

A Deal in Old Masters

Aldous Huxley

“Pictures,” said Mr. Bigger, “you want to see some pictures? Well, we have a very interesting mixed exhibition of modern stuff in our galleries at the moment. French and English, you know.”

The customer held up his hand, shook his head. “No, no. Nothing modern for me,” he declared in his pleasant northern English. “I want real pictures, old pictures. Rembrandt and Sir Joshua Reynolds and that sort of thing.”

“Perfectly.” Mr. Bigger nodded. “Old Masters. Oh, of course, we deal in the old as well as the modern.”

“The fact is,” said the other, “that I’ve just bought a rather large house—a Manor House,” he added in impressive tones.

Mr. Bigger smiled; there was an ingenuousness about this simple-minded fellow which was most engaging. He wondered how the man had made his money. “A Manor House.” The way he had said it was really charming. Here was a man who had worked his way up from serfdom to the lordship of a manor, from the broad base of the feudal pyramid to the narrow summit. His own history and all the history of classes had been implicit in that awed proud emphasis on the “Manor.” But the stranger was running on; Mr. Bigger could not allow his thoughts to wander further. “In a house of this style,” he was saying, “and with a position like mine to keep up, one must have a few pictures. Old Masters, you know: Rembrandts and what’s-his-names.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Bigger, “An Old Master is a symbol of social superiority.”

“That’s just it,” cried the other beaming, “you’ve said just what I wanted to say.”

Mr. Bigger bowed and smiled. It was delightful to find some one who took one’s little ironies as sober seriousness.

“Of course, we should need Old Masters only downstairs, in the reception room. It would be too much of a good thing to have them in the bedrooms, too.”

“Altogether too much of a good thing,” Mr. Bigger assented.

“As a matter of fact,” the Lord of the Manor went on, “my daughter—she does a bit of sketching. And very pretty it is. I’m having some of her things framed to hang in the bedrooms. It’s useful

having an artist in the family. Saves you buying pictures. But, of course, we must have something old downstairs.”

“I think I have exactly what you want,” Mr. Bigger got up and rang the bell. *My daughter does a little sketching*”—he pictured a large blonde barmaidish personage, thirty-one and not yet married, running a bit to seed.... His secretary appeared at the door. “Bring me the Venetian portrait, Miss Pratt, the one in the back room. You know which I mean.”

Miss Pratt nodded and disappeared.

“You’re very snug in here,” said the Lord of the Manor, looking round the room. Mr. Bigger’s sanctum was austere luxuriously, “Business good, I hope.” He genuinely did hope it. He liked this fellow. He was sympathetic. He understood things almost before you had begun to explain. He seemed to have known you for years.

Mr. Bigger sighed. “The slump,” he said. “We art dealers feel it worse than anyone.”

“Ah, the slump.” The Lord of the Manor chuckled. His round, red, shining face shone with mirth. “I foresaw it all the time. Some people seemed to think the good times were going to last forever. What fools! I sold out of everything at the crest of the wave. That’s why I can buy pictures now.”

Mr. Bigger laughed, too. This was the right sort of customer. “Wish I’d had anything to sell out during the boom,” he said.

The Lord of the Manor laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks. He was still laughing when Miss Pratt re-entered the room. She carried a picture, shieldwise, in her two hands, before her.

“Put it on the easel, Miss Pratt,” said Mr. Bigger. “Now,” he turned to the Lord of the Manor, “what do you think of that?”

The picture that stood on the easel before them was a half-length portrait. Plump-faced, white-skinned, high-bosomed in her deeply scalloped dress of blue silk, the subject of the picture seemed a typical Italian lady of the middle eighteenth century. A little complacent smile curved the pouting lips, and in one hand she held a black mask, as though she had just taken it off after a day of carnival.

“Very nice,” said the Lord of the Manor; but he added doubtfully, “it isn’t very like Rembrandt, is it? It’s all so clear and bright. Generally in Old Masters you can never see anything at all, they’re so dark and foggy.”

“Very true,” said Mr. Bigger. “But not all Old Masters are like Rembrandt.”

“I suppose not.” The Lord of the Manor seemed hardly to be convinced.

“This is eighteenth-century Venetian. Their color was always luminous. Giangolini was the painter. He died young, you know. Not more than half a dozen of his pictures are known. And this is one.”

The Lord of the Manor nodded. He could appreciate the value of rarity.

