

WHEN IT STRIKES TEN

-----00000000-----



WHEN IT STRIKES TEN

-----00000000-----

Time---early in the <sup>20<sup>th</sup></sup> ~~19<sup>th</sup>~~ century.

Scene---an old Georgian house in a Dublin street, now almost a slum

Characters

-----

Mr Ronald Goke-Vesey

Sir Lester Gore K.C.B.

Terence---a butler                      all old men.

The room where Ronald Vesey is sitting by lamplight is a typically Victorian room as to screens, curtains, upholstery, but there are good pieces of Georgian furniture, a Chippendale mirror above the mantelpiece, Sheffield plate candlesticks below it, with new candles burning on this evening.

Along the floor near Vesey's chair is a long Oriental rug. The room is a man's room, without flowers, and the tables are piled with books and papers. The curtains are drawn over the high windows. There is a smouldering spark of fire.



Ronald Vesey is alone in the room, seated in an arm chair, a rug over his knees. Papers crowd the table beside him with a lamp and hand-bell. He is deep in a small M.S. book. It seems to excite him and he frowns as he reads.

He rings his bell...there is a long pause and he rings again.)

Enter Terence, the butler. He is an old man in very shabby uniform with a green baize apron. He carries a tray with glasses, whiskey in decanter and syphen. He clears space on small table putting books etc on floor.)

Tereece.- Oh, I heard you, sir, the first time, but I thought I'd save my legs and bring the lot in one journey. It's queer the stairs seem to get steeper every year. I thought it would be the whiskey you rang for, but I wanted to contrive with the coal scuttle too.

Vesey.- Yes...I wanted the whiskey to be here before Sir Lester arrives. It will look as if it always was there..like the old days.

Ter.- (chuckling) 'Ready for visitors' says you. When did we have a visitor last, sir?

Vesey.- The doctor..he looks in quite often, Terence.

Ter.- He does indeed, sir, God reward him, he never forgets us. I'll ask him for a rub for this old hip of mine. When he's sober they all say you can't find a better doctor in ~~the~~ Dublin.

Vesey.- I believe you, and he never sends a bill and when I ask he's forgotten half his visits..no wonder he's a poor man.<sup>!</sup>

And he is the friend of the poor...indeed I suppose he



would include us in that class now, Terence.

Ter.- Ah, not with the uncivilized lot around here, sir. Maybe the street is a slum by now but they all know that Mr Coke-Vesey lives in this house, one of the old gentry, because his family lived here. And the way with the Irish is, however low down themselves, they respect them that were once high up. The Irish poor have little regard for new things, gentry or laws.

Vesey.- What way is the fire, Terence?

Ter.- Very poorly, sir..near death. I took heed to leave the scuttle outside the door. (He fetches coal and kneels down by hearth, trying to make it up) I do go easy on the coal seeing the price it is, but we'll need a brisk fire for Sir Lester. I suppose he'd have central heating.

Vesey.- I fancy he has every comfort and luxury in his London house..and now he's in the best hotel..ah, he's gone far since he left here. It was only by chance I saw his name in the paper. I never read this Fashionable news..it was odd that his name caught my eye for I had been thinking about him.

Ter.- (looking round from hearth where he kneels) Indeed it must have been a great surprise to him to get your letter and find you at the same address. Did he never write to you, sir, not for the Christmas..or any time?

Vesey.- Never, Terence, well, I'm not blaming him. It seems a life time since he lived in this street. He was still a young man when the house was sold and he went to England.



Ter.- ~~He~~, I remember them well, though it is long ago. He was often here those days, Mr Lester as he was then. Do you recall the musical evenings your Mama-God rest her-would have of a Thursday night? It was all the go then-quartettes they called them or Trios and the ladies and gentlemen all singing with one another..great for match-making it was too.

Vesey.- I remember..I remember..

Ter.- Mr Lester had a lovely Tenor voice..the maids would be pushing up the basement stairs to hear him and I'd be holding them back for fear they'd forget themselves and clap.Great days those were,sir.

