

ACT ONE

[The study is decorated in the early Victorian era style. One table is piled with several leather bound books. There is a grandfather clock, but it is stopped. A mirror on the wall is draped with a black cloth.]

[It's a cold October day, 1914. As the curtain rises classical music is playing and Grace is examining the study for the first time. Like all of Amy's secretaries, Grace is a first year graduate student at Radcliffe. This is her first job and she is easily intimidated and quite jumpy. Grace notices that the grandfather clock has stopped. She opens the case, restarts the pendulum, and sets the time to the correct time. She is peaking under the black cloth covering the mirror when Elizabeth enters, causing her to startle and drop the black cloth to the floor.

Elizabeth is dressed in a traditional maid's costume, although nothing flashy. She has been Amy's personal maid for many years now.]

ELIZABETH

[Putting the black cloth back on the mirror.] What on Earth do you think you're doing? Do you want to get fired, and you not even started working yet?

GRACE

I was just...

ELIZABETH

Every mirror in the house remains covered...

GRACE

But why do you...

ELIZABETH

...at all times. *[Sees the clock has been started, rushes to it and stops the pendulum.]* And all of the clocks must be stopped.

GRACE

But I just...

ELIZABETH

...or you'll be out of a job.

GRACE

But why?

ELIZABETH

She keeps the clocks stopped because she doesn't want to know what time it is. Works all night and sleeps all day, like a vampire she is. Claims that she doesn't like to see herself in the mirrors, but I think it's because there wouldn't be a reflection. They're like that, you know.

GRACE

Who is?

ELIZABETH

Vampires. What have I been talking about? You'll never last. Gone.

GRACE

Gone?

ELIZABETH

Faster than the last one, I wager.

GRACE

If you think she's a vampire, why do you stay?

ELIZABETH

Um, maybe because she inherited more gold than the State House dome. She pays me twice what I could get anywhere else, which is ten times what I'm worth.

GRACE

And she lives here all alone?

ELIZABETH

[*Sarcastically*] Oh yes, all alone unless you wanted to count the unimportant things like the dogs, the horses, and the lowly servants.

GRACE

[*Flustered*] Oh, I didn't mean that you wouldn't count. Of course you count. And the dogs too, I suppose. I mean, you both count the same. No, I don't mean that you both count the same. It's not like you're the same as a dog at all. No, not at all. I mean...

ELIZABETH

I know what you meant. Amy's the end of the Lowell line, unless she meets someone and gets married, which I doubt very much. When you've got as much money as she's got, there are always gentlemen suitors but Amy doesn't want any part of them. Confidentially, I think that's the real reason she won't lose weight.

[*Enter Amy from the bedroom to the balcony. Amy is early middle aged and at 5'10" and 250 pounds quite obese. Her hair is brushed back in a high pompadour to try to increase her height, her collar of net is held stiffly in place by whalebone stays, her tailored suit is dark and mannish. She has an air of masculine authority. She carries a sheath of handwritten papers.*]

AMY

So are you the new secretary Professor Baker sent over?

GRACE

Yes ma'am. My name's Grace.

AMY

Just graduated last spring I suppose?

GRACE

Yes ma'am. Radcliffe class of '14. I'm in graduate school now, but that's just part-time.

AMY

Well goody-goody. Welcome to Sevenels.

ELIZABETH

[*Aside*] "Seven Hells" is more like it.

[*During this next part Elizabeth mimics Amy speaking. She's obviously heard it before.*]

AMY

I suppose you're wondering about the name? My father started calling it Sevenels because there were seven Lowell's living here under one roof. Now, I'm the last one left.

You take shorthand, I'm told?

GRACE

Yes ma'am. The newest one, Gregg's.

AMY

Elizabeth, go make sure that things are ready for our guests. I'm going to dictate a letter.

[*Elizabeth exits to kitchen. Amy descends the stairs as Grace pulls out a steno pad from her purse to take a letter.*]

My Dear [*fumbles with her stack of papers, finds the original letter, continues*] Mr. Johnson.

Your letter is very pathetic, and, to my mind, your sister's poem is even more so. I am sorry to say that I can give you absolutely no encouragement as to her talent. It really would be better, I think, if she would abandon the idea of being an artist, and turn her attention firmly and with an effort of will toward being a sensible, sane, and sober human being. Her only hope is to get married and thus live off the labors of someone more talented than herself.

Art is not, as so many people believe, primarily an outlet for personal emotions. On the contrary, it is the creating of something apart from the artist which, when created, should have a separate existence and justify itself by its power of reproducing an emotion or a thought in the mind of the reader. The amateur writes poetry under great stress of emotion to free himself of an oppressive state of mind. The professional poet (and by professional I do not mean the word in its usual sense, but in the sense of an artist whose life is given up to the creation of poetry) writes, it is true, only when he has something to say, but, at the same time, with the object of making a beautiful poem, not with the object of relieving himself from any particular state of mind. Your Sister is obviously an amateur writing poetry to relieve herself of emotions under pressure, and the result is like the momentary relief of cramps by diarrhea.