“One notices at a first glance the influence of Longhi,” Mr. Bigger went on airily. “And there is something of the morbidezza of Rosalba in the painting of the face.”

The Lord of the Manor was looking uncomfortably from Mr. Bigger to the picture and from the picture to Mr. Bigger. There is nothing so embarrassing as to be talked at by some one possessing more knowledge than you do. Mr. Bigger pressed his advantage.

“Curious,” he went on, “that one sees nothing of Tiepolo’s manner in this. Don’t you think so?”

The Lord of the Manor nodded. His face wore a gloomy expression. The corners of his baby’s mouth drooped. One almost expected him to burst into tears.

“It’s pleasant,” said Mr. Bigger, relenting at last, “to talk to somebody who really knows about painting. So few people do.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever gone into the subject very deeply,” said the Lord of the Manor, modestly. “But I know what I like when I see it.” His face brightened again, as he felt himself on safer ground.

“A natural instinct,” said Mr. Bigger. “That’s a very precious gift. I could see by your face that you had it; I could see that the moment you came into the gallery.”

The Lord of the Manor was delighted. “Really now,” he said. He felt himself growing larger, more important. “Really.” He cocked his head critically on one side. “Yes. I must say, I think that’s a very fine bit of painting. Very fine. But the fact is, I should rather have liked a more historical piece, if you know what I mean. Something more ancestor-like, you know. A portrait of somebody with a story—like Anne Boleyn or Nell Gwynn or the Duke of Wellington or some one like that.”

“But my dear sir, I was just going to tell you. This picture has a story.”

Mr. Bigger leaned forward and tapped the Lord of the Manor on the knee. His eyes twinkled with benevolent and amused brightness under his bushy eyebrows. There was a knowing kindliness in his smile. "A most remarkable story is connected with the painting of that picture."

"You don't say so?" The Lord of the Manor raised his eyebrows.

Mr. Bigger leaned back in his chair. "The lady you see there," he said, indicating the portrait with a wave of the hand, "was the wife of the fourth Earl Hurtmore. The family is now extinct. The ninth earl died only last year. I got this picture when the house was sold up. It's sad to see the passing of these old ancestral homes." Mr. Bigger sighed. The Lord of the Manor looked solemn, as though he were in church. There was a moment's silence; then Mr. Bigger went on in a changed tone. "From his portraits, which I have seen, the fourth Earl seems to have been a long-faced, gloomy, gray-looking fellow. One can never imagine him young; he was the sort of man who looks permanently fifty. His chief interests in life were music and Roman antiquities. There's one portrait of him holding an ivory flute in one hand and resting the other on a fragment of Roman carving. He spent at least half his life traveling in Italy, looking for antiques and listening to music. When he was about fifty-five he suddenly decided that it was about time to get married. This was the lady of his choice." Mr. Bigger pointed to the picture. "His money and his title must have made up for many deficiencies. One can't imagine, from her appearance, that Lady Hurtmore took a great deal of interest in Roman antiquities. Nor, I should think, did she care much for the science and history of music. She liked clothes, she liked society, she liked gambling, she liked flirting, she liked enjoying herself. It doesn't seem that the newly wedded couple got on too well. But still, they avoided an open breach. A year after the marriage Lord Hurtmore decided to pay another visit to Italy. They reached Venice in the early autumn. For Lord Hurtmore, Venice meant unlimited music. It meant Galuppi's daily concerts at the orphanage of the Misericordia. It meant Piccini at Santa Maria. It meant new operas at the San Moise; it meant delicious cantatas at a hundred churches. It meant private concerts of amateurs; it meant Porpora and the finest singers in Europe; it meant Tartini and the greatest violinists. For Lady Hurtmore, Venice meant something rather different. It meant gambling at the Rudotto, masked balls, gay supper parties—all the delights of the most amusing city in the world. Living their separate lives, both might have been happy here in Venice almost indefinitely. But one day Lord Hurtmore had the disastrous idea of having his wife's portrait painted. Young Giangolini was recommended to him as the promising, the coming painter. Lady Hurtmore began her sittings. Giangolini was handsome and dashing, Giangolini was young. He had an amorous technic as perfect as his artistic technic. Lady Hurtmore would have been more than human if she had been able to resist him. She was not more than human."

"None of us are, eh?" The Lord of the Manor dug his finger into Mr. Bigger's ribs and laughed.