Vesey.- And now the doctor tells me there is that mechanical stuff-Radio he called it,he wanted me to get it,said it would be great company for me.I said'God forbid',I told him these walls had heard the real thing we had in my mother's time.

Ter.- (poking fire vigourously) This fire is very sulky,sir,she needs coaxing Would you ever hand me the paper forinst~~at~~ you.<sup>2</sup>

Vesey.- Here you are...Indeed Sir Lester won't believe he ever lived in this street.His family were the first to feel the turn of the tide and leave the north side of the river.

Ter.- And then the old lot,the real Quality started to flit.I could name the owners of every house..and now it will be a tenement<sup>†</sup> with twenty families in it.(Terence is holding the paper to the fire as he talks)..there were the Cokes at No.10 and old Lady Baltray,the dowager,at11...

Vesey.- Judge O'Mahoney at12 and ourselves-the sole survivors at13



Ter.- The Fitzgerald Lynches at 14..the old Honourable...I  
disremember her name.

Vesey.- O'Sullivan..ah,I remember her well..and the lorgnette!

Ter.- And all had their servants up in the attics and the men  
in the basement..and all the bath water to be carried upstairs  
but girls could work in those days.The Cook and the parlour  
maid knew how to scourge sense into them.

Vesey.- Yes,...Sir Lester will be surprised to find me still here.  
But why should a man desert his old home because others do.  
The country place had to go..too expensive,but this remains  
a refuge..I never go out so I don't care if it is a slum.  
I'm a hermit, Terence.

Ter.) You are, sir, indeed. Who's to forbid it? But I'll be glad to  
see you with one of the old sort. It will be great diversion  
for the two of you to be recalling the old days and talking  
of this one and that. If I go out for my little game of  
cards I don't like leaving you brooding over the past with  
the old letters and journals.

Vesey.- I like it, Terence, tho' it may make me sad at times.

Ter.- Would you not take a drop of whiskey before Sir Lester  
comes...just to hearten you?

Vesey.- No, Terence, thanks,...Terence, you've been filling up the  
decanter. How did you get it? You never asked me for money.

Ter.- (rather confused) It was just a drop I had below, sir, a drop  
of tea suits me better. Don't worry over that. I wouldn't  
like Sir Lester to think we were short of anything.

Vesey.- I don't like you to go short, my old friend.



Ter.- Don't worry for that, sir, I'll likely get my pint of porter when I go to Muldoon's for the lottle game of cards. The whiskey does upset my stomach at times. I'm best without it.

Vesey.- Nonsense, man. It's time we sold something and then you'll get your wages out of it and a bottle of whiskey. You'll go out tomorrow..have we silver still in the safe?

Ter.- We have, sir, but I'll never let you go short of silver for your own use.

Vesey.- I may come down to plate befor I die...the question always is how long shall I last and will the house and what's in it keep you ...it's all I can do in return for a life-time's service.

Ter.-Now, Master, I never like that talk. Please God the two of us will last out what we've got. See..I'll pour you the wee drop to take now and give yyou the heart for a chat with Sir Lester..the two of us will have many a day here yet, chatting of old times.

Vesey.- Perhaps, Terence, but the doctor warned me I might go any time frome the old heart..exertion or excitement. I don't fear death, any man should meet it boldly..and a gentleman should hold out both his hands in welcome.

Ter.- (handing glass) Let's have no more talk of death. You're meeting an old friend and that will make you a young man again. No doubt but you'll both be at it when I come in at night.

Vesey.- Not after ten o' clock, Terence...that's my ~~bedtime~~ bed-time I don't fancy Sir Lester will want to stay after ten.



What is the time <sup>now</sup> ~~no~~, Terence?

Ter.- (peering at clock) By the Hokey!..I forgot to wind her..but it ~~has~~ had gone nine by the Hall,I'll put her at a quarter past.  
Sir Lester should be here any time now.

Vesey.- As soon as you've shown him up, Terence, you can go out.

Ter.- I'll be glad to see the gentleman once more..he was Mister Lester in those days.Indeed I always had a notion,sir,that he was after our Miss Emily..you'll forgive the liberty but did you not think so?

Vesey.- I did indeed ,Terence.

