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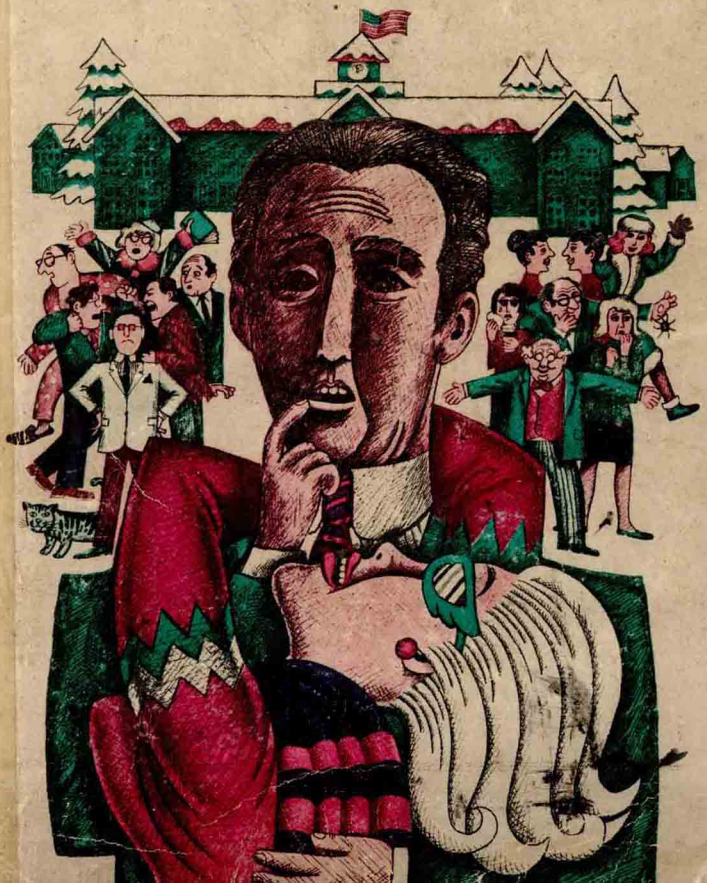
Night and Silence Who is Here?

Pamela Hansford Johnson



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Pamela Hansford Johnson was born in 1912 and gained recognition with her first novel, *This Bed Thy Centre*, published in 1935. Her novels available in Penguins include *An Error of Judgement*, *The Humbler Creation*, and *A Summer to Decide*; *The Unspeakable Skipton* (1959), *Night and Silence Who Is Here?* (1962) and *Cork Street, Next to the Hatters* (1965), though related only because each shares some of the same characters, she now calls 'The Dorothy Merlin Trilogy'. *The Survival of the Fittest* (1968) is her twentieth and most recent novel. She is a critic as well as a novelist and has written books on Thomas Wolfe and Ivy Compton-Burnett; *Six Proust Reconstructions* (1958) confirmed her reputation as a leading Proustian scholar. She has also written a play, *Corinth House* (1954), and a work of social criticism arising out of the Moors Trial, *On Iniquity* (1967). She has received honorary degrees from two universities.

Pamela Hansford Johnson, who has two children by her first marriage, is married to C. P. Snow and they have a son.

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Night and Silence Who is Here?

An American Comedy

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To my Son
Andrew Morven Stewart

'Night and Silence! who is here?
Weeds of Athens he doth wear.'

Puck, *M.N.D.*, Act II, Scene 2

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1 Dear old Dr Parke

Under the maples, burning like bonfires, pure yellow and pure red, walked Dr Dominick Maudlin Parke, his hands clasped behind his back.

The day was mild. The sky, behind the flagrant leaves, was almost white, almost as white as the hair of Dr Parke, dear *old* Dr Parke, though no more than fifty-seven years of age, who walked in generally admired perplexity, though he was not perplexed at all.

He knew precisely, as he had always known, what he had to do.

He had to welcome, at 4 p.m. on the dot, the latest and last of the Visiting Fellows.

His soft shoes trod soft leaves, amazingly coloured, though his eyes had long ceased to heed them. The scarlet maple leaf, when turned on to its backside, becomes the most fragile of mauves, rose-mauve, tender as the word Mauve or as the flesh of an odalisque in shadow on a couch of crimson plush: such flesh Dr Parke trod all unseeing, but all-knowing.

Any old how, such was his reputation.

In this pause of the day, when the boys were in their classes and the sky was quiet, he inclined his head towards the chapel in playful but reverent salutation. The ivy rippled politely at him in reply. Below the campus, New Hampshire plunged down to the Gropius airport, twenty miles away; above, it soared to the ski-slopes. To the left of Dr Parke, the Faculty houses, their lawns strewn with bicycles, toys, hosepipes, broken garden chairs: before him, chapel,

Old Hall, library. To his right the Boosie House (1912), the new dormitories (1958), the classrooms. Behind him, the gymnasium and the Centre for Visiting Fellows, flashing its glass, its lambent mahogany, back at the sun. Behind the Centre, more Faculty houses, including the President's, and houses of a random character put at the disposal of the Visitors.

