

A painting of a woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a white long-sleeved blouse and a long, flowing, light purple skirt. She is sitting on a stone ledge in a garden, looking down thoughtfully. To her left is a large bush of pink roses. To her right is a vase of purple flowers. The scene is set in a garden with various plants and a stone wall in the background.

*The Poet's  
Secret*

# *The Poet's Secret*

Dramatization of Henry James

by Christian Lanciai (2013)

## *The Characters:*

Henry, becoming author  
Cumnor, book editor  
Juliana Bordereau  
Tita, her niece  
their Jesuit confessor  
The poet

The action is in Venice towards the end of the 19th century.

## *The argument.*

In the beginning of the 19th century a world famous poet disappeared in Venice without leaving a trace except an unknown treasure of possible poems and letters to his last love, a certain Juliana Bordereau, who after his disappearance isolated herself completely in her Venetian palace with its beautiful garden and with only a niece for company except the domestic staff. Editors and journalists tried in vain to investigate and reach the secret of the vanished poet and his possible last writings.

Act I scene 1. Two gentlemen lunching in a restaurant.

*Henry*        You give me the most impossible task in the world.

*Cumnor*      Not only that. You have to succeed in it as well.

*Henry*        Why?

*Cumnor*      Because I failed, and we can't miss this chance.

*Henry*        Why?

*Cumnor*      The world would never forgive us. We have the possibility to solve an insolvable mystery, and the world is waiting for its solution. We can't fail the history of literature, now when we have a possibility not to.

*Henry*        But the odds are impossible.

*Cumnor* No odds are impossible. All problems can be resolved.

*Henry* I don't know if you threaten to throw me down a pit or a den of lions, but it feels like both.

*Cumnor* I am not threatening. I am doing it. You have no choice.

*Henry* Why did you fail?

*Cumnor* I committed the mistake of being honest. You must not be that in our field. All literature depends exclusively on duping and consists of convincing lies, since the truth always is revolting. Never tell the truth, and there will be no limits to how far you will reach in the world of the illusions of literature, for all literature is illusions.

*Henry* But our poet was a true human being, and we are committed to finding out the truth about him.

*Cumnor* Not that as much as what he wrote, and what he wrote that could be kept in that house could very well be his greatest lie and therefore of priceless interest to the world.

*Henry* You are a vulture.

*Cumnor* The poet is dead, but we don't intend to prey on him, only to give him a new life. Isn't that commendable?

*Henry* Don't you think the ladies could start suspecting something?

*Cumnor* They will be veiled in suspicion, especially after my failed attack. They will be on their guard. They will believe the worst of you. It's vital for you to make a perfectly convincing impression of honesty without being honest at all.

*Henry* It's the challenge in the venture that attracts me.

*Cumnor* Therefore I think you are the best horse to wage on. You can make it.

*Henry* The question is what I get in the bargain. I suspect unsurmountable complications.

*Cumnor* That's part of the game. Play it well, and you will win.

*Henry* What will I win?

*Cumnor* The greatest literary sensation of the decade with fame and economic success to follow.

*Henry* And what will it cost them?

*Cumnor* Nothing.

*Henry* But it might cost me my honour if I have to steal the letters.

*Cumnor* I think you could inveigle them to hand them over willingly. You only have to steal them, if there is no other alternative.

*Henry* Let's go through the procedure once more. I propose to them with my services and fawn on them, since they need a tenant.

*Cumnor* That is our trump card and our key. They need money.

*Henry* I charm them and make myself indispensable.

*Cumnor* I know their garden is completely dilapidated, and you have green fingers.

*Henry* I get their confidence, I inveigle myself in their secrets, and finally I get to learn where the letters are.

*Cumnor* And then you must not hesitate, but act directly, if friendly persuasion does not work.

*Henry* The risk is that the last thing they wish is to part with them and have them published.

*Cumnor* That's why you must not hesitate if it gets thick.

*Henry* The risk is that I then will betray their confidence and friendship.

*Cumnor* That can't be helped, but women are always women. They can always be persuaded.

*Henry* Old Mrs Bordereau must be almost a hundred years old. They say she is weak-minded. The last thing I want is any life on my conscience.

*Cumnor* She might be feeble in her old age, but her lucidity is perfect, since she wrote readable letters. She is harmless and safe, but look out for the niece.

*Henry* How so?

*Cumnor* She is all vigilance and pungent with thorns of hostility. Many avoid the house for her sake.

*Henry* Then she has a formidable family secret to guard.

*Cumnor* Exactly. And the history of literature needs to get it for its own sake.

*Henry* Old Mrs Bordereau was not his only love.

*Cumnor* But his last.

*Henry* What do we really know about it?

*Cumnor* Not much, but his last published poems were written in that house and maybe in its garden and are his most significant.

*Henry* And then he vanished without a trace.

*Cumnor* No one knows how.

*Henry* Perhaps he wanted to disappear like that. Perhaps he wanted to become buried in anonymity.

*Cumnor* That is what we must find out, and his last letters are there.

*Henry* Written to old Mrs Bordereau, who wants to bury them with herself.

*Cumnor* She must not do that. *That* would be a betrayal and a crime against the history of literature.

*Henry* But we don't know what they contain.

*Cumnor* That *he* wrote them is quite enough.

*Henry* How did you learn of the existence of the letters?

*Cumnor* Your predecessor. He worked in the garden. He was an amateur of literature and got to know one thing and another. In a moment of weakness the old lady revealed that she had no other riches or treasure than the last letters of the poet. And he learned there was a number of them.

*Henry* And the word went around, and you heard about it and started intriguing.

*Cumnor* I was quite open. I wrote a completely honest letter to them and declared myself willing to pay any sum for the letters which they could decide themselves.

*Henry* And you were answered with the sharpest hostility, as if they took your honesty for an insult.

*Cumnor* And the gardener was discarded. Since then the house and the garden have been in decay, and no one has been allowed to visit them.

*Henry* And so you send *me* there.

