitted, following a period of reflective deliberation, which might have led one to suppose he was pondering a problem of such magnitude that its correct solution was a veritable matter of life-and-death to him! "Although I've an uneasy suspicion I had a drop in '78 at Maxim's, the time they were opening their new gallery."

"Which was something I missed through ill-health, wasn't it?" the lady commented, half-excusing herself.

"Yes, I do believe it was, Patricia" Mr Grace confirmed, casting her a sidelong and vaguely reproachful glance. "However, it tasted more like cider, so you didn't miss much – not, at any rate, with regards to the refreshments!"

From what Andrew could see of him, Mr Grace was a man of approximately the same age as his wife, with grey hair, an average build, and a patrician profile. Not a particularly handsome-looking figure but arguably an intelligent-looking one nonetheless, a man with an air of authority, acquired, no doubt, during the course of his lengthy career as a maker or breaker of artists. One felt that if he hadn't been an art critic he'd have been a judge.

Possibly even a priest. But at the present juncture in time he was very definitely a sitter for Robert Harding, who, ensconced at his easel no more than a few yards away, appeared to be deeply engrossed in the application of bright pigment to a canvas slightly larger than the one he'd used for his previous client. It was indeed refreshing to behold such an unabashed demonstration of industry, to see the artist knitting his brows and occasionally allowing his tongue to delicately protrude from between his moistened lips, under the apparent exigency of the latest feat of concentration he was imposing upon himself with the encouragement of Mr Grace! Not once, during the entire course of his own portrait engagement with the artist, had Andrew noticed such a display of ardent commitment! Except when replying to the comments of his mistress, Harding had retained an almost unbroken equanimity, a serenity of visage bordering on the angelic. But now? One might have thought him in the throes of some demonic possession, or suffering from a fierce and implacable migraine. The transformation in his approach to portraiture appeared to be so complete ... that Andrew was tempted to laugh, so incongruous an impression did it make on him! If it was an act Harding was putting on to impress the renowned art critic, there could be no doubt that he was flogging it for all it was damned-well worth! A more concentrated act of sustained commitment one couldn't have imagined. Clearly, the absence of Carol Jackson from the scene had something to do with it. For, with her present, he wouldn't have felt quite so confident that the act would be taken seriously. Indeed, he mightn't have been able to perform one at all. But that was probably beside-the-point and only an aside that Andrew felt inclined to entertain on the strength of his sublimated amusement.

"Have you ever been to Maxim's, Robert?" the figure in the deck chair suddenly inquired of the painter.

"Yes, once or twice actually," he answered.

"Really?" Mrs Grace appeared lost in thought, but Mr Grace, having apparently lost interest in the champagne problem, pressed the artist to reveal what he thought of the place.

A slightly nervous cough from Harding intimated, to all present, the likelihood of a negative response. "Rather too modern for my tastes," he tentatively confessed, after a moment's cautious hesitation.

Andrew Doyle automatically stepped back from the fence, as though to avoid the gaze of someone who had a suspicion he was there. It was a veritable revelation! A confirmation of his prior assumptions concerning Harding's creative predilections! Maxim's evidently specialized in abstracts.

"Yes, I'd imagined it would be," Mr Grace remarked in an overly sympathetic tone-of-voice, the rudiments of a conspiratorial smile in swift pursuit of his words. "And thus rather too subjective, what?"

The artist nodded in agreement, then proceeded to mix some fresh pigment on his abstract-looking palette. "Not quite what I'd regard as art," he softly commented, becoming a little more forthright. "Though they do deal in a few paintings more to my tastes – portraits and landscapes, for example. Not to mention the odd nude of variable quality."

"Quite!" the critic conceded, nodding vaguely. "Unfortunately the emphasis is on Abstract Expressionism, Op, Pop, and Post-Painterly Abstraction. They don't even deal in Cubist or Surrealist works these days."

"Doubtless they're just another victim of the times," opined Harding, some freshly-tinted pigment poised on the end of his brush, like a blob of coloured ice cream. "Going down the slippery slope of commercial modernism in deference to creative degeneration," he added caustically.

"So it would appear," sighed Mr Grace. "Frankly, if modern art degenerates any further, I'll be out of a job. One feels the critic is a dying breed."

"Well, at least he won't die-out in your lifetime," Mrs Grace declared from her deck chair.

"Small consolation for those who come after me!" Mr Grace retorted, turning

briefly, at Harding's professional expense, towards his wife. "Fortunately, however, there are some artists in the world who are doing their level best to stem the rising tide of anarchic disintegration and thereby grant one the rare opportunity of reviewing art instead of kitsch. Artists who refuse to kowtow to the latest trashy shibboleths but remain loyal, even in the face of hardship, to the essentially objective nature of art."