Ter.- The way he'd sing: 'Believe me if all those endearing young charms'..you'd think it was for her alone,for I was bringing in the tea tray and I took note of it and how her cheeks ~~were~~ went all blushy and her eyes sparkled.A servant sees many a thing he's not supposed to notice.

Vesey.- Of course he does.You expected a declaration on his part did you, Terence?

Ter.- I did so,sir,for I saw more.Miss Emily came down the stairs one day as Mr Lester was leaving-maybe it was on purpose.He asked me of a sudden would I see did he leave his gloves upstairs.I came down rather quick and I saw him kissing her.I pretended to drop the gloves and be slow coming down. But there she was..our dear young lady,all smiles and blushes and she dashed up the stairs past me.Oh,I surely expected an engagement after that.

Vesey.- Instead he went off to London and married the daughter of a wealthy merchant..what I call a tradesman.



Ter.- And I thought in my own way, sir, that Miss Emily was never quite the same gay young lady after that. She got so quiet and the sparkle went out of her.

Vesey.- But she could have married another. She had more than one good offer. It was a pity she refused, growing old in this dark old house.

Ter.- I think in a manner of speech, sir, that Mr Lester spoilt the market for any other. It's a thing a man will do for a young girl, he dazzles her some way and she can't fancy the dull plain article that means a good husband.. than she loses them all in the heel o' the hunt.

(A bell rings, sounding loudly in the quiet house).

Ter.- That will be Sir Lester ..I'll be long getting down the stairs. (Exit. Another impatient ring. Vesey stands up, looking at door. Enter Terence announcing: 'Sir Lester Gore'  
A personable, well setup, well dressed gentleman enters. He is taking off his gloves as he comes. Terence lingers inside room. Vesey advances to meet his visitor.)

Lester.- Well, my dear Ronald, this is indeed a surprise for me.. to have heard from you after all these years... how are you?

Vesey.- As well as you see me, Lester. But I needn't ask how you are, I see knighthood has agreed with you.

Lest.- Ah, yes, the king has been kind over my small services to the country.. I mean England. I see you have our old friend Terence with you still. I seem to have stepped straight into the past.

(Terence comes forward and pushes up a chair for Sir Lester.)



Ter.- This one, sir, is sound in wind and limb. Some of them has beetle in their legs..a bit old like the master and myself. Indeed, sir, it's a picture Sir Lester looks after all the ~~years~~ years that have gone over him.

Lest.- (rather self-important) I've tried to keep up with the times, Ronald..one does in London..so many <sup>people</sup> ~~people~~ to see, such demands on one's time and experience. One swims in the full current of life. After that I must say I find Dublin very sleepy..it may be the air, but it's such a drowsy old town, ~~dreaming~~ <sup>dreaming</sup> of past days, past wrongs, past glories.

Ter.- You must have got a surprise, Sir Lester, to see the street as it is now. You'd not believe you had ever lived in it.

Lest.- You're right, Terence. The taxi-man said I must have made a mistake that I could ~~not~~ have a friend here, for all the houses were tenements.

Ter.- Ah, he would. And your old house ~~holding~~ <sup>holding</sup> a dozen families and most of the men in gaol.

Vesey.- You'll shock Sir Lester, you'd best go off to your cards. <sup>Terence</sup> <sup>^</sup>  
We have all we want.

Ter.- Very good, sir, Goodnight Sir Lester. If I should not be back when you go you know the old house and though we have no electric I've lit the gas on the stairs, so you'll see your way down.

Lest.- Ah, thank you, Terence. Yes I know my way well in this hospitable house. Goodnight, Terence. (Exit Terence)

Well now, my dear, Ronald, what is keeping you in this God-forsaken slum? Surely you can find some more cheerful spot



It really distresses me to find an old friend in such a neighbourhood.

Vesey.- Because Fashion has forsaken the street there is no real reason why I should follow her. I have no relations to be ashamed of visiting me here and no friends except a usually drunk doctor who looks in on me. I have the good fortune to be entirely my own master and no one need worry whether I live or die except my faithful Terence to whom I shall leave this house and its contents. I call that freedom. I doubt that you, Lester can say as much.