*Cumnor* Only the most perfect gentleman could win their confidence, and you happen to be such a rare person.

*Henry* And they need money.

*Cumnor* They have nothing to live on except their memories. As a perfect virgin in the context I have managed to have you recommended as a generous and helpful tenant of a sympathetic naïvety.

*Henry* How did you manage that?

*Cumnor* By their priest. You will meet him.

*Henry* Does he know about your plans?

*Cumnor* He is not initiated in them, but he is aware of the risk but takes it for the sake of the ladies, for he is a wise man. He will help you with handling them. He could serve you for guidance.

*Henry* The risk is that this confrontation in a dark decayed haunted house with two spooky ladies could be the greatest adventure of my life, since it will be a psychological journey with much more dangerous perils than any adventure journey, since they are unknown and unconscious.

*Cumnor* Good luck. It's after all Venice, and the ghost house is a palace.

*Henry* The mere environment urges me and compels me down into this possible abyss of no return.

*Cumnor* You have nothing to lose but everything to win.

*Henry* I hope so.

*Cumnor* The lunch is on me.

## Scene 2.

*Tita* It is with great reluctant hesitation that we engage a new gardener. The last one spied on us, which we will never be able to forgive him. We never would have engaged him if we were not in great economical need, and our padre has with great effort endeavoured to find someone who would suit us. I hope you are not educated.

*Henry* I am just a simple gardener with roses for my speciality.

*Tita* Our roses have withered long ago. Do you think you could recall them to life?

*Henry* I could try.

*Tita* How did you turn up here at all?

*Henry* I am just a simple tourist, but Italian gardens have always had a special attraction to me, and my great passion is to restore gardens fallen in decay. When I saw your garden and heard it calling for a helping hand, I immediately wondered whose garden it could be, and I was directed to your padre, who told me something

of you and your long history, while he at the same time interviewed me and mentioned that you were in dire economical distress and needed a tenant. Since I am well off I saw an opportunity.

*Tita* No connections in literature?

*Henry* I only know books are made from trees.

*Tita* I must warn you. We were sorely burnt by our former gardener's disloyalty and treason against us. We trusted him, which resulted in an importuning trespassing into our private lives by an impertinent publisher who thought he could make a fortune on our assumed correspondence with a deceased poet. If you have any intention or aspiration for prying in literature, you should immediately forget that you have been here at all and vanish at once.

*Henry* I regret your situation. You must have happened to dire need indeed not to be able to sustain your palace and garden any better.

*Tita* What is your impression?

*Henry* Of what?

*Tita* Of us and the house.

*Henry* You seem to belong to an age that isn't here any more but which has transcended into a kind of timeless state, into which also seem to have transcended into. Everything is beautiful but in decay, like the garden, as if new life had to be breathed into it all.

*Tita* Do you think you could do it?

*Henry* I could try.

*Tita* My aunt is very old and almost a mummy, but she is alive, and all her memories are alive. It's just the two of us living here and the cook. If you could bring new life into the garden, it would bring new life into us all.

*Henry* So your aunt is still in good health?

*Tita* She never walks out and never leaves her room but is very much aware. No one can fool her. You may see her when she herself is willing.

*Henry* Could I regard myself as employed then?

*Tita* It's a most irregular employment, since you actually pay for working here. But we have no choice. We need money.

*Henry* I am happy to be of service.

*Tita* I sincerely hope, Mr James, that we won't have to regret it.

### Scene 3.

*Padre* You have to tread carefully about these frail women. I hope indeed you will be most considerate and not risk anything. Have you met the old lady yet?

*Henry* Not yet.

*Padre* She will want to see you. Prepare yourself for the unexpected.

*Henry* What should I know about them?

*Padre* Old Mrs Bordereau lives entirely in the past but has a crystal clear memory and brain. Nothing escapes her, and her eccentricity should not be confused with any weakness of mind. She would seem like something of the most brittle and oldest lady in the world, who could dissolve into dust any moment by the slightest touch, but all her mental capacities are intact. She is still our great poet's last mistress and is still living on it.

*Henry* They know nothing about my interest in literature.

*Padre* Keep it that way. The more they trust you and take you in their confidence, the more you grow responsible for their lives. I didn't want to take the risk of giving them a new employed potential risk after the turbulence about the gardener, but they really were in distress and needed money. I finally dared to wage on you as the least evil of the alternatives that were offered.

*Henry* And Tita?

*Padre* She watches her aunt like a hawk. She will never allow you to be alone with her. The serving maid fear her for her severity, but she keeps the house and her aunt in order. She might seem deterrent by her forbidding ways and stiff callousness, but she has a heart. Never forget that.

*Henry* She seems to be a very suppressed and inhibited woman, as if she had buried herself alive.

*Padre* The more important it is to remember that she has a heart. It's not the aunt who made her so inhibited. It's she herself by an almost unsoundly exaggerated self-discipline.

*Henry* Never any admirer or cavaliers?

*Padre* That's the last thing she allowed into her life.

*Henry* Still she would be very beautiful if she weren't so strict.

*Padre* She has grown up in the prison of her aunt's memories, as if the past world was the only living and admissible one, the age of the great romantic poets, who are all dead.

*Henry* I will probably see old Mrs Bordereau tonight.

*Padre* Remember: double silk gloves.

*Henry* I follow your guidance in everything, padre.

#### Act II scene 1. Mme Bordereau's salon.

*Bordereau* So this is our new gardener. You must excuse me, Mr James, that you can't look me in the eyes, but without dark glasses I can't see anything myself. My eyes can't suffer light but can only see in darkness. It has been like that all since... Has Mr James' work in the garden been satisfactory, Tita?

*Tita* Perfectly. He makes the flowers thrive.

*Bordereau* That saves you, Mr James. Or else you would have been lost. A gardener who fails in tending a garden can only be an impostor. But if he actually has the quality of green fingers, there is as much hope for his survival as for that of the

garden. Our garden was dying from withering, neglect and dilapidation after our last gardener proved himself to be an invidious deceiver with anything in his bag except any clean linen. You will do as long as you don't disappoint us. Do you like it here?