It wasn't too difficult for Andrew Doyle to notice that, following this comment from 'On High', a modest but perceptible smile had insinuated itself into Harding's formerly stern mien – a smile which betrayed his heartfelt pleasure in identifying with the sentiments of his distinguished sitter. Yes, how significant all this was becoming for the writer, as he continued to spy on the unsuspecting trio through the small gap in his fence! Now there could be absolutely no doubt concerning the artist's bourgeois aestheticism, his reactionary tendencies vis-à-vis modern art! To all intents and purposes he didn't want progress but only regress or, failing that, perpetual stasis. He wasn't prepared to let art exhaust itself, to come to its inevitable painterly end in the ultimate abstraction. He was one of those who wanted, on the contrary, 'to stem the rising tide of anarchic disintegration' as Mr Grace, himself evidently an enemy of progress, had so crudely put it, and thus prevent the evolution of Western art from reaching its subjective goal. And, if possible, he'd doubtless do more than merely 'stem the rising tide'; he would endeavour to reverse it, so that the age could become a victim of his anachronisms, and thereafter be obliged to regard them as alone representative of artistic progress, the 'progress' of a post-abstract accommodation with photographic objectivity, and thus of the bourgeoisie with the proletariat, of liberal with social humanism.

To be sure, it was easy enough to see why portraiture had become such a must for Harding recently, as also why he hoped to curry favour with Mr Grace. And, to judge by the conversation and sentiments exchanged between the two men, he was doing just that – establishing the basis of a mutual understanding which would further his cause by, hopefully, bringing his work into greater prominence. For if Mr Grace wielded as much influential power as Robert Harding supposed, then there could be little doubt that the subsequent assistance of the critic would prove of inestimable value in his hitherto lone-handed battle against abstraction.

Turning away from the fence in manifest disgust, Andrew swiftly tiptoed

back to his study and gently closed its french windows behind him. He'd seen and heard quite enough of his next-door neighbour for one day!

CHAPTER THREE

Donald Prescott was by nature an eccentric. He was also a wealthy bachelor who spent a great deal of time photographing models for both native and foreign magazines. One of the models he photographed most often, whether dressed or undressed, was Robert Harding's current girlfriend, Carol Jackson, whose slim though shapely figure he particularly admired. She was also popular with the editors of a variety of successful men's magazines, and this fact had led to the formation of a sort of Carol Jackson industry for which, apparently, there was never any shortage of custom. Whatever the presentation, she could be depended upon to excite curiosity. And Donald Prescott, her favourite photographer, knew how to make the most of her. He was a dab hand at exploiting women!

At forty-five he was securely established in his chosen profession, able to pick and choose as he thought fit, and no less able to indulge in those favourite eccentricities of his which had earned him almost as great a reputation as his camera. Among their number was the establishment of the Rejection Club for young or aspiring authors who had garnered no less than fifty rejection slips from publishers, which met twice a month in the drawing room of his South Hampstead residence, and whose members spent the greater part of the meeting discussing literature and philosophy, their own and everyone else's. At present, the club membership numbered about forty, a majority of whom had around 50 – 100 rejection slips to their name, though a few had as many as 200 or more. What, besides eccentricity, had prompted Prescott to start the club was a desire to find out more about the difficulties with which aspiring authors were confronted, and to ascertain whether rejections followed as a consequence of a given writer's work being bad or good, insufficiently commercial or insufficiently accomplished, too truthful or too illusory, too bold or too tame, too dignified or too vulgar, the product of an incompatible if not antipathetic ethnicity or somebody who was ethnically acceptable but of the wrong gender, and so on. Having received approximately fifty rejections from a variety of publishers during the three years he'd spent, before turning to photography, as an aspiring author, he wanted to discover whether there were others who'd had as little luck as himself and, if so, for what reasons? Thus he placed a number of advertisements in local newspapers and magazines to the effect that he

intended to start a club for people with fifty or more rejection slips to their name, in order that they could get together on a fortnightly basis to discuss their problems, find out where, if anywhere, they were going wrong, and, if they couldn't rectify anything, at least obtain some mutual consolation and encouragement from one another.

All this had occurred some ten years ago and duly resulted in a steady flow of people in-and-out of the club, most of whom only stayed a few weeks but some of whom, warming to the hospitality and sympathy they received, being of the opinion that it was in their interests to stay much longer. The condition of entry did, however, necessitate that one should produce evidence, in the form of rejection slips, letters, or whatever, to prove one's work had in fact been rejected at least fifty times, in order to preclude the possibility of anyone's bluffing their way into it. But once this fact had been demonstrated, one was free to come and go at one's leisure.

Contrary to Donald Prescott's initial suspicions, a majority of the struggling authors who frequented his house on this basis weren't imbeciles or amateurish duffers who couldn't write to save their skins but, on the contrary, highly-gifted and serious-minded people whose work tended to be either insufficiently commercial to pander to popular taste or, in some cases, detrimental to bourgeois interests and the class system which favoured the rich and high-profiled, including those with a public school and university background, at the expense of the poor and downtrodden, who, excluded from the more glamorous or influential forms of employment, could never or rarely get sufficient media or other publicity to make them a desirable prospect from a publisher's point of view. Indeed, it had completely taken him by surprise to discover that so many intelligent writers regularly had work rejected because it was too scholarly, too philosophical, too ideologically radical, too complex, too outspoken, too satirical, too ethnically irrelevant, or even too revolutionary in its treatment of plot, characterization, style, grammar, etc., for general dissemination within the commercial framework of the so-called free market. Reading through one-another's typescripts, or even in some cases manuscripts, they learnt a great deal more about themselves and the general publishing climate of the age – sub-zero so far as any passionate relationship to intellectual heat was concerned! – than ever they would have done had the club not existed, and frequent rejections obliged them to presume that their work simply 'wasn't good enough'. On the contrary, it was generally found to be 'too good' (both morally and

