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The Cat Among the Pigeons

by Rosalyn Hurst

The visitor entered the building, late Regency, he mused as the heavy door silently closed behind him revealing an enormous lobby, dark tiled floor, mahogany panel walls hung with the portraits of long forgotten trustees.

A porter approached him. In accordance to the rules of the establishment, he wore a long black dress coat, striped black and grey trousers, spectacles, the yellow-tinged lenses disguising the eyes. Bowing, the porter firmly took the visitor's overcoat and briefcase, purred, "the Board members are just arriving, please follow me to the boardroom."

This obsequious deference that did not fool the newly defrocked visitor. He noticed the sharp eyes, that appraising, measuring look. Led across a tiled lobby passed a tiled fire place over which hung a portrait of the lugubrious founder of the Trust, bewhiskered, still as the corpse he must be now, that retained the power to give withering looks to passers-by.

At the bottom of the wide staircase that circled slowly into darkness, the visitor asked what lay at the very top. Staff accommodation, he was told, for the porters and night staff. But the tone of the response did not encourage any further questions.

In silence they padded up the stairs, the brightly polished handrail reflected the grim light of a winter afternoon, the thick carpet deadened the sound of them ascending and the deep scarlet patterns were, the visitor thought, intended to hide the splatters of blood which must occur if the rumours of board meetings were to be believed.

The porter opened the door of the boardroom and said, "there are three more to come, some are well intentioned, you know, just the odd bad apple as they say. I'll be waiting outside."

'How odd' thought the visitor, 'How did he know? But then all porters and caretakers, all chauffeurs and cleaners, know far more about the goings on of an office than the senior managers.'

Four of the Trustees were already gathered around a table of coffee cups and crumbling biscuits. Two did not approach but huddled together, their heads bent whispering, looking, as an older man chest puffed out walked confidently towards the visitor with words of welcome.

The door opened and two members entered.

"Lord Cushat, so good of you to come, can I offer you some tea, some coffee," a woman coo'ed, the suggestion of a curtsy, a small flirtatious smile. As the Peer was led to a chair with some ceremony, the visitor heard the chairman's voice,

"James, good of you to leave the House, all well in the constituency? I was in Culverdene only last week, heard were on your way back from the Virgin Islands, Hope the weather was good there, nearly blown away here. Heard Charles had died, suddenly dropped off his perch as they say."

The visitor was not introduced though he observed his presence had been noted.

"Lets' begin", The Chairman said, and with remarkable organisation all the Board homed in as one, to sit in what would seem to well established places, the visitor was gestured to a

chair at the side, but chose instead and to the great consternation of the Board, to take a chair directly in front of the door, so blocking any escape.

As the Chairman stood, his paunch attempted to escape from that shiny silk shirt, a true corporation bursting in an attempt to match his self-esteem.

“As we have a new member, can I introduce the Board?” and as the names were called out, the visitor noticed the extraordinary physical resemblance they had, not only to each other, to the Chairman, but to the hideous portrait of the founder now with his wife which hung above the fireplace.

“We are, as you see, a family trust, a family that has implicit trust in all but especially in each other.”

There was a flutter of agreement, nods and smiles around the table. He continued, “Our new visitor is distantly related I do believe.” He did not, unwisely, wait for a response. The visitor began to tap his fingers gently on the table, his nails occasionally catching the surface, only his near neighbour a nervous elderly man, noticing moved his chair to edge away.

The Honourable Member for Culverden, coughed with theatrical flair looked at his watch,

“Can we get the matter settled, I have to go back to the House.”

The Chair, ruffled through his papers reluctantly agreed, “I believe we are all agreed that the Trust will fund the RSPB in their latest project, but that Cushat & Culverdene Wild Bird Food Its will act as our consultants. They have generously agreed a small fee of 75% of the donation. Agreed?”

As hands were nervously fluttered in agreement, the door crashed open, to hit the wall like a rifle shot.

“So sorry, bus broke down. I am Jasper.”

The stunned chairman was approached by a rotund young man, so very much like the portrait, so very like the chairman and all the Board.

“Delighted to be asked to join the Board,” he chirped.

Silence, as all turned to the visitor, then stood and as in a flock moved as far from him as possible.

“Who are you? The chairman cawed, his voice breaking, sounding so much like an old crow

“I am so pleased you asked, at last,’ the visitor began, “my name is Pangur, Felix Pangur from the Parliamentary Commission for Fraud and Corruption.”

Noise broke out, a hoot from Jasper, a shriek from the top of the table, clatter from others, as both Lord and MP struggled to leave the room. The cat among the pigeons, working with the porter a true tomcat, poised to catch any in panicked flight.