*Henry* I can't say anything else.

*Bordereau* Why?

*Henry* The unique environment, the enchanted garden, your timeless palace with its rich and moody atmosphere, the charming aura that encloses both of you...

*Bordereau* Why do you draw the conclusion that the garden is enchanted?

*Henry* It's no conclusion. But it gives the impression that it has seen a lot.

*Bordereau* The memories hang on, Mr James, and will never abandon us. It's by us they live, and we live only by them and for them. – Would you leave us alone, Tita? (*Tita rises immediately and leaves.*)

(*confidentially*) You have led us to believe that you are willing to pay for your sojourn here.

*Henry* I am willing to pay whatever you may ask.

*Bordereau* Then I ask for a thousand dollars a month.

*Henry (is surprised, but controls himself)* I can pay you three months in advance, but not today, tomorrow at the earliest.

*Bordereau* Then you are a rich man with limitless resources. Then you are not just a gardener. Don't imagine that I don't see you through, Mr James. Everyone who comes here has only one thing on their mind: the letters of the poet. Or else no one would come here willingly. The atmosphere and mood, which you try to flatter us by characterizing it as enchanting, is only deterrent, suffocating and murderous.

*Henry* Still your niece stays on with you.

*Bordereau* She has grown up here in the house. She has nothing else. Everything she has, she has received from me. We control each other, and she thinks she is in control of me, while on the contrary in spite of my incapacity I am the one who rules her entire life. She thinks she controls me by so strictly controlling everything pertaining to the house, but my soul controls hers, and that's the higher power. That's why I asked her to leave me alone with you, for she could not tolerate what I have to say to you. I trusted our former gardener. He gave us hope by like you bringing the garden back to life. But when it proved that he was just an agent for a greedy publisher in London hungry for sensations, our hearts broke. Our hearts could not endure being broken again, Mr James. They have been broken too many times before, especially mine...

*Henry* I assure you...

*Bordereau* Assure me nothing, Mr James. I see you through. Promise nothing, and there is nothing you can break. I only warn you against the consequences, if you also would betray us.

*Henry* You are an interesting family, and I would gladly get to know you better.

*Bordereau* That's the spirit. You are at least honest. What do you think of my niece? Have I ruined her life by giving her my own?

Henry She is still relatively young and has the best part of her life still ahead of her.

Bordereau Is she pretty?

Henry She could be.

Bordereau Like I was once, until a young and beautiful romantic poet released the life and beauty within me. It can never swelter, no matter what I look like and how old I grow.

Henry But it is not you who have buried her. She has buried herself in her strict puritanism in constant black clothes of mourning under a mask of forbidding formalism.

Bordereau Do you think you could liberate her?

Henry I am no poet.

Bordereau Are you sure?

Henry I write no poems.

Bordereau But you are a man of letters. You speak like an educated man and are no fool or idiot or ordinary fish who contents himself with following the mainstream. Only dead fish follow the stream. You are no dead fish.

Henry I sincerely hope so.

Bordereau You could do something for her. I don't have much time left and can't do much for her any more, but I am doing what I can. That's why I ask you for so much rent. The fact that you don't even hesitate to such an absurd and unreasonable demand immediately reveals you as someone who believes himself to have much more to gain than just unwithering roses.

Henry I think we could be good friends.

Bordereau You and Tita or you and me?

Henry All three.

Bordereau I think so too. You have started well. Continue like that. (*beats the floor three times with her stick. Tita enters immediately.*) We are agreed, Tita. He will pay without bargaining.

Tita That gives me pleasure. Is it time for your tea, aunt?

Bordereau Yes, it is time for my tea. Show Mr James down to the garden. He longs to get to work.

Tita Then follow me, Mr James. (*leaves with Henry*)

Bordereau A totally different type and more astute than any of the previous ones. So far he has played his cards well. As long as he continues to do so, the game can go on.

Scene 2.

*Cumnor* It will not do, Henry. You have to make greater effort.

*Henry* These are sensitive ladies, John. You can't treat them like anything.

*Cumnor* Why not? They treat you like anything, don't they? They suck you for your money and use you flat out while you almost never even are allowed to see them. They probably laugh at your naïvety behind your back while you imagine that you fooled them by fawning and flirting with them. That's amateurish.

*Henry* This will take time, John. We need patience. Their fates are entrusted to my responsibility both by their priest and themselves, and I can't risk anything.

*Cumnor* Not even for literature? They squeeze you out while you are not even allowed to see any document. That old woman won't even give you any receipt for your rent.

*Henry* She was the poet's last great love, John.

*Cumnor* That's what I mean. She hasn't been that for 70 years, and it's the present that counts.

*Henry* Something tells me she still could be.

*Cumnor* Would his ghost still be around in the house and associate with her like then and never have grown tired?

*Henry* What do you want from me?

*Cumnor* What you came here for. Get at the poet's letters by any means. And you haven't even suggested any price for them yet.

*Henry* What price do you suggest that I suggest?

*Cumnor* I think I know a way. You haven't had any difficulty with any of them, no conflicts, no upsets and not even any doubts. Go in for it for serious and seduce the niece.

*Henry* She is not seductive.

*Cumnor* No woman is not seductive.

*Henry* You don't know her.

*Cumnor* Get to know her yourself, then. She must have a weak spot somewhere. Take her out for dinner and charm her. By your ways you could win anything.

*Henry* But I have to tread carefully.

*Cumnor* Of course. But so far you have treaded so carefully that you haven't reached anywhere at all.

*Henry* I take no risks.

*Cumnor* That's good. I don't ask you to either. I just ask you to do something.  
(*rises and leaves*)

*Henry* A garden will not grow up and bring flowers in one night. You have to cultivate it carefully with endless patience, if you are to bring forth even a single flower.

Act III scene 1. Tita alone in the lovely garden.