intellectually), too out-of-the-ordinary to attract a large public, given the crass nature of most people's literary tastes in Britain or, more specifically, of the system which bludgeoned them into conformist acquiescence in the general mediocrity prevailing in successful literary publications, not to mention established literary circles. Now this discovery at least sufficed to reassure many members of the Rejection Club of their respective literary abilities, even if it couldn't alter anything in terms of their immediate or short-term prospects of being published. For few if any of the more intelligent, gifted, and well-educated ones (usually self-taught on the basis of home reading which transcended school education to an extent and in a way that made the latter seem relatively inconsequential) were prepared to sacrifice their creative integrity to the great modern antidote of popular taste, and thereupon reduce their creativity to the lowest-common-commercial-denominator on the basis of a materialistic concession to the supply-on-demand tyranny of market forces!

Indeed, as the club developed and its members became more intimate, a kind of anti-populist campaign was launched in which they vowed to write contemptuously of established authors who specialized in and profited from crime, thriller, war, horror, spy, and occult stories, kowtowing to popular predilections with an opportunistic blatancy totally unworthy of a cultured and discriminating turn-of-mind, never mind a self-respecting artist! Such authors, particularly the most commercially successful of them, were unanimously regarded as the literary scum-of-the-earth, and poster-size reproductions of their fame-wallowing faces were duly tacked to the walls and exposed to graphic disfigurement and verbal abuse as a reminder of just how contemptible they were! And, by way of reminding themselves of their common cause against commercial trash, the Rejection Club sported, in large letters on a wooden plaque which hung over the drawing-room's mantelpiece, a reassuring quotation from *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* by Oscar Wilde, which read: 'No country produces such badly written fiction, such tedious common work in the novel form, such silly, vulgar plays as England. It must necessarily be so. The popular standard is of such a character that no artist can get to it. It is at once too easy and too difficult to be a popular novelist. It is too easy, because the requirements of the public so far as plot, style, psychology, treatment of life, and treatment of literature are concerned are within the reach of the very meanest capacity and the most uncultivated mind. It is too difficult, because to meet such requirements the artist would have to do violence to his temperament, would have to write not for the

artistic joy of writing, but for the amusement of half-educated people, and so would have to suppress his individualism, forget his culture, annihilate his style, and surrender everything that is valuable in him.' Thus read the very pertinent and admirably anti-commercial quotation with which the club members sought, under Donald Prescott's moral guidance, to boost their morale and strengthen their resolve never to capitulate to the pseudo-cultural enemy, whatever his class, but to carry-on fighting against him in the name of art, truth, spirit, intelligence, honesty, courage, idealism, etc., to the bitter end or, preferably, until such time as an ultimate victory had been won, and everything low and mean was systematically consigned to the rubbish bin of commercial history! That Oscar Wilde had fought against this enemy to the bitter end, they fully realized. But so, too, had other such 'saints' of their 'church' as Baudelaire, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Huysmans, James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Hesse, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, and Thomas Mann, so that it was with such courageous names as these in mind that they continued to write and dispatch typescripts, and even manuscripts, not guaranteed to solicit popular endorsement.

Yet there was also another side to the club's attitude towards commercial literature which, initiated by Prescott himself, took the form of an imaginative sympathy for those exceptional publishers who, less overly exploitative than the majority of their competitors, would much rather have published only works of cultural and literary value but were obliged, through force of economic necessity, to kowtow to commercial criteria and only publish such books as could be expected to appeal to a wide public. Here it was not so much the author, whose work (though intrinsically valuable in itself) had been regularly rejected, with whom one was expected to sympathize ... as the publisher who suffered nightmares of depression and humiliation at having to publish so much rubbish, novelistic or otherwise, simply to make ends meet, and who, deep down, would rather have published only what he knew to be artistically and/or culturally meritorious. Instead of which, the cut-throat circumstances of life in a capitalist economy obliged him to earn the privilege of bringing out a few genuinely valuable books by publishing a host of trashy ones – much to his personal dissatisfaction!

Yes, in order not to become too prejudiced against publishers, and thereby run the risk of losing all track of economic reality, Donald Prescott reminded his fellow-rejects, from time to time, of the difficulties they faced, and of the noble intentions which the most reputable firms always harboured. The

literary saint, who suffered all manner of tortuous misgivings and reserves in the face of commercial pressures, had to be juxtaposed with the well-intentioned publisher who, no less frequently, suffered all manner of tortuous misgivings and reserves in the face of economic pressures, before one could hope to get the two in perspective and arrive at anything like a reasonable viewpoint. Otherwise one would be deceiving oneself and doing a grave injustice to both author and publisher alike! Yet this didn't mean to say that, as a writer, one should therefore 'sell out', by sacrificing one's creative principles, and automatically commit literary suicide. If one had any creative principles at all, it was one's duty as an artist to stick by them in order not to allow commercial pressures and temptations to get the better of one. For if one didn't, there could be no question of work of intrinsic literary value ever being produced again! One would simply be reduced to the contemptible status of the literary riff-raff – a victim of the democratic mob and an enemy of the spirit! There could be no question of any member of the Rejection Club becoming that!

Such, at any rate, was how Donald Prescott had reasoned in the heyday of his dedication to the club, which, however, had lately ceased to appeal to him to the extent it formerly did, before he made a name for himself in photography.