Yours sincerely, Amy Lowell, etc. Get the address from this letter [*hands her the original letter.*]

[*Grace remains standing and staring at Amy.*]

Well, what are you just standing there for?

GRACE

It does seem just a bit harsh.

AMY

[*Imitating*] "It does seem just a bit harsh." I suppose you'd have me send back some inspirational bit of drivel.

GRACE

Well, with some support perhaps she'd develop her abilities. Her appreciation of poetry could become more refined. If my Professor of Literature hadn't been supportive of my early efforts I don't know what I would have done.

AMY

So if he hadn't been supportive you might not have made it to the heights of success that you now enjoy, is that it? Appreciation of poetry is rather a rare quality, the writing of it rarer still. It is to my mind absolutely

quixotic to suppose that most people have any real appreciation of poetry at all; most people have none. It is one of the highest functions of the human brain and appeals only to people who have it instinctively or who have slowly and gradually trained a small faculty to a greater knowledge and appreciation. It does not necessarily exist with other intellectual faculties; it has to be born in one. It appears in the masses as well as in the classes; quite as much in one as in the other. It is rare in every grade of society. I have my doubts whether it can be cultivated at all unless there is a very strong bias there beforehand.

As to your Professor of Literature, my experience with Professors of Literature is that they have less instinctive knowledge of literature than almost anyone else.

Now, you go make yourself some tea or something while I get ready for our guests.

[Exit Amy upstairs to the bedroom, Grace to the kitchen]

[BERKELEY enters from the reception area. He makes frequent visits to Sevenels and is lively and dapper. He is a rare book dealer who is an expert in typography and graphic arts. BERKELEY is late middle-aged or even older, and though probably gay he takes easily to rich women.]

BERKELEY

[To Elizabeth, offstage] That's OK, I know my way in. I'll settle into the library and wait.

[He looks around, helps himself to a drink from the bar. Opens the cigar box and takes one, considers lighting it, then pockets it instead. Debates, then pockets three more. Debates more, then puts one back.]

[CARL ENGEL and ELIZABETH enter from the reception area. CARL is a French born US citizen who makes his living playing the piano. He is handsome and sophisticated, with a superb knowledge of the arts. AMY is attracted to CARL, but CARL is not attracted to AMY although he admires and enjoys her intellect.]

ELIZABETH

Please make yourself comfortable Mr. Engel. We have two more guests arriving on the next trolley and Miss Lowell

will be down presently. [*To Berkeley*] Mr. Updike, this is Mr. Engel. Mr. Engel, Mr. Updike. Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll prepare for the other guests. [*exits*]

CARL

[*Looking out the French Doors at the stables out back.*] She's got another one of her motor cars parked in the stables.

BERKELEY

I suppose she'll eventually replace the horses altogether with them.

CARL

I don't think so. She loves the horses too much. She just keeps squeezing them into a smaller and smaller space.

BERKELEY

Well, it seems to me that she'll need to eventually make up her mind one way or the other.

CARL

How do you know Miss Lowell? I've been coming to these little intellectual get-together's of Amy for quite some time but I don't recall seeing you here before.

BERKELEY

Well, I'm here quite regularly but our meetings are often more...intimate.

CARL

[*Doesn't believe him*] I see. So you and Miss Lowell are...

BERKELEY

Oh yes, but really I don't like to...

CARL

A gentleman should never...

BERKELEY

Exactly what I was saying.

[Amy comes to the balcony with green face plaster all over her face and curlers in her hair.]

AMY

Hi Carl. Hi Berkeley. I'll be down in a bit. *[goes back into the bedroom, then pops her head back out again.]*
Berkeley, I've looked at the books you sent over and I'm afraid that none of them are suitable. I'm not going to take any of them. Be a dear and just take them back to your shop when you leave—they're on the table there.
[exits to bedroom]

BERKELEY

We're very discrete.

CARL

Obviously.

[Enter Elizabeth, Ada, and Grace]

[Ada Dwyer is eleven years Amy Lowell's senior but holds her age well. She was raised a Mormon and has spent the past twenty years as a stage actress, developing quite a bit of fame on the small stage circuit. She is charming, cultured, poised, intelligent, and feminine]

ELIZABETH

Gentlemen, Miss Ada Dwyer and Miss Grace Mously. Ladies, Mr. Berkeley Updike and Mr. Carl Engel. *[She offers drinks.]*

CARL

Berkeley was just telling me about his rather special relationship with Miss Lowell.

BERKELEY

Mister Engel, if you please!

CARL

Miss Mously, you must be Amy's new secretary. But I don't believe that I've heard your name before Miss Dwyer. Have you known Miss Lowell long?

ADA

Neither long nor overly well. I've talked to her briefly at the stage several times, attended one of those famous poetry lectures of hers one time, and then ran into her again at Miss Munsterberg's funeral and she invited me over.

GRACE

Miss Munsterberg?

ADA

No-one important. Miss Lowell and I were the only alive people there.

GRACE

[To Ada] I suppose you're a big fan of Miss Lowell? I mean, I still can't believe that I'm working for the leading poet of our time.

CARL

Yes, what do you think of the demon saleswoman of poetry?

