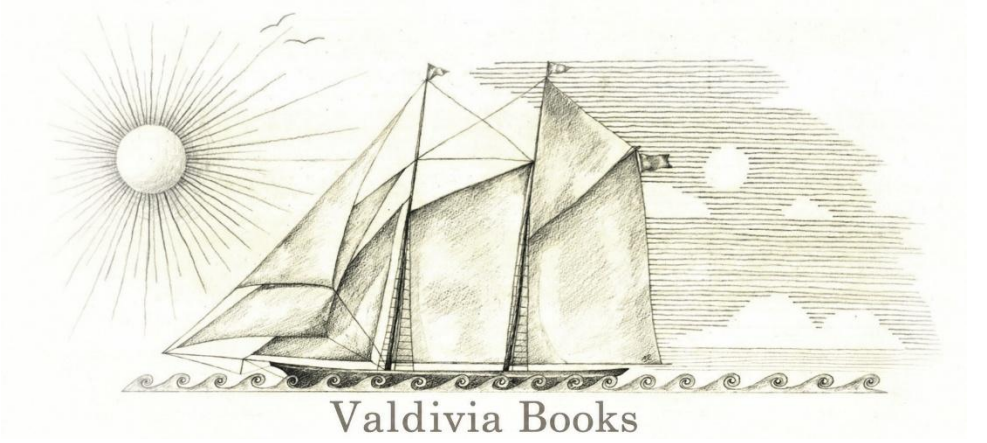


Memoirs of a 20th Century Gentleman

Reading Sample —

Part Five: Inner Sense

by

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This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

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Many years later, Charlotte entered the Library.

Sceptical did not begin to describe her on this day; she once swore she'd never have anything to do with Him again.

She was older now. She didn't know the whole story, but she had begun to think that perhaps there was more than just 'evil personified' somewhere in the truth of it all.

The Library wasn't what she had expected.

Not because her father had ever possessed anything resembling restraint, but because the room had been spoken of for so long—and preserved with such peculiar care—that she had half expected double doors, rolling ladders, marble busts and at least one dead philosopher glaring down from a plinth.

Instead, it was simply a room.

A beautiful room, admittedly.

But still just a room.

The fireplace stood between two alcoves filled from floor to ceiling with books. More crowded the remaining Moroccan Red walls, the two old mahogany reference bookcases, dictionaries and atlases, histories of Greece and Rome, Plantagenets and Tudors, Napoleon and Wellington, empires, revolutions, philosophers, and more than just a passing interest in Maritime history, all together with tyrants and inconvenient women all mixed together as if in one dysfunctional Sanctuary. An enormous, illustrated edition of Life of Pi sat on top of the books, apparently having arrived without consulting the available architecture.

Some stood in immaculate Folio Society cases.

Others looked as though they had survived active military service.

Two ox-blood Chesterfield chairs faced the fireplace at opposing angles—not quite facing one another, but close enough for conversation if either occupant chose to risk it. Between them stood a black cast-iron chess table, its great carved pieces waiting in two silent armies.

The fire had been laid but not lit.

The room did not smell abandoned. Sandalwood had been burned over and over until the wood itself had an aroma, but something else too; impossible, but if she had to put a name to it: Sea.

There was no dust gathered theatrically upon the books, no cobweb hanging from the coloured tiffany lampshade, no stale breath of a mausoleum pretending to be a Library.

The leather had been fed, oiled as if one of the gladiators in those serious looking reference books.

The wood had been polished.

The room had been kept.

That irritated her more than neglect might have done.

Her father had somehow arranged to remain troublesome even in his absence – by remaining.

A deep burgundy-and-gold rug stretched through the centre of the room. It was softer beneath her feet than she expected, though she had obeyed the small handwritten card at the door:

NO SHOES.

THE RUG IS BLESSED.

I MAY BE HARAM, BUT I'M NOT SACRILEGIOUS.

Charlotte had stared at it for several seconds before removing her shoes.

“That sounds about right,” she muttered.

Near the fireplace stood a five-foot tower of pierced brass, rising in narrowing sections towards a long, improbable spike. It looked less like a lamp than something a Sultan might once have used to summon weather.

A pale strand of LEDs within it cast a beautiful warm array of patterns across the corner of the room. Something hypnotic about the lights sent one into the desert from a long-ago time.

Across the room, a globe stood on wheels, six bottles of wine held snugly below it, betraying the three inside. Beside it sat a hand engraved brass round tray on a low table, heavy enough to serve dinner upon or defend the house during a siege, two floor cushions either side; as if the room wanted to welcome every culture somehow.

An oak chest stood near one of the Chesterfields. Every visible surface had been carved by hand—swirling looping Celtic shapes cut so deeply into the timber on each side that Charlotte found herself tracing one with the edge of her finger without realising.

A clear smooth plastic covering protected the top.

Practical.

Even sacred carvings apparently required somewhere to put a wine glass.

The deep terracotta walls were no quieter than the shelves.

Ships appeared everywhere without the room quite becoming nautical. A schooner at sunset. A vessel seen through an open window. A naval officer. A sea creature with a ship reflected in its eye. A small octopus-like thing apparently caught in the act of ‘inking itself’.

There were two severe drawings of a château looming over a village.

There was a veiled woman in a dark dress.

Another figure wore a hat upon which was something barely distinguishable:

ART WITHOUT EGO. It rang a distant bell in her mind from somewhere long ago.

And there was a hooded man holding a candle carefully between both hands, darkness gathered around him while he tried not to lose the light.

Charlotte did not need to read the label to know who that was supposed to be.