More from habit than genuine conviction, he still kept it going and entertained the surviving members to the extent circumstances would permit.

His eccentricity in this respect had not deserted him, even if his initial enthusiasm for the cause, born in days of misery and struggle, had somewhat waned under the influence of his subsequent successes. Nowadays it was primarily to show off his latest photographs and air his prejudices on a variety of topics, from the obsolescence of horse racing to the moral vacuousness of society women, that he allowed a couple of rooms in his spacious house to be invaded, twice a month, by the leading rejects of the literary world, a majority of whom had become so set in their rebellious ways, and so absolutely unable or unwilling to revise their approach to writing, that they virtually regarded every new publication with deep suspicion, believing it must necessarily be morally bad in consequence, and would almost certainly have turned against any member of the club who deserted them in this respect, as though he were a traitor to their cause and accordingly merited the kinds of abuse and contempt ordinarily reserved for the more conspicuous examples of commercial success which hung, somewhat pathetically, from each of the main walls, as if from gibbets!

Concerning Donald Prescott's other main eccentricities, however, it's perhaps wiser not to speak at all. Although it might prove of passing interest to the odd person, here and there, to learn that he was possessed of a marked predilection for women's underclothes, particularly panties, which he collected with a zeal and pride not far removed from what a collector of books or records might experience with each new addition to his collection of cultural artefacts. Not that he went into ladies' underwear shops and actually bought them over the counter, or anything like that. Absolutely not! They came to him via the models, including Carol Jackson, whom he had at one time or another succeeded in seducing (and he'd succeeded in seducing the great majority of them). One pair of panties from each model was his requirement which, once acquired and securely pegged to a clothesline in one of his spare upstairs rooms, became for him the equivalent of what a scalp must have been to a Red Indian in the bad old days of intertribal or colonial warfare – namely an object of conquest.

Altogether, since he first began collecting them, just over six years ago, he now had some 330 pairs of assorted panties dangling in parallel rows of different height across the large room in which he chose to keep them – panties of every shape, size, and colour, with a number of G-strings thrown-in for good measure. And to each item exhibited in this provocative fashion was appended a small cotton tag bearing, in neatly printed block capitals, the forename of its original owner, together with the date of surrender. Thus one might have encountered, in this extraordinary museum of women's briefs, upwards of twenty exhibits bearing the name Susan, sixteen the name Christine, twelve the name Margaret, ten the name Carol, and so on, right the way down to those specimens which were as yet unduplicated, but bore such unusual and exotic names as Norma, Jayshree, Yogini, Shobhana, Shahla, Alia, Isik, and Anne-Marie. To be sure, the genuine connoisseur of panties could hardly have failed to be impressed by this collection, were he granted the good fortune to be escorted around the Panties Museum – as Prescott liked to call it – by the curator-in-residence himself and invited to scrutinize the exhibits to his heart's content, listening, all the while, to the running commentary provided by his host as a means to enlightening him as to the character and quality of their original owners, not to mention the dubious means by which they'd been acquired! Such an unprecedented spectacle could hardly have failed to elicit at least some enthusiasm from the guest whose privilege it was to witness what Prescott proudly referred to as 'The finest private collection of assorted female briefs in Western Europe', even if

the accompanying invitation to take a sniff at as many of them as he pleased in order to verify, where possible, the authenticity of their current owner's claims, wasn't guaranteed to meet with his wholehearted approval! For it had occurred to a few sceptics, when confronted by these exhibits for the first time, to doubt the genuineness of Prescott's claims and to question whether he hadn't simply bought them all in various shops, at one time or another, appended name tags to them, and then cold-bloodedly invented some cock-and-bull story about his conquests, together with equally spurious information regarding the characters and physical qualities of the young women concerned, the better to impress his visitors. But the doubts of the sceptics – for the most part elderly males unwilling to believe their host could possibly have had it off with so many women during the course of his photographic career – were invariably silenced when each of them was personally invited to sniff certain of the exhibits, and accordingly verify the fact that they had indeed been worn and still bore faint traces of their original owners' person. To be sure, the smell of the museum was not, in view of Prescott's disinclination to let-in too much fresh air at the risk of undermining the credibility of his claims, particularly fragrant. But such was his determination to prevent anyone from accusing him of fraud ... that he was more than prepared to put-up with any nasal or psychological inconvenience this caused him, as well as go to the trouble of pointing out such small stains of one sort or another as could still be found on various of the exhibits, as further proof that these items weren't new but decidedly second-hand.

However, the vast majority of Donald Prescott's visitors were prepared to believe what he told them about the items in question without desiring the slightest recourse, nasal or optical, to corroborative evidence. And the vast majority of them, despite initial misgivings and private qualms at the sight of the Panties Museum, had come away feeling rather impressed by its curator's apparent luck with women. Only a relative handful of persons, such as recoiled from any form of eccentricity and originality, whether out of personal insecurity or bourgeois prudery, subsequently harboured serious misgivings. And they generally declined any further invitation Prescott might make to keep people in touch with his various commitments – fetishist or otherwise!