ELIZABETH

[To Grace] I told you about the demon part.

GRACE

I thought you said vampire?

ELIZABETH

Same thing. Now if you'll excuse me I'll get back to the kitchen. [exits]

ADA

I haven't made up my mind yet. [*She has been admiring the statue by the fireplace*] How very few statues there are of women.

CARL

It's hard to get them to look right.

ADA

How so?

CARL

A woman remaining still and saying nothing doesn't seem true to life.

BERKELEY

[*To Ada*] I suppose that you're one of those emancipated women who believes that women should be able to vote just like men.

ADA

Oh no, what would be the point of having the vote if we voted as poorly as men?

[*We hear the sound of snarling, barking dogs. Enter Elizabeth*]

ELIZABETH

[*Calmly*] The dogs seem to have treed Mr. Bodenheim. May I request some assistance from you gentlemen in extricating him?

[*Exit Elizabeth, Carl, Berkeley.*]

GRACE

I do hope he's alright.

ADA

Those sheepdogs wouldn't hurt a mouse. They're just playing a game and he's the prize.

GRACE

I thought that Mr. Engle was very rude.

ADA

Really, the more one knows of men the more one prefers dogs.

GRACE

I suppose you're right.

ADA

Why certainly. Dogs don't feel threatened by a woman's intelligence. Middle aged dogs don't abandon you for a younger owner. Dogs think you are a culinary genius.

GRACE

Dogs don't play games with you.

ADA

Except fetch.

GRACE

And then they don't make fun of the way you throw.

ADA

Dogs miss you when you're gone.

GRACE

And they don't criticize your friends.

ADA

Or brag about whom they've slept with. And when they kiss you they really mean it.

GRACE

And dogs understand what "NO" means.

[both start laughing.]

[Enter Carl, Berkeley, Bodenheim, and Elizabeth.]

[Maxwell Bodenheim (Bodey) is a young, poor bohemian poet who is in love with the idea of himself. His clothes are disheveled but the only real injuries are to his pride. Elizabeth is trying to brush him off and re-arrange his clothes but he is having none of it.]

BODEY

Just leave me alone to lick my wounds, woman. I come to discuss poetry, only to be attacked by a pack of wolves.

[Elizabeth exits.]

CARL

Hardly wolves, Bodey, just some frolicking puppy dogs.

BODEY

I know a pack of wolves when I see one.

ADA

I'm sure you would recognize a wolf when you saw one, Mr. Bodenheim.

BODEY

[Noticing the ladies for the first time.] Of course, I had everything under control. You just need to let them know who's boss.

ADA

I see.

BODEY

Dogs, children, and women all respond best to a firm hand.

ADA

A firm hand...

CARL

And when we arrived outside Bodey was well up a tree looking for the perfect branch to cut so that he could administer appropriate punishment.

BERKELEY

Spare the rod, spoil the...

ADA

Child?

BODEY

Or dog.

CARL

Or woman, I suppose?

BODEY

Exactly!

ADA

Perhaps I should take a switch to your bare backside, Mr. Bodenheim, just so that you can see what it feels like?

BODEY

No man would tolerate that, Ms. Dwyer.

BERKELEY

I might give it a try.

[Amy enters from the bedroom and descends the stairs.]

GRACE

Oh good, here's Miss Lowell.

AMY

I see that the evening's off to a lively start without me.

[While continuing to speak Amy hangs light shields consisting of silhouettes of children playing in enormous flowers and twigs.]

I believe in the maxim "think twice before you speak." I find that the extra time helps me say something more aggravating than if I spoke at once. *[She opens a cigar humidor and hands out cigars to the men, then to their surprise, offers cigars to the women as well.]* Don't be surprised, ladies, we don't put much stock in the Sullivan Ordinance around here. Women are free to smoke if they choose. *[She unwraps a cigar, explaining...]* Unwrapping a cigar is like undressing a lady... *[selects a large cigar and a small cigar.]* some are large and some are small... *[puts the small cigar back in the humidor]* but I find that the large ones have more character. First, one removes the belt *[she removes the first of the two cigar-bands]*, then the ball-gown *[she unwraps the silver paper]*, then the shift *[removes the tissue paper]* and finally the girdle *[removes the second band.]*

ADA

Oh my!

[Ada falls back into a chair, overcome and excited by Amy. Throughout the remainder of this Act Ada is obviously attracted to Amy, although Amy does not notice.]

AMY

Please, everyone find a chair.

[Amy lights the cigar, settles into her leather chair by the fire, and begins again.]

I have *[puff, puff]* no patience with the new-fashioned woman *[puff, puff]* and her so called rights. I believe

[*big cloud of smoke*] in the old-fashioned, conservative woman and all of her limitations.

GRACE

Doesn't it feel a bit, well, unladylike to smoke a cigar?

AMY

I was brought up like a man, and I'm glad for that—though I sometimes wish I had been born a man, just to be complete about it.

ADA

Oh, I'm glad that you were not.

BODEY

There's more to being a man than smoking a cigar, Miss Lowell.

CARL

Well, there's the plumbing aspect. Though that difference can be large [*nods his head toward Berkeley*] or small.