*Tita* How pale the moon is! So unspeakably lonesome in its desolation! So naked and cold in its innocence! So enigmatical in its inaccessibility and so false in its cold silence of detachment, like a virgin who refuses to have anything to do with love, the insensibility of an iccold death's head, and thereby so attractive, desirable and adored by longing poets. I don't understand destiny, what it is doing with us, what the meaning is with its power and manipulation with our lives, what it is all about. My aunt keeps jealous watch and brooding on a secret about a poet loved and adored by a world, who maybe ended his life in her arms, but she refuses to share that secret with the world, which maybe she even never got to know herself. The more eagerly the world desires and sucks for it without considering the possibility that it might be terrible and compromising for all parts involved. We would have buried it alive if a stranger had not importuned into our lives, not just once but again and again and always by new types, that each time try new intrinsic methods to reach a mystery that perhaps might never be reached.

*Henry (showing up)* Miss Tita? Are you here?

*Tita* I know it's against my habits.

*Henry* You never visit your own garden.

*Tita* I was finally curious about the nature of the garden from which you send us flowers every morning.

*Henry* Then I have managed to lure you out.

*Tita* Why this consistent attention to us, two mummified and petrified ladies?

*Henry* You are not lost. You are alive but live a secret life of detachment of a beauty and nature out of this world which not even Venice in all its fantastic charm can reach even the vicinity of, while it is quite reasonable that you could exist only here.

*Tita* We lived here once.

*Henry* Your aunt. But did you ever have a life of your own?

*Tita* No.

*Henry* Still you choose to live the life of another.

*Tita* I have no other life.

*Henry* You could have one.

*Tita* How?

*Henry* You live in the most beautiful city in the world, and yet you don't even go outside your own house to discover it.

*Tita* My aunt suggests that I do.

*Henry* Why don't you then?

*Tita* I feel too much tied to her and to my duties and responsibilities here in her house.

*Henry* But she wants you to be free. She only wishes you well.

*Tita* That's the only reason you are tolerated and may remain. My aunt imagines that you are good for me.

*Henry* She keeps me only for my money. My contribution helps you to survive. She thinks my money could help you after her death.

*Tita* Has she spoken to you about her death?

*Henry* She is speculating in it. She believes she could die any moment.

*Tita* And she suspects the worst of you. She thinks you have made your way here only to get at what's more worth to her than money.

*Henry* What's that?

*Tita* A London publisher wrote three letters to her offering to buy her memories of the poet at a price she could decide herself.

*Henry* And what did she answer?

*Tita* That there no such memories.

*Henry* But she has her memories, and they are quite intact. Is it more than just documents?

*Tita* Letters, documents, poems, portraits, all kinds of stuff.

*Henry* And why then did she deny their existence?

*Tita* I fear that she wants to take them with her into her grave. She hasn't for years taken them out to regard them. She always used to do that.

*Henry* Have you seen them?

*Tita* No, she has never showed them to me. She only told me the more about them.

*Henry* But she doesn't want to share them with you even when she dies?

*Tita* That is a risk.

*Henry* We must anticipate that. It would be a crime against world literature to bury them alive and especially a crime against the poet's memory to let them get lost.

*Tita* I agree.

*Henry* What can we do about it? Do you know where she keeps them?

*Tita* I don't even know that. There is only one possibility. Keep up your friendly attention to her. Continue sending us roses from the garden. She appreciates that. It helps her keep the memories alive and to dream about them and gild them. Go on coaxing her and remain sympathetic to her. And never ask her for anything. Then perhaps she might present an offer.

*Henry* An arrangement?

*Tita* She is obsessed by the vanity of her life's only love affair and has no other life but wishes at the same time to liberate herself from it preferably in a way that will give her peace.

*Henry* Then we should be able to accommodate her interests.

*Tita* I hope so. I would like to help you and support you.

*Henry* You are welcome.

*Tita (takes his hand)* She would like to see you again.

*Henry* I hope so.

*Tita* She is afraid of losing you, which is a good sign.

*Henry* I hope so.

*Tita* Knock at her door tomorrow. She will let you in.

Henry Will you be there?  
Tita I am always with her.  
Henry Let us then wish each other good luck on our quest for the holy Grail.  
Tita A poet's concealed heart's blood and secret, threatening to remain unknown and buried alive by an old dying maid's jaundice.  
Henry The poet's eternal life is in danger.  
Tita And we must save it.  
Henry Then we are agreed.  
Tita Thanks for your understanding, Mr James. Now we had better separate for the night. (*lets his hand go and leaves*)  
Henry A strange apparition, like a totally different woman, who suddenly opens her life and her possibilities for you. That must be taken care of. I must not let her down, and least of all the confidence of the old lady.

Scene 2. Mrs Bordereau's salon.

Bordereau What agreement have you reached?  
Tita Nothing.  
Bordereau You are conspiring against me.  
Tita Not at all.  
Bordereau He is using you for a means to get at my letters.  
Tita Would he use me? Aren't we rather using him?  
Bordereau He has been very amiable with us, and his work with the garden must be considered honest. That can't be misunderstood. What frightens me is his hidden agenda.  
Tita You are too suspicious. You believe the worst of all.  
Bordereau And I have reasons for it. I have been cheated, disappointed and betrayed before.  
Tita You have misunderstood their good intentions.  
Bordereau To get at what was only entrusted with me? (*A prudent knock on the door.*)  
Come in!  
Henry (*shows his face*) Miss Tita suggested I should make a visit.  
Bordereau Come in, by all means, and let's have a talk. Your attention with all the beautiful flowers is very much appreciated. I hope you will continue to be content with us and your work.  
Henry Or else I would not have stayed on.  
Bordereau We feared that our detachment would deter you from having anything more to do with us.  
Henry You choose and live your own lives. I have chosen to assist you by tending your enchanted garden, your unique palace and its environment and your enigmatical destiny.  
Bordereau What do you know about our enigmatical destiny?

Henry Not much, which is why I would like to learn more.