But one of the people who never declined the photographer's invitations to visit him was Carol Jackson, who was now posing for his latest camera in quite the most slender brassiere it had ever been her privilege to wear, her

head thrown back in a posture of sensual abandon, her hands crossed behind it. How many more snaps of this nature Prescott would require she couldn't guess. For he'd taken enough photos of her in a variety of different poses, and with varying amounts of clothes on and/or off, to fill half-a-dozen magazines! She was always amazed by his persistence, a persistence which he attributed to perfectionism and the correlative desire to get the most out of his models; though it was fairly obvious that his real motive was simply a love of taking photos and ordering women about – with or without clothing.

And some of his orders, Carol had to admit, were not at all easy to follow! One wondered how he ever thought them up, so unusual, not to say bizarre, were the resultant poses! Really, it was a never-ending source of astonishment to her, to what lengths one sometimes had to go to satisfy men!

Selling sensual pleasure to voyeuristic jerks wasn't always child's play, despite appearances to the contrary. Why, with so many men's magazines in competition these days, it was hardly surprising that one had to stretch and contort oneself to the extent one did, irrespective of whatever natural beauty one possessed and of how foolish the whole affair seemed to one! For there were indeed times when the exigencies of one's occupation gave rise to a feeling of existentialist absurdity, and one was hard-pressed not to burst-out laughing or absolutely refuse to comply with the exacting demands of the occasion. How curious men must be, Carol would think, that they should find this kind of thing, these absurd postures, entertaining! One cannot even begin to fathom them! But, as usual, the sentiment expressed in Tennyson's unfortunate line: 'Ours is not to reason why', coupled to the need to earn a living, would suddenly interpose itself between her thoughts and her actions, granting additional weight to the latter. It was as well for her, she felt, that pornographic modelling was only a sideline, not the backbone of her career as a professional model.

"So how's your artist friend been keeping lately?" Prescott asked, as the time approached for them to take a break from their morning's labour.

"As well as can be expected," Carol replied, before settling herself down in the nearest armchair and lighting a mild cigarette with the aid of a plastic lighter.

"And still painting hard?" Prescott rejoined.

"So far as I know," Carol admitted. "Portraits at the moment."

"Portraits?" Prescott raised his brows in a show of acute surprise. "Are they any good?"

"Not bad; though I'm not properly qualified to judge, am I?" said Carol rhetorically. "However, he must have some talent for portraiture if Henry Grace is sufficiently interested to have commissioned his portrait. You've doubtless heard of him before."

The photographer smiled faintly and then gently nodded his handsome head. "I've actually talked to him," he confessed. "Quite a few times, in fact."

"Really?" Carol hadn't even vaguely considered the possibility, and was somewhat surprised in consequence.

"He used to be among my most regular visitors at one time," Prescott declared, with a little chuckle. For a moment he stared unseeingly at Carol, as though absorbed in some arduous recollection, before asking: "And what, pray, does friend Robert think of him?"

"Professionally or personally?" Carol wanted to know.

"Either."

The model reflected awhile, inhaling and exhaling some smoke from her cigarette. "Well, professionally he thinks very highly of Mr Grace," she revealed. "But personally ... I'm not so sure. They appear to get on quite well together – at least to the extent that circumstances currently permit them.

But I haven't yet succeeded in finding out all that much, partly because Robert systematically refuses to discuss the subject with me. He absolutely forbids me to be present in the garden or, for that matter, the studio while Mr Grace is there. And Mr Grace has bloody-well been there from three to four hours a day all the past week!"

"Presumably that's the time it takes Robert to complete a portrait or perhaps even a number of portraits of the same sitter?" Prescott conjectured, smiling to himself.

"I imagine so," Carol confirmed, frowning.

The photographer leisurely poured out a couple of glasses of sweet white wine and then handed one to Carol, asking: "What about Henry Grace's wife – is she there, too?"

"Yeah, Mrs Grace accompanies him to Richmond every frigging day!" Carol exclaimed with ill-disguised exasperation. "Keeps him company, apparently."

Donald Prescott had to laugh, and did so with relish! It was just like Henry Grace, he duly reflected, to drag Patricia along with him.

"What's so amusing?" Carol wanted to know, becoming puzzled and slightly offended by the photographer's unexpected attitude.

"Oh, nothing really," Prescott assured her. "Just a little private joke, that's all."

"Anyway, Robert is doing his utmost to get into his latest sitter's good books," Carol declared, changing the subject slightly. "He's of the opinion that his career will thereby be considerably enhanced."

Having got over his burst of sarcastic laughter, Donald Prescott merely smiled and wandered over to his camera, which he proceeded to gently stroke with the hand not holding a glass of wine. "Your lover must have a much higher opinion of Henry Grace and his professional influence than I do," he at length said.

Carol was somewhat flummoxed by this remark. "What makes you say that?" she asked.

"Simply what you told me," the photographer replied. "I very much doubt whether an old rogue like Henry Grace would put himself out on Robert's behalf, no matter how hard the latter tries to impress him. He's just not that kind of man."

Deep down Carol was almost amused or, at any rate, secretly gratified by the possibility that her boyfriend was making a damned fool of himself just when he thought he was being most wise. "Are you sure?" she queried.

"Absolutely sure," Prescott affirmed in a tone of voice which left no room for uncertainty. "Besides, even if Henry Grace *were* to do the improbable, I doubt whether his professional influence would appreciably improve Robert's prospects of advancement to greater fame. After all, a single art critic, even when well-known, doesn't have all that much clout. Doubtfully as much as your admirer may, for reasons best known to himself, like to imagine anyway."

