

8. INT. ROOM. AFTERNOON.

Open on the inside of a small, neatly-arranged cottage. A scrubbed table stands in the middle of the room, on which is a cookpot, a wooden spoon and a large pail. Beside it, seated in a simple wooden chair, is ARTHUR. He is dressed simply in a soft white shirt, an open waistcoat and dark trousers - all a little the worse for wear.

In his hands he holds a pair of shabby black shoes and a brush, and on the table is a pot of polish. He is thoroughly engrossed in his task.

A gentle knock sounds at the door. ARTHUR's hands pause their work for a moment, then continue. The door opens and in steps BEATRICE. Her dress is suggestive of considerable wealth.

BEATRICE  
Good evening, Mr Evans.

ARTHUR begins to rise from his seat. BEATRICE waves a hand.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
Please. There is no need.

ARTHUR lowers slowly back down to his seat. BEATRICE observes him for a moment, then gestures to another chair beside the table.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
May I sit?

ARTHUR nods and continues to shine his shoes.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
You have a lovely home.

ARTHUR  
It has always served me well,  
ma'am.

BEATRICE  
Has it been in your family long?

ARTHUR  
For generations, ma'am. It belonged to my father before me, and his father before him, and his father before him. On and on it goes, all the way back to the beginnings of Christendom ... and some considerable way beyond that, I'd wager. And of course, one day - God willing - I'll pass it on to my son, and the cycle will begin anew.

BEATRICE  
Ah. That accounts for it.

ARTHUR

Forgive me, my Lady. For what?

BEATRICE

For the palpable beat of its heart.  
One cannot but step over the  
threshold to feel that it is a  
place which has known love. The  
very walls hum with it. I cannot  
think of a better place to raise a  
child.

ARTHUR

I have always believed it to be so.

BEATRICE

The woman who possesses the good  
fortune to become your wife, will  
be gifted the happiest and most  
comfortable of households.

They look at each other; a charged moment begins to build,  
which ARTHUR breaks, turning decisively back to his shoes.

ARTHUR

Though in truth, I must confess  
myself a little surprised, ma'am,  
at your appearing so very enamoured  
with my little cottage; for it has  
nothing of the grandeur of  
Salisbury about it.

BEATRICE

You think I care for grandeur?

ARTHUR

I should have thought such  
quaintness of living far from the  
manner to which you are accustomed.  
Novelty, in my experience, is a  
fickle friend, and when She has  
grown bored of toying with the  
feelings of her subjects she  
departs with haste, leaving naught  
but discontent and discomfort in  
her wake.

BEATRICE stands up, suddenly impassioned.

BEATRICE

What value is there to be found in  
grandeur? What heart, what feeling?  
(MORE)

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

To be sure, Salisbury House is vast - I myself could not say with certainty the precise number of rooms it holds within it - I, who can claim to know it better than any soul who yet walks upon this earth, saving perhaps my father. It is, without exception, the most beautiful house in all the county. Any attempt to claim otherwise would be revealed as sheer folly the moment one's gaze fell upon its magnificent façade. Its decorations are sumptuous; its gardens verdant. It is the perfect union of outward architectural genius and inward luxurious design. Every landowner within twenty leagues either covets it or attempts to replicate it, to no avail; it is the envy of all.

(beat)

But for all this, it is but a shell. For it must take more than simple good workmanship and efficient maintenance of a house-and-garden to keep it alive. It must be both cherished and nurtured, lest it lose all of its former bloom. Grandeur breeds only coldness and loneliness; and Salisbury House is both grandest and loneliest of all.

BEATRICE falls silent. There is a pause.

ARTHUR

I am sorry, my Lady. It was not my intention to cause you distress.

BEATRICE retakes her seat. They look at each other.

BEATRICE

The only thing which could ever bring me true distress, Mr Evans, is to have you believe me to be either capricious or inconstant.

ARTHUR

Yesterday I would have sworn on every holy book in the land that you were neither of those things, ma'am.

BEATRICE

Am I to take it then that your feelings have changed?

ARTHUR does not reply, just looks at her. BEATRICE's strength falters under his level gaze, and she looks away.

ARTHUR  
Why have you come, my Lady?

At this, BEATRICE bristles.

BEATRICE  
Am I not entitled to walk on my own  
father's land?

ARTHUR  
(coldly)  
The Lady of the House is of course  
free to go wherever she pleases.  
Excuse me.

He places the newly-shined shoes on the floor and stands up. He crosses to a small side table on which sits a small tin. He opens it and pulls out a small whittling knife and a sharpening stone. He begins to sharpen the knife with his back turned to BEATRICE, who watches him for a moment.

BEATRICE  
(quietly)  
I came to apologise.