Bordereau And how do we know that you don't have any hidden agenda in what you desire to get out of us?

Henry What hidden agenda could I have?

Bordereau I know the men. They don't offer money if they don't think they could profit by it.

Henry How could I profit from helping you with the garden?

Tita Don't scare him off, aunt.

Bordereau How do you know that we aren't bluffing?

Henry (*cautiously*) What kind of bluffing could that possible be?

Bordereau Like everyone else you want to get at my memorabilia of the late poet. What are you prepared to give for them?

Henry (*careful and alert*) What kind of memorabilia are you offering?

Bordereau I am not offering them. I am just stating that they exist and that I am in charge of them. What would you like to give for them?

Henry Any price.

Bordereau So you are exposed. You are here only for the sake of my secret memories. They are not for sale. They will follow me into the grave, like it was his own wish that they would follow him into the grave.

Henry Still you have not allowed them to follow him into the grave.

Bordereau Because he has no grave! He is timeless! He is without a grave like Moses!

Tita And to aunt he is holier than Moses.

Bordereau Much holier! Moses was a fake and a charlatan! A true poet is always true, and nothing can be truer! It has fallen on me to safeguard his truth and genuineness forever!

Henry I have as great interest as your niece to protect and preserve his truth.

Bordereau And therefore you wish to prostitute him by dispersing his last writings to a greedy publisher?

Henry That is not the issue.

Bordereau What is the issue then? Why are you here?

Henry The issue is the obligation and responsibility to literature and the truth.

Bordereau You don't know what you are talking about. What is a poet's truth?

Henry His own confessions.

Bordereau Begone. I will consider your suggestion. Please continue sending up your flowers. And by all means, take out my niece for gondola rides and pleasures at the Piazza and on restaurants. She needs to get out.

Tita My place is here, aunt, where I am most needed.

Bordereau Not any more. I will soon be dead. Then you will be free. I have buried you alive. Don't you see that I only wish to liberate you? Please show our gentleman gardener out.

*(Tita has no choice, gives a sign to Henry, and they walk out.)*

*(alone)* Falsehood, falsehood everywhere! But I have had enough of it and don't want to die false, but a poet's sentence is terrible! If only I could die here and now! But it is my destiny to constantly have to survive my own damnation. *(sinks back with a sigh.)*

Scene 3.

*Cumnor* Well, Henry, what splendid new progress can you brag about?  
*Henry* I think we have got the niece over on our side.  
*Cumnor* You have been at it for three months without reaching an inch closer to the secret, if the documents exist at all, and now you brag about having conquered her.  
*Henry* I didn't say that, but I think she can help us.  
*Cumnor* Has she even seen the documents?  
*Henry* No.  
*Cumnor* There you are. They continue inveigling you in an illusion of security and their grace, while they use you and squeeze you out of all you possess. Even my assets are limited. If you don't make a hit soon I will have to let you go.  
*Henry* The old lady is as frail as the most precious and finest crystal.  
*Cumnor* While her entire life consists of memories of her promiscuity. She is only cheating you while you are there to cheat them.  
*Henry* I cannot do that.  
*Cumnor* What do you mean?  
*Henry* If I can't reach the documents by honest means I will have to let them be.  
*Cumnor* So you are willing to fail the world and the history of literature and the poet's memory.  
*Henry* I still think we can reach our goal in an honest way.  
*Cumnor* You will never get past the old woman. She will rather die and burn herself alive with the house than allow you to see a single document. It was her only love, which has turned her into a monster of jealousy, like an old dragon guarding the treasure of his greed.  
*Henry* But the niece is different.  
*Cumnor* Yes, that's what you imagine. Her aunt controls her completely.  
*Henry* That's the question.  
*Cumnor* There is only one solution to the problem. You have to steal the documents behind the old woman's back, with or without the help of the niece. Or else she will burn them.  
*Henry* I don't even know where they are yet.  
*Cumnor* Exactly. Not even that you have been able to find out. You have only been trifling with the niece and imagined things. They have duped you.  
*Henry* Give me yet another chance and a respite as long as the money lasts.  
*Cumnor* It's your money in that case. I will not put up with any more.  
*Henry* I take the risk.

*Cumnor* Then at least you still have faith in our cause. Think of the reward if you succeed. But at the same time I must warn you. If I see the slightest sign of you reaching an agreement with the niece about securing all the rights for the remaining papers, I will expose you with all your double-dealing both to the world and to the ladies and especially to the old one.

*Henry* By that you would kill her. You are as jealous as she is.

*Cumnor* He could have been our greatest poet after Byron. The documents could turn him to an advantage to Byron. I feel responsible for them as a publisher, a responsibility which I can never fail.

*Henry* Trust me, John. I will never let anyone down. We are all four of us focussed in our own way not to fail our cause, you your literary cause, I my ladies, Tita her aunt and the aunt her poet. And it is only the aunt who knows what the whole thing really is about. She is the key and the one we least of all must lose.

*Cumnor (resigns)* Very well, carry on, Henry, like you have done so far, but you are welcome to some day present some result, please. I will go on backing you up. *(rises, gives him a pat on the shoulder and leaves.)*

*Henry* What kind of a strange secret is the old mummy so jealously keeping and brooding on? The deeper I penetrate into this affair, the more I get the feeling that she might have some reason for keeping it buried alive. Or else she would long ago have shared it and made money on it, avaricious as she is, rather than lived so long in darkness on mortification.

#### Act IV scene 1.

*Bordereau* Are you conspiring with him?

*Tita* Aunt, I could never go behind your back.

*Bordereau* That is no answer to my question.

*Tita* Yes, it is.

*Bordereau* If it is, it is an avoiding answer.

*Tita* Neither he nor I am conspiring against you.

*Bordereau* Yes, you are. You are doing it together.

*Tita (patiently)* He has not betrayed you, and I even less.

*Bordereau* But you intend to do it, for the sake of those blasted letters. I should have destroyed them long ago.

*Tita* Why then didn't you do it?