"Subtle," she said.

The hooded man continued smiling as if fully aware of her thoughts.

On another wall hung a canvas photograph of a pair of bare feet upon a bed, facing an impossible view of a sailing ship beyond an open window.

Her father's final author portrait – even she knew that one.

A lot had been said over the years about it, from the weird to the absurd. Did he consider himself too ugly at the end? Did he think he was selling to a foot-fetish audience? Or was he truly transitioning? She had to admit though, as annoying as it was, it was a good picture.

Elsewhere, several small frames had been joined into one larger arrangement: photographs of Charlotte as a baby with her mother; Charlotte with her father; her father holding her; her mother holding her; the three of them caught briefly inside

a life that had once believed itself permanent with a beautiful Sea backdrop, as if it was trying to show itself part of the little family.

Among them was an older photograph.

A sixteen-year-old boy in a black leather jacket stood on Tennyson Down, Alum Bay and the Solent behind him, his face arranged into the sulky contempt that only a sixteen-year-old could sustain with such professional commitment.

He was facing towards the Needles.

Towards the place where part of him had eventually returned.

Charlotte moved on.

Above a small rosewood bookcase hung a framed copy of The Last Watch.

She recognised it.

She did not stop.

The little bookcase beneath it seemed to hold fiction compared to the heavy reference books on the other shelves. This one had shelves too low for books and had forced them to lie sideways in untidy stacks. Steinbeck. Orwell. Kafka. The Historian. And Birdsong, which seemed to somehow stand out proudly.

One battered paperback looked ready to collapse if anyone laughed too loudly near it with a faded spine where she could just make out Charlotte & Emily, the Bronte sisters she mused, her namesakes.

The books did not look selected for display.

They looked read.

Some repeatedly.

On the opposite wall hung another frame, far larger than the rest.

It began with her name, again as if one big elaborate joke at her expense.

Charlotte Emily.

The letters seemed enormous.

There was a poem beneath them.

Charlotte saw that much and chose not to see any more.

Not today.

Possibly not ever. She had no interest in being dragged in to one of His games.

She turned towards the desk.

It stood behind the Chesterfields: a dark oak pedestal desk with an ox-blood leather writing surface, broad enough to have accommodated manuscripts, maps, wine, arguments and at least one unreasonable declaration of principle.

A captain's chair in that same ox-blood leather rested behind it.

On the wall above were three framed pieces.

To the left, a chronology of the Valdivia.

In the centre, a large, commissioned drawing of the Ship under sail.

To the right, an old certificate decorated with Neptune, Script and Maritime flourishes, all on an old sea chart.

She leaned closer.

Her father's name appeared upon it.

So did a date.

22 April 1993.

Her mind did the maths before she could stop it.

He had crossed the Equator at only seventeen years old.

Charlotte looked from the certificate to the ship and then away again.

To the left of the desk sat an Antique Travel Writing Bureau no more than twelve inches high. Its polished wooden front was secured by a tiny key, as though some miniature Victorian clerk might return at any moment to complete his correspondence.

She mused how every item in the room seemed planned somehow, as if for this moment. She wasn't sure if she liked it, she looked around again.

On the opposite end of the room, on a midnight blue cloth-covered table, stood pierced lanterns for candles, old bowls, a metal goblet and several intricate wooden boxes.

One box was patterned in three warm, intricate woods.

Root of Thuya, Walnut and Lemon Tree, according to the fading note preserved inside its lid.

Another opened to reveal an antique pipe: an eagle's claw gripping an egg.

A square wooden box bore an anchor.

A longer one carried a ship's wheel.

And beside them sat a large wooden die which, when Charlotte lifted its lid, contained three smaller dice inside – one was missing, she knew as it was in one of her board games still today.

She remembered.

Not the day clearly.

A charity shop.

Her father being far too pleased with himself.

A box pretending to be a die, containing more dice.

Of course he had bought it.

Then she saw the other thing.

It had been made from coloured lollipop sticks, with a strip of paper glued across them in a seven-year-old's handwriting.

The glue had failed at some point.

Someone had repaired it.

A thin sheet of clear plastic now protected the paper.

THINGS I LOVE ABOUT DAD.

Below it came a list of qualities, unevenly spelled and fiercely meant.

YOU ARE THE BEST COOKER.

Charlotte stared at it, remembering how it gave him such joy laughing at that. But it was what was written near the bottom that she now realised he had coveted for all those years after:

I LOVE YOU DADDY

The room became very still.

She placed the little object back exactly where she had found it.

She crossed back to the desk, sat back in the Captain's chair, and finally decided to notice the middle drawer in front of her.

There was nothing unusual about it.

No brass plaque.

No lock.

No dramatic instruction carved into the oak.

She pulled it open.

Inside lay an old silver laptop.

A folded note rested upon the lid.

The handwriting was unmistakable.

For Charlie.

When You're Ready xxx

Charlotte closed the drawer.

She stood there for a while.

Then opened it again.

The laptop was outdated now. Even its edges seemed old, its silver casing faded against the antique red leather of the desk.

She barely remembered taking it out.

Barely even remembered sitting in the captain's chair.

The laptop was lighter than she expected.

Too light to hold anything that mattered.

There was a charging cable beneath it.

She plugged it in.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then a small light appeared.

The machine took a long time to boot.

Long enough for Charlotte to change her mind.

Twice.

An ocean-blue screen emerged from the darkness.

No name.

No password request.

No company logo.

Her fingers hovered above the trackpad.

The laptop speakers gave a faint breath of static.

Then a woman's voice said:

"Hello, Charlie."