ARTHUR continues to sharpen the knife.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
Did you hear me, Mr Evans?  
(beat)  
Arthur?

At his name, ARTHUR stops.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
Arthur. Please ...

ARTHUR turns around, his expression hard.

ARTHUR  
I am Mr Evans, the groundskeeper.  
And you, my Lady, are the daughter  
of my Lord and Master. I am not  
Arthur, and you ... you are not ...

BEATRICE  
(softly)  
Beatrice?

He turns away again.

ARTHUR  
Not to me.

BEAT.

BEATRICE

Earlier today, I believe you may have been given entirely the wrong impression by what you overheard.

She waits. He neither speaks nor turns around.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

Mrs Dupont has been a close confidant and friend of mine for a very long time - ever since we were babes-in-arms, in fact. She is well-intentioned and amiable, but I will admit that she has always had a certain ... silliness about her.

ARTHUR

Silliness? Is that what you would call it? Perhaps what you may deem to be so harmless, my Lady, others would identify as cruelty.

BEATRICE

Cruelty? No, no - not Florence. I will grant you that she has a ... a rather undesirable capacity to speak before making sense of her thoughts quite as she ought to. But cruelty? No. That cannot be counted as one of her defects.

(beat, he does not respond)

You do not know her as I do, Arthur - Mr Evans. She is good, she is -

He turns around suddenly, barely restrained anger visible in every muscle of his body.

ARTHUR

Begging your pardon, ma'am. I know that what I am about to say may be beyond my station, and were it not that I fear what else I may say should you remain here, I would not presume to speak these words. But I must ask that my Lady make her way home now without delay. She need not be at pains to explain herself - indeed, she can have nothing of importance to say at all - to one of such poor stock as me.

BEATRICE

How can you speak so? To describe yourself with such disdain, such censure.

ARTHUR

I did not.

BEATRICE

But you are not of poor stock-

ARTHUR

My Lady, that is precisely what I am. No more, no less. Forgive me, but it seems that you have been labouring under the misapprehension that I am some peculiar kind of gentleman in disguise. I am not. Though I am as certain as a man can be that I have not done so, I can only apologise if, during any part of our correspondence, I have given you the wrong impression. My speech, my literacy, my ceaseless desire to fill the years between birth and death with more knowledge than that with which I began my life, are merely the result of the careful attentions of a real - that is to say, natural-born - gentleman. I appear as what I can never truly be.

BEATRICE

You have more of the gentleman about you than any man I ever met.

ARTHUR

It is but an illusion. A fantasy, borne of a man who, in perhaps the biggest act of hubris of his life, wondered what it would be like to imbue a simple peasant with the kind of manners and ideas which can only align with a life far from his reach. I am the unfortunate result, doomed to live two lives as one - both unsatisfactory, neither fulfilled.

BEATRICE

My Father always spoke so highly of Sir Chaney - my impression of him was that he was a good man, with a kindly word to say for all. I cannot think that he would have acted out of callousness. To me, the act of educating you rather stems from a fervent desire to clear a pathway to a better life.

ARTHUR

If that is the case, then he was sorely mistaken. All I am, all I ever have been, is the son of a groundsman. And that is all I ever will be. But I tell you this only so that you can see that you need not apologise for any crimes against me you feel yourself to have committed. It is certainly not the first time that I have been toyed with as a consequence of the ennui and restlessness of one of your station.

BEATRICE

Do you really believe I could have treated you with maliciousness?

ARTHUR

I never would have, my Lady, had I not heard it from your own lips.

BEAT.

BEATRICE

I accept that it may be too late - that all of your former warm opinions toward me have been lost forever. But I shall ask regardless: might I be gifted the opportunity to explain?

There is a pause. ARTHUR nods slowly.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

I received your most recent letter later than usual - it was not until nearly five o'clock yesterday afternoon that Jenkins arrived, and even later still that I was afforded the opportunity to read it. It is for this reason, perhaps, that I became careless. Upon reading, I set the letter down upon the table in the salon, and promptly fell asleep shortly after. It was not until many hours later that I was roused blearily from my slumber by Jenny, who ushered me swiftly off to bed. I was so tired that I quite forgot to pick up the letter, and so there it remained - ready for Florence to stumble upon the following day as she waited for me to emerge for our morning walk.

ARTHUR

Respectfully, ma'am, this accounts for her discovery of the letter. It does not however, account for or explain the words that were spoken between you. Nor does it excuse them.

BEATRICE stands suddenly, filled with passion.

BEATRICE

It was Florence who said those terrible things! You cannot think that I could ever have agreed with them?

ARTHUR

I heard few sounds of dissent from your side.