*Bordereau* Because all my life is in them. Without them both he and I would definitely be dead.

*Tita* So why have you then never wanted to publish them, in order to give both yourself and him a new life?

*Bordereau* Because he wanted the secret to remain intact.

*Tita* What secret?

*Bordereau* You shall never know. When I die it will die with me.

Tita But you never die.

Bordereau No, that's the problem. I seem to have obtained that curse from him that I, like him, can never die. *(A knock.)*

Here he is again, our patient friend, who so patiently waits for me to die, so that he doesn't have to betray me by stealing the documents, which is his only reason for enduring our decayed and constantly more dilapidating existence, while when I am dead he will be thoroughly astounded that I managed to destroy them all. For neither will you decline from publishing them with him when I am gone, will you?

Tita I refuse to speculate in your death.

Bordereau So let that poor man in then.

*(Tita gets up and lets in Henry.)*

Henry What can I do for you today, my ladies?

Bordereau You had better do nothing.

Henry How so?

Bordereau Leave everything as it is. Leave our house and its secrets in peace. Don't delve into the past. Let it mould in the grave with me. Cultivate your roses and our garden, and make my niece happy, if possible, by not doing anything else.

Henry But you never let me reach you. How could I then make your niece happy by doing nothing?

Bordereau What do you really want?

Henry I can't deny that your mystifications must make me curious.

Bordereau I have an offer for you. Tita, leave the room.

Tita Is it about money again?

Bordereau Don't ask. *(Tita leaves.)* I have an offer for you to satisfy your curiosity. *(takes out from her hidden things a small carefully wrapped up parcel which she opens and which reveals a miniature portrait.)* This was what he looked like. He actually existed in your so called reality.

Henry *(impressed)* I don't doubt that for a moment, but this must be an early portrait.

Bordereau The earliest. It was painted by my father at the time when we first met in his study. I was very young then.

Henry So was he. There is not a similar portrait of you?

Bordereau No.

Henry What is the offer?

Bordereau That you may buy it.

Henry What may I offer?

Bordereau A thousand pounds.

Henry *(stunned)* I don't have that much money.

Bordereau Is it worth it?

Henry It is worth a great deal but more than I can afford. I could sell it though to someone else.

Bordereau I don't want just anyone to handle it.

Henry I can understand that. Thanks for your confidence. Is there nothing else you wish to sell?

*Bordereau* Like what?

*Henry* You know very well. The letters.

*Bordereau* Forget them. They don't exist. They are not for sale. I haven't seen a trace of them for thirty years.

*Henry* So you haven't burnt them.

*Bordereau* Not yet.

*Henry* Do you intend to do so?

*Bordereau* If necessary.

*Henry* Why would it be necessary?

*Bordereau* Neither he nor I wanted them to survive any of us.

*Henry* But you need money.

*Bordereau* Certainly.

*Henry* Wouldn't you suggest a price?

*Bordereau* You ask me to prostitute the soul of a dead poet.

*Henry* To save his soul and give him a new life.

*Bordereau* You don't know what you are talking about.

*Henry* You refuse to inform me.

*Bordereau* (*hits the stick in the floor. Tita arrives immediately.*) Tita, throw out this man. He only wants our souls for procurement.

*Henry* Literary works of art can not be buried alive at length. They will reach the public.

*Bordereau* Leonardo da Vinci refused to prostitute his Mona Lisa by departing with her. In the same way I refuse to depart from my life with him.

*Henry* That is your right. But it is not your right to destroy them.

*Bordereau* You don't know what they contain.

*Henry* It makes no difference.

*Bordereau* Yes, it makes all the difference in the world.

*Henry* What happened to him really?

*Bordereau* Tita, didn't I ask you to throw him out? The audience is over.

*Henry* (*rising*) I will consider your offer concerning the portrait.

*Bordereau* It remains.

*(Tita leads Henry out.)*

He drives poles into my heart and wrings them about. But I can't surrender to him. I can't open my own grave.

## Scene 2. In the garden.

*Tita* Aren't you asking a bit much of me?

*Henry* Would it be so difficult to find out where the documents are kept, if they exist at all?

*Tita* They exist, that is for certain.

*Henry* And you have no idea of their secret, what story they tell, what kind of a relationship they had, why it ended and where he went, after having lived your entire life with her, who only has lived for her memories of him?

*Tita* Only his poetry.

*Henry* She gives the impression of keeping and brooding on a deep secret, which at the same time as it frets on her and consumes her, keeps her alive.

*Tita* Yes, that is my impression also.

*Henry* We have to reach a settlement. This can't go on any longer. I can't afford a continuous unreasonably exorbitant rent for working here.

*Tita* We are grateful for that.

*Henry* While you at the same time unsparingly exclude me from your lives.

*Tita* My aunt is like that. She was always like that.

*Henry* What does she have to hide? Did she take the poet's life and buried him in the garden?

*Tita* You must not say that.

*Henry* Could any possibility be excluded when nothing is known?

*Tita* I don't think she took his life.

*Henry* Was it so banal, that he was unfaithful to her and just ditched her, which she has never been able to accept?

*Tita* His poems indicate the contrary.

*Henry* His poems! His damned lies and poems! All his life was just damned lies and poems!

*Tita* But it was poetry, that we are living on.

*Henry* Which you use to cultivate your own vanity. A poem is just a fleeting feeling and a dream of only thin air, like a shooting star which instantly vanishes into nothing.

*Tita* No, a poem conserves its dream and its feeling. That's what poetry is for. It makes eternity real.

*Henry* But your poet was not immortal.

*Tita* Yet he is still alive, perhaps very much because he just disappeared. Do you want to take his life?

*Henry* On the contrary. My publisher wants to give him eternal life for real.

*Tita* Without knowing the contents of the letters? A poet can only create his immortality himself. Our poet has made his in his own way, and only by being gone forever we mortals have nothing to add to his immortality, such as it is.