Politely, Mr. Bigger joined in his mirth; when it had subsided, he went on. "In the end they decided to run away together across the border. They would live at Vienna—live on the Hurtmore family jewels, which the lady would be careful to pack in her suitcase. They were worth upward of twenty thousand, the Hurtmore jewels; and in Vienna, under Maria Theresa, one could live handsomely on the interest of twenty thousand. The arrangements were easily made. Giangolini had a friend who did everything for them—got them passports under an assumed name, hired horses to be in waiting on the mainland, placed his gondola at their disposal. They decided to flee on the day of the last sitting. The day came. Lord Hurtmore, according to his usual custom, brought his wife to Giangolini's studio in a gondola, left her there, perched on the high-backed model's throne, and went off again to listen to Galuppi's concert at the Misericordia. It was the time of full carnival. Even in broad daylight people went about in masks. Lady Hurtmore wore one of black silk—you see her holding it, there, in the portrait. Her husband, though he was no reveller and disapproved of carnival junketings, preferred to conform to the grotesque fashion of his neighbors rather than attract attention to himself by not conforming. The long black cloak, the huge three-cornered black hat, the long-nosed mask of white paper were the ordinary attire of every Venetian gentleman in these carnival weeks. Lord Hurtmore did not care to be conspicuous; he wore the same. There must have been something richly absurd and incongruous in the spectacle of this grave and solemn-faced English milord dressed in the clown's uniform of a gay Venetian masker. 'Pantaloön in the clothes of Pulcinella,' was how the lovers described him to each other; the old dotard of the eternal comedy dressed up as the clown. Well, this morning, as I have said. Lord Hurtmore came as usual in his hired gondola, bringing his lady with him. And she in her turn was bringing under the folds of her capacious cloak, a little leather box wherein, snug on their silken bed, reposed the Hurtmore jewels. Seated in the dark little cabin of the gondola, they watch the churches, the richly fretted palazzi, the high mean houses, gliding past them. From under his Punch's mask Lord Hurtmore's voice speaks gravely, slowly, imperturbably:

" 'The learned Father Martini,' he said, 'has promised to do me the honor of coming to dine with us to-morrow. I doubt if any man knows more of musical history than he. I will ask you to be at pains to do him special honor.'

" 'You may be sure I will, my Lord.' She could hardly contain the laughing excitement that bubbled up within her. To-morrow at dinner time she would be far away—over the frontier, beyond Gorizia, galloping along the Vienna road. Poor old Pantaloön! But no, she wasn't in the least sorry for him. After all, he had his music, he had his odds and ends of broken marble. Under her cloak she clutched the jewel case more tightly. How intoxicatingly amusing her secret was!"

Mr. Bigger clasped his hands and pressed them dramatically over his heart. He was

enjoying himself. He turned his long foxy nose toward the Lord of the Manor and smiled benevolently. The Lord of the Manor for his part was all attention.

“Well?” he inquired.

Mr. Bigger unclasped his hands and let them fall on to his knees.

“Well,” he said, “the gondola draws up at Giangolini’s door. Lord Hurtmore helps his wife out, leads her up to the painter’s great room on the first floor, commits her into his charge with his usual polite formula, and then goes off to hear Galuppi’s morning concert at the Misericordia. The lovers have a good two hours to make their final preparations.

“Old Pantaloon safely out of sight, up pops the painter’s useful friend, masked and cloaked like every one else in the streets and on the canals of this carnival Venice. There follow embracements and hand shakings and laughter all round; everything has been so marvelously successful, not a suspicion roused. From under Lady Hurtmore’s cloak comes the jewel case. She opens it and there are loud Italian exclamations of astonishment and admiration. The brilliants, the pearls, the great Hurtmore emeralds, the ruby clasps, the diamond earrings—all these bright glittering things are lovingly examined, knowingly handled. Fifty thousand sequins at the least is the estimate of the useful friend. The two lovers throw themselves ecstatically into each other’s arms.

“The useful friend interrupts them; there are still a few last things to be done. They must go and sign for their passports at the ministry of police. Oh, a mere formality; but still it has to be done. He will go out at the same time and sell one of the lady’s diamonds to provide the necessary funds for the journey.”

Mr. Bigger paused to light a cigarette. He blew a cloud of smoke, and went on.