Lest.- Freedom like yours? No. I have given hostages to Fortune. I have a family, all of them now married and doing well in the world. My dear wife I lost some years ago. I am a grandfather and it is pleasant to feel one has ties with the youngest generation.

Vesey.- The youngest generation of Dubliners abounds in this street. I do not see them as I never go out, but I hear them and I prefer the memories of the street as it was in our decorous youth.

Lest.- That is all very well, Ronald, but you are living in a dream world, among ghosts. Have you no Radio?

Vesey.- Radio...no, I'd rather have ghosts to squeal and gibber.

Lest.- And no electric light..this dim old house in gas light.. Why I have'nt seen gas since my youth.

Vesey.- And I have known nothing else.

Lest.- And what do you read, man? How do you pass your time?



Vesey.- I have been rereading old, letters, diaries with a view to burning them before I die and saving Terence the job. But forgive me I am neglecting you. You will have a glass of whiskey.

(Vesey gets up and goes to table with tray and pours our whiskey)

Vesey.- Soda? stop me in time..

Lest.- Thankyou,..enough..enough. I had my glass at dinner but I must drink to the past in this familiar house. You are joining me are you not?

Vesey.- Thankyou, no. Terence insisted on my having a spot before you came.

(Having handed the glass to Lester Vesey goes to door, locks it and pockets the key, then returns to his chair.)

Lest.- Here's to the Past, (drinks) ..all the same, Ronald I think present and future are of more practical use. What is the good of recalling old times that have done their day? My motto has always been 'Let the dead Past bury its dead'

Vesey.- Yes, but it does not always bury it deeply. In fact, Lester, the past is always with us, demanding retribution reminding us of its wrongs, its hurts till pity drives us to demand atonement.

Lest.- I don't follow you, Ronald. What is in your mind? Hurts.. wrongs? You are speaking very strangely

Vesey.- You knew my sister Emily.. you remember her?

Lest Why of course.. a most charming young girl as I remember her. Is she still living?

Vesey.- No, she died fifteen years ago, she was then an old querulous



discontented woman; her love for a false lover had blighted her life in youth and though the term is often lightly use I think hers was a case of a broken heart.

Lest.- Surely you take some early..er..fancy too seriously. As I remember Miss Emily she was a lively attractive girl who must have had many admirers ..and if one fell short, she would have had others anxious for her favour.

Vesey.- Oh, yes, she had suitors, but the one she loved and gave her faith had played her false-how false I did not know till I read her diary here written at the time this..wretch was courting her. Here..this may interest you it is a valentine, enclosed in the diary..I believe they do not send these pretty lacey things in these days.

Lest.- Ah, they were a pretty convention..but nobody took them seriously.

Vesey.- You did not for these were your sentiments, hardly poetry but from the heart it seemed. Listen-

'My heart is all I have to give

It's yours as long as I shall live.'

The initials are yours I think-L.G'

Lest.- (laughing uneasily). Why yes..a very youthful jeu d'esprit. I had forgotten it. I'm sure she had many like it. I'll admit that your sister and I did have a little flirtation. Of course I was too young to marry and I had my way to make in England. Such affairs must be transitory..each side forgets in time

Vesey.- but my sister did not forget. She believed in your faith. I want to read you this extract from her diary..

Lest.- Come, Ronald. Can't we drop the subject. We are two old men



What use to repeat a girls' fancies? Must I listen to her private thoughts.?

Vesey.- Yes, you must listen. Here she says that she has promised to marry you but that you have pledged her to secrecy until you have made an income and can claim her. She quotes Solvig's song..I remember how she sang it..'But he will come again..come again <sup>I know</sup> and be mine'. Like Solvig she waited

Lest.- How could I know she would take me so seriously. I soon stopped writing, I thought that would show her <sup>a change</sup> without any formal break.

Vesey.- She knew nothing of your change of heart till she saw the announcement of your engagement in the paper that and ~~the~~ <sup>your</sup> wedding announcement are enclosed in this diary and there is a little note in her own writing.