"But Mr Grace is internationally famous!" Carol protested, feigning concern on her boyfriend's behalf. "Surely that fact must be taken into account when assessing either his potential or actual influence?"

Donald Prescott reluctantly abandoned the camera at this point and sat down in his customary leather-backed chair again. "Oh, I entirely agree," he conceded, a glint of ironic satisfaction faintly discernible in his large blue eyes. "But so what? Will that make any real difference? To put it bluntly, his fame is essentially a thing of the past. He achieved it during the 'sixties, extended it in the 'seventies, and took a stand on it in the 'eighties. I doubt whether he's budged a fraction-of-an-inch in over a decade. And during that time his actual influence has been in steady decline, falling, I dare say, to a level which could only impress those of his own generation who remember his early fame and, out of self-serving sentimentality, are still inclined to equate him with it! However, to the young art critic of today and, I might add, to most of the younger generation of artists, he's a blundering anachronism, a voice to which one can listen but whom one needn't take too seriously. Even *he* must know it, despite his considerable capacity for self-deception. For he's completely out-of-touch with the latest developments in painterly art, never mind light art and anything else, my own photographic interests notwithstanding, which might broadly be identified with proletarian as opposed to bourgeois interests."

"But how do you know all this?" Carol queried, still unwilling to take Prescott's opinions at face-value. After all, could she be certain, knowing as much about him as she did, that he wasn't making it all up just to amuse himself at her expense? She stubbed out the burnt-down remains of her smouldering cigarette in the metallic ashtray serving the adjacent coffee-table, sipped a little more wine, as though to extinguish the fire in her mouth, and then looked at him expectantly.

"Through what I've recently read by him, read about him, heard from various artists and critics about him, thought about him, remembered about him ... oh, through so many channels," the photographer at length asserted, expressing, via a broad sweep of an arm, the general breadth of his information. "He writes well and is respected in many countries by a great many people – don't get me wrong there! Yet his influence isn't so great that he could be expected to win-over the hearts and minds of the more youthful or progressive art-lovers. On the contrary, his influence on the younger generation would be very slight, believe me! And it's above all to the younger generation that your admirer would have to appeal, if he hoped to increase his fame – not to those outmoded people whom Henry Grace could still be depended upon to influence in some way."

"But maybe that's precisely what Robert wants," suggested Carol, recalling to mind the conventional nature of his most recent work. "Simply to be appreciated by art enthusiasts of a more traditional stamp, and thus become renowned as a champion and defender of conventional aesthetic values."

Donald Prescott gave vent to a short, sharp burst of sardonic laughter, such as he usually only succumbed to when confronted by suggestions or comments which ran contrary to his own better knowledge. "That may be," he conceded, for Carol's sake, "but I would hardly describe that thought as one guaranteed to appeal to the ambitions of any self-respecting, progressive artist! If it's that kind of fame he's after, he might as well take his canvases to an antique dealer as to a modern gallery. Indeed, he might as well give-up painting original works altogether and concentrate on copying old masters instead. He'll be appreciated all right, but only by those philistines who know next-to-nothing about modern art and can only relate to what preceded it. In other words, people who require of art that it conforms to something intelligible to *them*, something pleasantly picturesque. But if he thinks he'll secure universal acclaim through reverting to such conventional muck, and if he thinks Henry bloody Grace will help him acquire it, then he's sadly mistaken! Just as he's sadly mistaken if he thinks that, by returning to a more traditional framework, he'll be saving art from the ogres of modernity and thereby restoring it to a healthier condition. Nothing could be further from the case! All he'll end-up bloody-well doing is to acquire, with his rather limited fame, the contempt of all truly contemporary artists and connoisseurs of modern art for being both a fool and a reactionary down-dragging

influence on the age. But don't tell him I told you that. Let him discover it for himself, if he's really determined to pursue this futile course of his."

"I wouldn't dare tell him," Carol responded. "He wouldn't listen to me anyway, having dismissed so many of his previous girlfriends for being critical of his work. He'd probably send me packing there and then."

Donald Prescott glanced at his gold-plated wristwatch and commented how it was time they got down to some more work before lunch, since he had another model – a new one – to see during the afternoon, and didn't want to fall behind with his schedule. What kind of panties she'd turn-up in, he didn't of course know. But he was fairly confident that, before she left his studio an hour or two later, she would have surrendered them to his private museum and thus enabled him to expand his collection to 331. Without a doubt, he was dutifully looking forward to conquering her! For the time being, however, there was Carol Jackson to photograph again, and this time minus her bra. She had already been conquered, and on more than one previous occasion, to boot!

CHAPTER FOUR

It was with some surprise that Andrew Doyle found himself being invited by his next-door neighbour, the following week, to join him and Carol on a visit to Henry Grace's house in Berkshire, over the weekend of July 25/26th, and, no less surprisingly, found himself accepting the invitation from Robert Harding despite some personal reservations. Apparently the critic had been so pleased with his portrait, and so impressed by the hospitality granted him during the course of his sitting for the artist, that he'd decided to invite Harding up to Berkshire as a sort of reward for all the trouble to which the latter had evidently put himself in the execution of his painterly duties. And the artist, overjoyed by this most wholesome response to his stratagem, had automatically accepted the invitation, flattered, as he was, to be the guest of so distinguished a man as Henry Grace!