“So they set out, all in their masks and capes, the useful friend in one direction, the painter and his mistress in another. Ah, love in Venice!” Mr. Bigger turned up his eyes in ecstasy. “Have you ever been in Venice and in love, sir?” he inquired of the Lord of the Manor.

“Never farther than Dieppe,” said the Lord of the Manor, shaking his head.

“Ah, then you’ve missed one of life’s great experiences. You can never fully and completely understand what must have been the sensations of little Lady Hurtmore and the artist, as they glided down the long canals, gazing at each other through the eyeholes of their masks. Sometimes, perhaps, they kissed—though it would have been difficult to do that without unmasking, and there was always the danger that some one might have recognized their naked faces through the windows of their little cabin. No, on the whole,” Mr. Bigger concluded reflectively, “I expect they confined themselves to looking at each

other. But in Venice, drowsing along the canals, one can almost be satisfied with looking—just looking.” He caressed the air with his hand and let his voice drop away into silence. He took two or three puffs at his cigarette without saying anything. When he went on, his voice was very quiet and even.

“About half an hour after they had gone a gondola drew up at Giangolini’s door, and a man in a paper mask, wrapped in a black cloak and wearing on his head the inevitable three-cornered hat got out and went upstairs to the painter’s room. It was empty. The portrait smiled sweetly and a little fatuously from the easel. But no painter stood before it and the model’s throne was untenanted. The long-nosed mask looked about the room with an expressionless curiosity. The wandering glance came to rest at last on the jewel case that stood where the lovers had carelessly left it, open on the table. Deep set and darkly shadowed behind the grotesque mask, the eyes dwelt long and fixedly on this object. Long-nosed Pulcinella seemed to be rapt in meditation.

“A few minutes later there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs, of two voices laughing together. The masker turned away to look out of the window. Behind him the door opened noisily; drunk with excitement, with the gay laughable irresponsibility, the lovers burst in.

“‘Aha, caro amico. Back already. What luck with the diamond?’”

“The cloaked figure at the window did not stir; Giangolini rattled gayly on. There had been no trouble whatever about the signatures, no questions asked; he had the passports in his pocket. They could start at once.

“Lady Hurtmore suddenly began to laugh uncontrollably; she couldn’t stop.

“‘What’s the matter?’” asked Giangolini, laughing, too.

“‘I was thinking,’ she gasped between the paroxysms of her mirth, ‘I was thinking of old Pantaloon sitting at the Misericordia, solemn as an owl, listening—’ she almost choked, and the words came out shrill and forced as though she were speaking through tears—‘listening to old Galuppi’s boring old cantatas.’”

“The man at the window turned round. ‘Unfortunately, Madam,’ he said, ‘the learned maestro was indisposed this morning. There was no concert.’”

He took off his mask. ‘And so I took the liberty of returning earlier than usual.’ The long gray unsmiling face of Lord Hurtmore confronted them.

“The lovers stared at him for a moment speechlessly. Lady Hurtmore put her hand to her

heart; it had given a fearful jump and she felt a horrible sensation in the pit of her stomach. Poor Giangolini had gone as white as his paper mask. Even in these days of cicisbeo, of official gentlemen friends, there were cases on record of outraged and jealous husbands resorting to homicide. He was unarmed, but goodness only knew what weapons of destruction were concealed under that enigmatic black cloak. But Lord Hurtmore did nothing brutal or undignified. Gravely and calmly, as he did everything, he walked over to the table, picked up the jewel case, closed it with the greatest care and saying: 'My box, I think,' put it in his pocket and walked out of the room. The lovers were left looking questioningly at each other."

There was a silence.

"What happened then?" asked the Lord of the Manor.

"The anticlimax," Mr. Bigger replied shaking his head mournfully. "Giangolini had bargained to elope with fifty thousand sequins. Lady Hurtmore didn't, on reflection, much relish the idea of love in a cottage. Woman's place, she decided at last, is in the home—with the family jewels. But would Lord Hurtmore see the matter in precisely the same light? That was the question, the alarming, disquieting question. She decided to go and see for herself.

"She got back just in time for dinner. 'His Illustrissimous Excellency is waiting in the dining room,' said the majordomo. The tall doors were flung open before her; she swam in majestically, chin held high—but with what a terror in her soul! Her husband was standing by the fireplace. He advanced to meet her.

"I was expecting you. Madam,' he said and led her to her place.