'Death-at 13 South Benedict Street-Emilia Anne Coke-Vesey in ~~her~~ twenty-fifth year. On whose heart God have pity.'

Lest.- Very fanciful..a girl does dramatize her love affairs.

(He rises) But now I shall go off. There is no use in continuing this painful and profitless conversation.

(Vesey rises with a menacing look)

Vesey.- Ah, but there is purpose in it, Lester. I did not get you here for a mere chat over old times. I intend to avenge what I consider a grievous wrong to a dead woman and an insult to her only brother. Such wrongs were settled between gentlemen in old days with their lives. Honour could only be satisfied by death-that was the manner of gentlemen.

Lest.- What manner? Are you crazy, Ronald ?



Vesey.- Not at all I challenge you here and now to a duel.

Lest.- You're mad..I'm going.(He hurries to door and tries to open it) Why is this door locked? What infernal trick are you playing?

Vesey.- I locked the door but I hardly believed that a gentleman would refuse a challenge.

Lest.(coming back to centre room) If you do not unlock that door I shall open the window and call for help.

Vesey(sardonically) You have forgotten our Dublin windows.That one cannot be opened,it is stuck.Calm yourself,Lester,you had better take up the challenge.It gives you a chance to kill me.We are both old men with death not far off, what have we got to lose?A year or two? Surely better for us both to die tonight in an honourable way.

Lest.- And you think I should like to be hanged for your murder if I survive..Anyway what is this mad scheme of yours?

Vesey.(turning to table and picking up a case) I have a pair of pistols here,I've loaded them.I propose that we put the length of this rug between us..

Lest.- But that is plain murder at such a close range.It means death for us both.You mad man can't you see the folly of it all,we have no seconds,no doctor,it should be done in a proper way...Let me go and find seconds and a doctor. Yes,Ronald,then I will agree..just open the door and I promise I will come back with doctor and seconds



Vesey,- Ah, very clever, you are trying to humour me. No, you will not escape that way. Dead men need no doctors and our seconds are not visible. One friend we have to give us the word. That old clock behind you is soon about to strike ten. I propose that at the tenth stroke we fire. I shall count the strokes aloud. Come now, brace yourself. Choose your pistol.

(Lester takes it and goes backward to end of rug, his back to the clock)

Lest.- I fire only in self defence. If you kill me you will be hanged or sent to a Criminal Lunatic Asylum, I wish you joy of it.

Vesey. I am content..be ready the clock is about to strike.

(The two men stand in position. Both raise their pistols. The clock begins to strike.)

Vesey.- One...two...three...

(At the third stroke <sup>Vesey</sup> ~~he~~ falls, stumbling down onto his knees and ~~coll~~ slouched against a chair. Lester stands still for some seconds then advances cautiously and bends over Vesey)

Lest.- Ronald ....Ronald...are you ill?

(He lays down pistol and takes Vesey's hand, bends over him.)

Lest.- Dead...by the mercy of God..he's dead. (He picks up key from floor and hurries to door, opens it and calls.)

Lest.-Terence....Terence...come quick.

Ter.- (From a distance) Coming, sir..what is it?

Lest.- Terence, your master has fainted..it may be worse than that. I think he is dead. you will want a doctor I will go out and

*find one*



(Terence comes in, wearing an overcoat and muffler. He goes straight to Vesey and bends over him, feels his hands, then stands up.)

Ter.- he's gone...he's gone..my darling man, my ~~best~~<sup>dearest</sup> old master.

Sure there'll never be his like for the real old gentleman he was. They don't make the like of him in these days.

God go with you, Master dear...how did he fall so, sir?

Lest.- I tell you he was crazy, Terence. There are two loaded pistols here and you'd better put them away and say nothing. I can't stay here, my nerves have gone. I'll ask the first policeman I see to send a doctor and to get me a taxi. (Exit)

(Terence kneels down beside the fallen figure)

Ter.- So you're gone, master dear, and left me to my lonesome days but best for yourself, and maybe I'll be joining you soon if it is God's will, the world has no place for the likes of us..may you rest in peace.

Curtain

-----0000000000-----