The fact that no recourse had been made to the special financial concession he'd contemplated offering the art critic was another joy to him. For, in reality, he could ill-afford to be overly generous in that respect, and was only too relieved that such a ploy wouldn't be necessary after all. And Henry Grace, in the throes of his gratitude, had not only invited him, but permitted him to bring one or two of his friends along as well, in order to make the journey less lonely and the visit more sociable. It would amount, in effect, to a pleasantly educative social gathering – one comprised of the Graces, together with a few of their close friends and/or relatives, and whoever Harding brought with him – which was sure to provide a worthwhile experience for all concerned.

The prospect of such an experience was therefore what particularly appealed to the three young people, if somewhat less so to Andrew Doyle, as they set off from Richmond in the artist's car, on the morning of July 25th, for Mr Grace's country house, situated near Maidenhead. It was a relatively short drive which faced them as, abandoning Surrey, they crossed into Berkshire, exchanging few words but being content, on this warm sunny day, to take-in the provincial scenery, much of which was refreshingly agreeable to behold.

What, exactly, he would find to say to Henry Grace when they arrived, Andrew didn't have a clue; though, to judge by what he'd previously

overheard from the secret vantage-point of his back garden, he doubted whether it would amount to anything very congenial or sympathetic! He might even be obliged to stand-up for his radical views on art in the face of conservative opposition, and criticize both the artist and his newly acquired friend for endorsing reactionary tendencies inimical to the further progress of modern art. He didn't know. But it wasn't beyond the range of his imaginings, as he lolled on the back seat of his neighbour's battered BMW, to suppose that some such defence of modern art might be forced upon him. After all, wasn't it obvious that he was being driven towards the enemy's camp, a camp Harding doubtless found of agreeable prospect but which he could only regard with deep suspicion, albeit in an intriguing and secretly gratifying kind of oppositional way? For if he was going to lay his cards on the table, he figured he might as well do so with style, with a thoroughness and relish which, no matter how offensive to the opposition, would serve to flatter his idealistic integrity in loyalty to his views, and thereby preclude any allegations of hypocrisy.

As for Robert Harding, there could be no doubt that he was the most excited of the trio, the one who most looked forward to arriving at the destination towards which they were speedily heading, and the one whose thoughts were almost entirely set on furthering the good impression he'd already made on the art critic and, if possible, winning some additional supporters to his side, supporters who, through Henry Grace's illustrious example, might well commission him to paint *their* portraits in due course. Indeed, the thought had earlier crossed his mind that it could well be his fate to paint portraits of Mr Grace's family, as well, perhaps, as an extra and possibly even larger one of the critic himself. After all, the man was sufficiently wealthy to be able to afford additional commissions. And why shouldn't he, Robert John Harding, distinguished graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art, be the artist to execute them? The work he'd already done was bound to excite further interest in his talents, consolidate his growing reputation, and thereby enhance his prospects of greater success. Even Andrew Doyle, whom he'd invited along more from professional tact than because of any altruistic motive, could prove of invaluable assistance in this respect, adding to the confidence already established with Grace by saying a few words in praise of his own rather more modest portrait, which, unbeknown to himself, could hardly fail to excite further curiosity, not to say critical regard.

Yes, it was indeed a good idea to make use of Doyle in this way! It might

even be possible to show the author's portrait to Mr Grace sometime in the near future, get the old man to write about it. And even the one of Carol Jackson, done several weeks before, might prove of more than passing interest to the critic's keenly-experienced eye.... Although there was something odd about Carol herself, these past few days. Harding couldn't quite determine what, not having probed her very deeply, but he was pretty sure that she was holding something back from him, keeping herself in secretive reserve on some enigmatic pretext or other. Perhaps she had a professional problem or two on her conscience, or a qualm about visiting Mr Grace? It wasn't like her at all. Still, it would probably blow over, like a heavy shower, in due course. Miss Jackson wasn't always smooth sailing anyway!

But the journey to Henry Grace's house certainly had an air of smoothness about it as, with an hour to go before noon, they entered the drive and drew-up alongside its dark-green front door. The house, set well back from the road by a pretty front garden, was quite impressive, with a whitewashed façade and eight latticed windows positioned equidistantly along its two stories, giving overall emphasis to length rather than height. Imposing without being ostentatious, the dwelling bespoke bourgeois comfort and charm – precisely the kinds of qualities that Andrew Doyle had grown accustomed to living without, during the course of his several years' experience of north London lodgings and, latterly, small garden flat in Richmond. But it rang a bell in his memory nonetheless, as he pictured to himself the New England-style house in which he used to live, compliments of a friend's family, at Merstham, in Surrey, before being obliged to move to the grimy metropolis.

A brief rap on the door by Robert Harding was promptly answered, and the visitors, excited and apprehensive by turns, were invited inside by a smartly dressed, grey-haired woman whom Andrew immediately recognized as the one he'd spied sunbathing in Harding's back garden the previous week. Close-up, she looked slightly less impressive than at several yards' distance; though there was something about her dark-blue eyes, fine brow, aquiline nose, and sensuous lips which suggested the likelihood that she'd once been an extremely attractive woman – even if age had somewhat detracted from her natural assets.