BEATRICE

You would have had me disagree with her, then? What would you have had me say? That you and I share a connection the depth of which she cannot possibly comprehend - that I can scarcely even begin to comprehend myself? That writing to you has been my sole source of joy - my only solace - these six months past? Is that what you would have had me tell her, knowing full well what she would have done with such information? It would have been halfway around all the ladies in the county by nightfall.

ARTHUR looks away.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)

I am more sorry than you can possibly imagine to have caused you pain. But I could not say otherwise than I did. She would never have understood - she cannot.

ARTHUR

Of course she cannot; nor can the rest of them. They with their feckless husbands who while away their weeks gambling and drinking in town, leaving their silly wives to wander without aim through their lonely manors.

(MORE)



ARTHUR (CONT'D)

They who, just a few short years ago, made a point of informing every other young lady within forty miles of their betrothals to such ostensibly eligible men. Only to find, to their great distress, that an estate and a fortune of ten thousand a year cannot compensate for a basic want of good character. Is it any wonder that they live their lives in bitter search of idle gossip and the cruel mockery of others? No - them I can forgive. But you? A woman of sensibility and intelligence - of education, of what I believed to be a true generosity of spirit. From you, ma'am, I would have expected better. Perhaps that was folly on my part.

BEATRICE

I have not changed, Arthur. I remain all that you believed me to be.

ARTHUR

In fact, I know it to be folly. How could you be different? It is as you yourself said - Mrs Dupont is your childhood friend, your confidant. These are your lifeblood - the people with whom you belong. The veil has been pulled down from my eyes; I was blind, but now I see. You are but one and the same.

BEATRICE

How can it be that a man who could write to me with such feeling, such depth ... such heart ... how can he now be so cold, so hostile? Can it truly be so?

ARTHUR

Any and all letters exchanged between us were naught but an illusion. You have taught me so. For if you can have played such games with my heart, if you can have written to me with such unrestrained deviousness - how can I bear to own that the feelings I expressed were my own? I cannot do it. I will not.

BEATRICE

You are wrong. I meant every word.  
And just because you do not choose  
to own your words, it does not make  
them unsaid. Or unfelt.

ARTHUR

It is of no consequence. It was an  
idle dream, my Lady - nothing more.

He turns his back again and begins to sharpen the knife once  
more.

BEATRICE

Such formality. Such aptitude for  
smothering and restraining how you  
truly feel. It would almost be  
admirable, were it not so  
desperately sad.

ARTHUR

If my circumstances were different,  
my Lady, I may be more accustomed  
to self-expression. Were I a Lord,  
I might, for instance, express a  
commonly held belief around town  
that Mrs Dupont is a detestable  
woman, with both appalling manners  
and a taste for guile and falsehood  
which is second to none. But as was  
made clear to me today - that is  
not my place.

BEATRICE

(desperately)

Even if that is correct, what would  
you have me do?

ARTHUR

I would have you keep better  
company, for your own sake if not  
for mine.

BEATRICE, infuriated, marches across the room.

BEATRICE

And what is this better company you  
speak of? Who are they? Where are  
they? Do you suggest I converse  
with the birds as they nest in the  
woodland down by the creek? Or  
strike up a friendship with the  
squirrels as they wend their way  
through my father's rose bushes up  
yonder? Or perhaps I can go one  
further - perhaps they can be found  
in books?

(MORE)

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
Ink and paper friends, perfection  
in all ways but one - namely, that  
they do not exist!

ARTHUR steps away from her, slightly taken aback.

ARTHUR  
My Lady, I ...

BEATRICE  
Now you blush. Now you lose your  
speech. You, who have spoken so  
freely and with such ceaseless  
censure of my friend and companion.  
Has it only just now occurred to  
you that she could be my only one?

ARTHUR looks down and does not speak. BEATRICE is overcome  
with emotion.

BEATRICE (CONT'D)  
You think me fickle and callous.  
You have accused me of viciousness  
and deceit, and perhaps you are  
within your right to do so after  
what you have heard. But is it not  
true that all you can really accuse  
me of is cowardice? For was it not  
fear - fear of losing the only  
friend I have ever known - which  
led me to stop up my mouth and  
allow such behaviour to proceed  
unchecked? Will you grant me enough  
humanity to see the truth?

ARTHUR  
Which is?

BEATRICE  
That I am not cruel. I am lonely.  
And the only time in my life that I  
have felt real, true kinship -  
connection, mutual regard and  
affection - has been with you.

They look at each other for a moment. Slowly, ARTHUR reaches  
out and takes her hand gently in his own.

ARTHUR  
You have my utmost sympathy. It is  
not a life I would wish for anyone,  
least of all you.

BEATRICE  
Then you forgive me?

ARTHUR  
I forgive you.

BEATRICE

Oh, Arthur. Thank you-

ARTHUR

But that does not mean that I wish to continue our correspondence.