*Henry* We don't even have his death certificate! He could have faked his own death! Don't his readers have the right to know the truth?

*Tita* Not if he himself wished to get away with it. Shouldn't we respect him for that?

*Henry* And what if he was lost by some mystical circumstance without having a chance of explaining himself or to tell anyone what happened?

*Tita* I have promised to help you, and I stand for that, but I can't risk my aunt's vulnerable health in any way.

Henry I have to respect that.

Tita Thank you.

Henry Do you think we could have any result in any reasonable time?

Tita We have to take one day at a time. She hasn't much time left. If not before, we have to reach some clarity when she has left us.

Henry This continuous waiting and patience is like an hourglass which is constantly running out but never runs out. It just keeps going on, like a bleeding that can't be stopped and never ceases in a perpetual dying process which never ends.

Tita We have to wait out time.

Henry But the time is not waiting for us.

Tita We have no choice. We are its victims.

Henry And prisoners. Only death will let us free.

Tita If even that will do it. Don't you think that perhaps the poet found a way to get around it?

Henry That's the question your aunt refuses to answer.

*(They leave holding hands, and she gently leans her head against his shoulder.)*

*(The scene is empty, but after a while, the poet enters.)*

The poet It is over. I can't pretend any more. I can't deceive her any longer. The truth must get through, and I have to face it and its consequences. I must spare her and save both of us, no matter how painful it will be to both of us.

Juliana *(Tita in a younger shape, enters, lovely as a day)* My love, why this sad appearance?

poet This is the last time we'll see each other, Juliana. You must never doubt that you were my only great love, but I found you too late.

Juliana Nothing is ever too late for love.

poet We love each other too well, Juliana. The passion is too great and too undeniable in its irresistibility. I cannot check myself. We have to love each other with the full force of passion or depart. Since the first is forbidden...

Juliana Forbidden?

poet Juliana, you are the last one I could do any harm. I give you life but sacrifice my own.

Juliana You speak in confusing riddles.

poet Juliana, I have had many before you. As much as you are the perfect virgin, I am the contrary. One of my ladies, I don't know which one but I can only guess, gave me for a farewell present an incurable infection by the most terrible and contagious of all diseases, the severest curse of sexual life, an illness which condemns me to constitute a contamination source of mortal danger to my environment until destruction enters by beastly insanity transforming me into a monster.

Juliana Do you have lues?

poet Yes, my love, I have lues. I received my sentence from the doctor yesterday and haven't slept tonight for only thinking of you and our necessary separation.

Juliana What will you do?

*Poet* My life is no longer any life. The sexual power is the only healthy life power. If you are bereft of it by an incurable venereal disease or impotence you no longer have any natural life. I will disappear. Don't ask me where and how, because I don't know that myself. I will interrupt our love while it was at its most beautiful at its zenith and try to preserve it in that state by relinquishing it. I don't want to expose you to my declination, my gradual destruction and death, for I don't want to live through that myself. I will get off before it is too late to avoid the mortal dishonour of the disease by refusing to accept it.

*Juliana* Suicide?

*poet* Only by nature in that case far away from the coarseness of reality and scientific certificates and mortal conclusions of the doctors. I want to live, and therefore I am escaping from life.

*Juliana* You sacrifice your life to spare me. Then I will only ask you for one thing. You have one life that will never perish, and that is your poetry. Please continue writing poems to me as long as it is still possible.

*poet* I would willingly grant you that request. But you must not complain when they stop.

*Juliana* You will then always live within me as the one you were and always will be, and no one except the two of us will ever know our secret.

*poet* Thank you, my love, for taking it so completely without affliction.

*Juliana* I immediately recognize my responsibility. You choose to seal your fate, and I will see to it that it remains sealed.

*poet* My poems will never leave you. I only regret one thing, for which I humbly ask your apology.

*Juliana* You have nothing to regret.

*poet* That I met you too late. But it was nobody's fault, only the irony of fate.

*Juliana* Perhaps the meaning of both that and your illness was the release of the full width of your love.

*poet* Like Schubert's music.

*Juliana* Like Schubert's music.

*Poet* Let's not make the separation worse. My gondola is waiting for me. You will never see me again. But my thoughts will always follow you.

*Juliana* And mine will follow yours even after your poems have run out. Your life will continue after death, and when once I die I will find you there.

*Poet* Perhaps we could really find each other again beyond the limits of time.

*Juliana* Let us live for that and therein find the eternal life.

*poet* The eternal life can only exist in love.

*Juliana* I think so too.

*(He tenderly presses both her hands in both of his, lets them go with a last long look and disappears.)*

*Juliana sits down exhausted with a sigh – and cries.)*

Scene 3. The salon.

*Bordereau* I have cried all these years since then but always concealed my tears and saved their pain for the common soul we created, a child more alive and beautiful than any human child, namely the great poetry of his pain, which all the world has beset me since then for the right of prostitution, while I protected myself by hiding behind a wall of silence, retreat and protection for the eyes, so that no one should detect my constant tears. His letters and poems only lasted for a few years and then immediately and suddenly ceased, and I am the only one who understands them and who is capable of understanding them. You can't share things like that with others. The personal feeling is unique and can never be communicated in its truth to someone else. Poetry is an effort, but not even the most beautiful and truest poem in the world could communicate the full sincerity of a feeling. Words are only means, like all life is just a masquerade for the manipulations of the spirit and the emotional life. If you understand the spiritual movements and manoeuvres behind the mundane course of events, you can manipulate with life, like we women with our feelings easily manipulate our men, but no strains and trials are more unspeakable than the spiritual ones. – But someone is coming. Have I forgot to lock the door? Who has the courage and audacity to enter without knocking? (*retires quietly to conceal herself.*)

(*Henry enters, looks around, makes certain that no one can see him, and then starts searching, opening cupboards, bureaux, a writing-desk and other places but finds nothing, sighs heavily of frustration.*)

*Henry* She has hidden them too well. We will never find them.