"So delighted to meet you, Mr Doyle," she averred, squeezing the writer's

hand with a more than reassuringly firm grip, as he was first introduced to Mrs Grace and then to Mr Grace by an impeccably polite neighbour. "I do hope you'll enjoy it here."

"Yes, splendid of you to come!" Mr Grace declared, shaking hands in turn and beaming appreciatively at the three young people before him – particularly the artist, with whose face he was of course already familiar. "My wife and I are anxious to make your stay here as pleasant as possible. And so, too, is our daughter, Pauline."

A young woman with long black hair of a very fine texture and blue eyes the exact colour of her mother's had appeared in the entrance hall in her parents' wake, and was now tentatively extending a nervous-looking hand towards each of the three guests in turn.

"Unfortunately my son is at present visiting a neighbouring friend," Mr Grace confessed, as the last handshake was duly terminated. "But you'll meet him soon enough, don't worry! He's a year-and-a-half older than Pauline, who has just turned eighteen."

"Oh dad, do you have to tell everybody my age?" Pauline protested good-naturedly, a slight but perceptible blush suffusing her slender cheeks.

"They'd guess it soon enough anyway," her father responded, playfully patting her on the rump. "Now then, as you're all no doubt hungry and thirsty after your little journey, we must set about finding you some refreshment. Lunch is currently being prepared, but a drink is something I can fix you up with right away. If you'd just care to follow me into the lounge, where, incidentally, your excellent portrait of me is now hanging, Robert."

Obediently, they followed their host into the said room, accepted, one after the other, a glass of wine, and stood before the portrait in question, which hung over the mantelpiece in an expensive-looking carved-oak frame – one that appeared to take the artist by surprise, since he hadn't provided anything like it himself.

"Yes, a useful addition," Mr Grace opined, in response to some eulogistic comment from Robert Harding. "It makes the work appear more dignified, don't you think?"

"Absolutely!" the artist agreed, going-up closer to the mantelpiece in order to scrutinize the frame in more detail. "It's a Carlton, isn't it?"

"A Wark-Davidson actually," the critic corrected, with a benign smile. "I purchased it the day after you finished your work. Thought it might impress you!"

The room in which they were now standing, Andrew noted, was tastefully decorated, being furnished in modern though not trendy items, and provided shelter for five additional paintings, three of which were landscapes of a fairly conventional naturalistic order, the remaining two being portraits of, as yet, unspecified persons; though the patrician tone and bearing of each suggested a strong connection with the Grace family. As to the occupants of the room, however, it was manifestly apparent that none of the other guests – if other guests there were to be – had as yet arrived. For, apart from the three newcomers and the Graces themselves, the lounge was otherwise empty. Presumably Mr Grace's friends would turn-up later, at a time more suited to their habits? The prospect of having to spend most of the day in his company probably didn't appeal to them, after all.

Meanwhile, the focus of attention having shifted from the portrait to the other paintings in evidence, and even to a discussion on art in general, Andrew Doyle was obliged to listen to both Mr Grace and Harding without being able or, indeed, invited to offer any comments himself; though he did contrive to nod his head once or twice and to grunt knowingly, in response to the occasional glance the art critic directed towards him, more out of politeness, it seemed, than from any intentional desire to include him in the conversation. But, as though to rescue Andrew from the social isolation into which he was further and further sinking by the moment, young Pauline meekly inquired of him whether he was an artist, too?

"No, not in the painterly sense," he quietly and almost apologetically replied, turning towards the pretty face on a level with his own. "Although I have to admit to being something of an artist as regards the production of literature."

"Ah, so you're a writer!" deduced Pauline, offering him an admiring smile.

"Yes, in a manner of speaking, though I very rarely use a pen," he informed

her. "You could say I'm essentially a philosophical artist."

Visibly intrigued by this unexpected revelation, the young woman then asked: "Have you, eh, written many books?"

"Just a few," he admitted, feeling slightly embarrassed by her apparent enthusiasm for the subject, and no-less slightly regretful for the fact that his dream of having his work brought to public attention on CD-Rom in addition to paper had yet to be realized. "Two novels and a volume of essays," he added.

"How interesting!" Pauline exclaimed. "I've always wanted to meet a writer."

"Is that so?" Andrew Doyle found himself responding, his embarrassment giving way to a slight annoyance at being taken for a kind of hero. Doubtless this young woman, like so many of her kind, had motives for feeling that a 'writer' was someone special – a sort of intellectual superman or something.

Perhaps it was one of her most cherished illusions, to meet the modern equivalent of Keats or Shelley or Wilde or Stoker! One could never tell. But, then, one could never expect an eighteen-year-old female to relate to a thirty-year-old male anyway, to view writers through the same pair of eyes. To her, a student of literature, they were evidently something special. To him, a practising writer, they were occasionally something special but, for the most part, insufferable bores! Few indeed were the writers with whom he would want to identify, especially among his contemporaries! But that, alas, wasn't a fact he could impart to Mr Grace's daughter, who was doubtless flattered by her illusions and secretly gratified, moreover, that one of her pet wishes – to meet a published author face-to-face – had now actually come true. All he could do, under the circumstances, was bear up to the vocational distinction he apparently signified in Pauline's deferential estimation and accept her unspoilt opinion of authors without demur. Possibly she ...

END OF PREVIEW