BEAT.

BEATRICE

What?

ARTHUR looks down at her hand for a moment, still cradled in his own.

ARTHUR

I am glad beyond measure that you feel I have brought you some solace. And our acquaintance, though brief, has brought me more joy than I could ever have hoped for. But although I could perhaps have tolerated such language as 'base' and 'deficient' to describe myself-

BEATRICE

Please, do not suffer me to hear those words again, I cannot bear it. Have I not already accounted for it? I have already told you, it was Florence, not I, who said those things!

ARTHUR

If I might be permitted to finish, my Lady. I could perhaps have tolerated such language, however indicative of the poor character of the speaker it may be, had it been used only in relation to myself.

BEATRICE

Forgive me, but I do not understand.

ARTHUR

You do not recall? Allow me to refresh your memory, ma'am. Toward the end of your conversation, Mrs Dupont, due to what I can only assume to be the result of a spirited exuberance arising from the complete evisceration of my character, took it upon herself to direct her attention toward a wholly more innocent and undeserving subject than myself.

Comprehension begins to dawn on BEATRICE's face.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I see that we begin to understand one another. Do you know Mrs Bowley well, my Lady?

BEAT.

BEATRICE

As well as any I encounter on my forays down to the village with Father. But those, as you know, are few and far between.

ARTHUR

But you know enough of her to know that she is a good and kindly woman, with not a bad word to say about a single soul on God's green earth?

BEATRICE

I do.

ARTHUR

Why then did you stand mute in the face of Mrs Dupont's censure of her? Why, when her name was blackened and tarnished in the most heinous manner, when she was mocked and maligned without reserve, did you not lift a finger to condemn it? And do not again cry 'cowardice', for it can never be a sufficient excuse in this instance.

For the first time, ARTHUR betrays real anger. BEATRICE takes a slight step back, alarmed.

BEATRICE

Arthur, I ...

ARTHUR

I can forgive many things, my Lady. But to stand idly by while the most innocent creature in all the world - the woman who brought enough cooked meals to feed three hungry, devastated children for a month after my mother died; the woman who took in my youngest sister after my father passed away shortly after, and gave her honest work when she knew I could no longer afford to keep her; a woman who has made it her mission in life to help the poor, the wretched and the sick - when an angel such as this is wantonly abused before you and you do nothing - this, I can never forgive.

BEAT.

BEATRICE

It would not have occurred to me to speak in defence of Mrs Bowley, and even if it had, I am not sure that my lips could have formed the words. You order me against claiming cowardice as my defence, but it is all I have. I am weak, Arthur. I have not your courage, it is true.

(crying)

But I beg of you, do not allow this to ruin me in your eyes forever. Aid me - teach me to be better than I am, but please, do not cast me aside. I cannot bear it.

ARTHUR looks at her for a long time; BEATRICE stands before him helplessly. For a moment it seems as though he may relent, then:

ARTHUR

Good day, my Lady.

He makes a short bow, then turns his back to her. Once again, he begins to sharpen the knife. BEATRICE stares at him, rooted to the spot. It becomes clear that he does not intend to turn around.

BEATRICE

As you wish. Good day, Arthur.

She makes for the door. As she reaches it, she turns back, overcome with emotion.

## BEATRICE (CONT'D)

I feel compelled to inform you how regretful I am that you feel so strongly. The thought that you could harbour such negative feelings toward me as a result of my actions causes me a pain so acute that I hardly know what to do with myself. You believe our acquaintance to have been nothing more than the idle sport of a silly, lonely woman. You are wrong. I have shared thoughts with you that were hitherto unspoken to another living soul. Before, I lived not as woman but as spectre: devoid of both life and feeling. Because of you, I have learned to breathe again - my poor heart, old beyond its years, has begun to beat once more. While I admit that our correspondence began as simple curiosity, it did not remain thus for long. I say this not as a means of persuasion, as I can see that all attempts to change your mind would be futile. But I cannot leave you with the wrongful presumption that our acquaintance was meaningless to me. It was not. Indeed, it has been - and, I suspect, always will be - the most meaningful experience of my life. Good day to you, sir.

She leaves quickly, holding back tears. ARTHUR continues to sharpen the knife. His movements slow until they eventually come to a stop. He thinks.

Suddenly, he drops the knife on to the table with a clatter and runs toward the door, grabbing his coat from a chair nearby. He pulls the door open and makes as if to follow.

He stops abruptly, one arm in his coat. He hesitates. His eyes follow BEATRICE's retreating figure through the door. Slowly, he shrugs the coat from his arm. He looks around his little cottage, then back through the door.

His eyes are sad. He neither speaks nor chases after her.

FADE OUT.