*Bordereau* (*treads forth*) I regret your baseness, Sir. (*Henry almost has a stroke.*) You will never be able to write a single poem. (*walks out proudly keeping her head tall but shaken in the depths of her soul by the sacrilege.*)

(*Henry is shattered, wants to sit down, finds no place, shakes his head and almost runs out.*)

Act V scene 1.

*Tita* He has left.

*Bordereau* No wonder. He was finished here.

*Tita* He wished us no harm.

*Bordereau* I know. But he made a fool of himself, which he will never be able to forgive himself.

*Tita* I liked him.

*Bordereau* We both did. He was promising and had prospects, and we gave him a fair chance. He botched it.

*Tita* He was pressed.

*Bordereau* The more important not to panic. Well, it's a finished chapter, and so am I. I have nothing left to do in life but to lie down and die.

*Tita* You have been saying that for thirty years.  
*Bordereau* Don't you think I am serious?  
*Tita* You always were.  
*Bordereau* That's what I mean.  
*Tita* At least he gave us a beautiful garden.  
*Bordereau* And thanks to him I won't leave you destitute. His money saves you and our home.  
*Tita* A ghost house replenished with legends of poems and letters that maybe never existed.  
*Bordereau* They exist.  
*Tita* But why make such a secret of them?  
*Bordereau* Every single document is well preserved, and when I die you may do with them whatever you wish. Then you will learn where they are. They will remain mine only until I die, for I only lived in them.  
*Tita* You keep me captive to the last moment in your mystical relationship.  
*Bordereau* Nature wanted it that way. It is not my fault. It was not his fault. It was nobody's fault. It just turned out that way. (*rises*) I am tired. Lead me at last, my poor lonesome niece, as lonely as I myself was once upon a time, to my final rest. I promise not to get up of bed any more.  
(*Tita helps Mrs Bordereau tottering out.*)  
*Tita* Then I will sit with you until you die.  
*Bordereau* So that you then will be rid of me.

## Scene 2. The garden.

*Henry (enters with strong feelings of overwhelming memories)* Yes, they have tended the garden well. This time they have managed to make it survive a failed gardener. Nothing has changed. Everything seems as static here as it always has been. Perhaps I might now at last reach a solution to the mystery.

*Tita (enters, almost as beautiful as the young Juliana, with something enlightened about her.)*  
How kind of you to venture here again.

*Henry* I had no choice when I received your invitation.

*Tita* You have been absent for long.

*Henry* Six months. And in the meantime much has happened.

*Tita* During that time my aunt has passed away.

*Henry* I heard about the funeral. I am very sorry.

*Tita* At last she didn't have to suffer any more.

*Henry* Pardon me a sensitive question: was it as a consequence of my importunity that she confined herself in bed?

*Tita* I don't think so. She considered you quite objectively a finished chapter. Honestly speaking I think she was relieved to be rid of you.

*Henry* She never mentioned me again?

*Tita* She only mentioned you as one 'like all the others'.

*Henry* How she must have despised me.

*Tita* In her view you fell like all the others from a man who could have proved capable of some decency to one who like all the others didn't.

*Henry* I regret my clumsy blunder.

*Tita* You were tempted by your publisher. I tried to defend you.

*Henry* I was inexcusable in going too far.

*Tita* She gave you a fair chance of a fair game, but I must confess, that if you hadn't dared the effort of stealing them, you might still never have gained any access to them.

*Henry* Did they exist?

*Tita* Of course they existed.

*Henry* She didn't destroy them?

*Tita* Not a single one of them.

*Henry* So you could take care of them?

*Tita* All of them.

*Henry* Where were they hidden?

*Tita* She had concealed them all in her bed. No one was ever allowed to it except for changing sheets. It was her money in the mattress.

*Henry* And naturally no one could think of the importunity to look for them there. I searched everywhere else but found nothing.

*Tita* I know.

*Henry* So they are preserved?

*Tita* No.

*Henry* What happened to them??

*Tita* I destroyed them.

*Henry* You?

*Tita* Yes.

*Henry* By her request?

*Tita* Not at all. On my own initiative and responsibility after careful consideration without anyone influencing me.

*Henry* Did you read them?

*Tita* Every one most carefully.

*Henry* Did you reach any clarity in the mystery?

*Tita* It was just sincerely honest expressions of tenderness in one letter after another, in one poem after another. No explanation. The mystery you suspect, if there was any, they only knew themselves and never mentioned it.

*Henry* No clue?

*Tita* No clue.

*Henry* And you destroyed invaluable poems and sincere love letters from a world famous poet?

*Tita* They were not meant for unworthy eyes.

*Henry* This is terrible, what you tell me.

*Tita* If you had returned earlier you might have been able to save them.  
*Henry* How?  
*Tita* You could have continued working on me, like you did so successfully, until you went too far.  
*Henry* I realize the full extent of my complete failure.  
*Tita* Don't take it so hard. You still managed to save the portrait.  
*Henry* By selling it for you. I hope the money served you well.  
*Tita* I received it most gratefully. Now we can continue maintaining the house and cultivating our garden.  
*Henry* I assume this is the last time we see each other. I have to return to London.  
*Tita* Yes, this is the last time we'll see each other. You have got what you wanted. You got a solution to the mystery. There was no mystery, not even in the letters and poems.  
*Henry* My publisher will cleansweep the floor by doing me in.  
*Tita* The entire blame is his own. He was the one who drove you on.  
*Henry (rising)* All I can do is to regret how it all turned out.  
*Tita* There is nothing to regret. What happened happened, as a matter of course.  
*Henry* Poor comfort for a failed publisher.  
*Tita* Farewell, my friend. You could always write a beautiful short story about the adventure and make money on it. (*offers her hand for a farewell*)  
*Henry (accepts it and kisses it)* Farewell. (*bows humbly and departs*)  
*Tita (sits down and ponders the situation for a while)* Poet, we have done all we could to honour you. All your letters and poems still remain, but they have to wait for the right person for a worthy treatment and understanding.

*Curtain.*

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