"That was the only reference he ever made to the incident. In the afternoon he sent a servant to fetch the portrait from the painter's studio. It formed part of their baggage when, a month later, they set out for England. The story has been passed down with the picture from one generation to the next. I had it from an old friend of the family when I bought the portrait last year."

Mr. Bigger threw his cigarette end into the grate. He flattered himself that he had told that tale very well.

"Very interesting," said the Lord of the Manor, "very interesting indeed. Quite historical, isn't it? One could hardly do better with Nell Gwynn or Anne Boleyn, could one?"

Mr. Bigger smiled vaguely, distantly. He was thinking of Venice—the Russian countess staying in his pension, the tufted tree in the courtyard outside his bedroom, that strong hot

scent she used (it made you catch your breath when you first smelt it), and there was the bathing on the Lido and the gondola and the dome of the Salute against the hazy sky, looking just as it looked when Guardi painted it. How enormously long ago and far away it all seemed now! He was hardly more than a boy then; it had been his first great adventure. He woke up with a start from his reverie.

The Lord of the Manor was speaking. "How much now would you want for that picture?" he asked. His tone was detached, offhand; he was a rare one for bargaining.

"Well," said Mr. Bigger, quitting with reluctance the Russian countess, the paradisaical Venice of five and twenty years ago. "I've asked as much as a thousand for less important works than this. But I don't mind letting this go for seven-fifty."

The Lord of the Manor whistled. "Seven-fifty," he repeated. "It's too much."

"But my dear sir," Mr. Bigger protested, "think what you'd have to pay for a Rembrandt of this size and quality—twenty thousand at least. Seven hundred and fifty isn't at all too much. On the contrary, it's very little considering the importance of the picture you're getting. You have a good enough judgment to see that this is a very fine work of art."

"Oh, I'm not denying that," said the Lord of the Manor. "All I say is that seven-fifty's a lot of money. Whe-ew! I'm glad my daughter does sketching. Think if I'd had to furnish the bedrooms with pictures at seven-fifty a time!"

He laughed.

Mr. Bigger smiled. "You must also remember," he said, "that you're making a very good investment. Late Venetians are going up. If I had any capital to spare—" The door opened and Miss Pratt's blonde and frizzy head popped in.

"Mr. Crowley wants to know if he can see you, Mr. Bigger."

Mr. Bigger frowned. "Tell him to wait," he said irritably. He coughed and turned back to the Lord of the Manor. "If I had any capital to spare, I'd put it all into late Venetians. Every penny."

He wondered, as he said the words, how often he had told people that he'd put all his capital, if he had any, into primitives, cubism, nigger sculpture, Japanese prints....

In the end the Lord of the Manor wrote him a check for six hundred and eighty.

"You might let me have a typewritten copy of the story," he said as he put on his hat. "It

would be a good tale to tell one's guests at dinner, don't you think? I'd like to have the details quite correct."

"Oh, of course, of course," said Mr. Bigger, "the details are most important."

He ushered the little round man to the door. Good morning. Good morning. He was gone. A tall pale youth with side whiskers appeared in the doorway. His eyes were dark and melancholy; his expression, his general appearance were romantic and at the same time a little pitiable. It was young Crowley, the painter.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Mr. Brigger. "What did you want to see me for?"

Mr. Crowley looked embarrassed, he hesitated. How he hated having to do this sort of thing! "The fact is," he said at last, "I'm horribly short of money. I wondered if perhaps you wouldn't mind ... if it would be convenient to you ... to pay me for that thing I did for you the other day. I'm awfully sorry to bother you, like this."

"Not at all, my dear fellow." Mr. Bigger felt sorry for this wretched creature who didn't know how to look after himself. Poor young Crowley was as helpless as a baby. "How much did we settle it was to be?"

"Twenty pounds, I think it was," said Mr. Crowley timidly.

Mr. Bigger took out his pocketbook. "We'll make it twenty-five" he said.

"Oh, no really ... I couldn't. Thanks very much." Mr. Crowley blushed like a girl. "I suppose you wouldn't like to have a show of some of my landscapes, would you?" he asked, emboldened by Mr. Bigger's air of benevolence.

"No, no. Nothing of your own." Mr. Bigger shook his head inexorably.

"There's no money in modern stuff. But I'll take any number of those sham Old Masters of yours." He drummed with his fingers on Lady Hurtmore's sleekly painted shoulder. "Try another Venetian," he added. "This one was a great success."

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