One of the Visitors was coming across the grass now from the library, little Miss Groby, laden with books and muttering to herself. For an elderly woman she moved fast, with a mouselike scuttle. She nodded briefly to Dr Parke, glancing at him from beneath her beetling brows, but did not speak.

'Good day, good day, good day!' he called after her, sweeping the air with his goodwill, 'and what a day!'

Miss Groby scuttled on towards the Centre.

'And *what* a day!' Dr Parke repeated, this time for the day's own benefit. The whole of his teeth moved slightly, like the keyboard of a piano. He had forgotten his dental powder. As he passed on he forgave Miss Groby for her lack of response. After all, he supposed, she had just had a splendid late lunch in the Boosie House, and replete after such delights, perhaps even a little drowsy, was eager to get back to her work.

He turned for a moment to see her disappearing through the glass doors. He felt sorry, as he often did, that Carlo Tiepolo and Miss Corall made the building so untidy by propping their balcony windows open with chairs. From where he stood, the seats of Swedish leather, peacock and scarlet, stuck up from the face of the building in gross disharmony. It occurred to him that had they an alternative device by which to open the windows they would certainly use it: but he did not know what this device might be or how to go about discovering it. He was not, although he believed himself to be one, altogether a practical man. And he was Head of the Centre.

A man of small stature, with stooped and skinny frame but cheeks still round and rosy, he contemplated the impossibility of making changes. Changes ought to be made, perhaps, but he simply didn't see how they could be. Meanwhile, Miss Corall's chair was withdrawn and Dr Tiepolo's fell over.

Old Dr Parke looked at his watch and began to hurry. It was already twenty-five past three. Oh dear, he was going to be late at the airport!

2 An Englishman's Home

Matthew Pryar, fifty-one last week but looking like a well-preserved thirty-eight, fastened his seat-belt. He was humming dulcetly to himself, without knowing it, 'Sheep May Safely Graze'. He was rather tired, but also happy in the foreknowledge of comforts to come. After a rough night in New York he had not felt like his breakfast, nor had he felt very much like lunch, either. By the time he was on his way to Hamelin he had recovered his appetite, but on this flight no meals were served. The President had promised, however, when inviting him to pursue his Merlin studies at the Centre, to look after him in every way, and within an hour, perhaps, would be implementing that promise.

The bright sky drenched the windows to port: to starboard, rich earth swamped them: great hills and sunny fields, the fuzz of trees, chalkline of roads, and now, visible as the plane banked steeply, houses, backyards, motor-cars, men, even, and at last the Gropius wonder itself only a couple of bumps and a trundle away.

Matthew unbelted himself, brushed himself down, passed a comb quickly through the sleekness of his hair, still brown, with a discreet ripple in it. He felt the pleasurable anticipation not only of one who is about to eat, but who is about to enter a new avatar. He was delighted by the idea of being accepted as a scholar among scholars.

Having done almost no work of any description since he came down from Oxford (he was well-heeled), and devoting his attention solely to the sweetening of social life both for

himself and others, he had been nagged by Dorothy Merlin into making a study of her work. Since he mildly liked her work, he saw no reason why not to: and as her total *œuvre* consisted of twenty shortish poems and four slim verse-dramas, the labour was not demanding. He had all the luck of those who find themselves, by accident, first in the field. He was immediately accepted as the world authority on Dorothy Merlin, because he was literally the only one. And so, a rich American liberal arts college had desired him.

He had prepared his attitude of arrival. He was not going to make scholarly noises: others might see through them, and at Cobb, anyway, scholars would be two a penny. He was going to play safe and be himself, bringing the elegant world to them, the elegance of London and the shires: and when they got used to that, they would wonder all the more that so urbane a head should carry so rare a speciality.

The plane swung round before the airport building, stopped, and stopped purring. Everyone stood up to grab at coats, hats, brief-cases. Blithe as a boy, Matthew stepped out on to the tarmac, his mothy smile at the ready, and walked towards reception and checking.

There were several people awaiting the new arrivals. Seeing a tall, ascetic-looking man with literary eyes, Matthew advanced upon him confidently, hand outstretched.

'Good morning, Dr Parke. I'm Pryar.'

'Fingleton,' said the man.

'From Cobb?'

'General Motors.'

Matthew turned away. He eyed the others: pretty obviously, none were for him. More perplexed than irritated, he went to collect his bags, eight matching cases in Hunting Stewart tartan, with M J P in gold letters on their sides, which came skidding off a moving belt. Matthew stood among them and waited.

The building was remarkably handsome, a pride to the

world in which it existed, clean, glaucous, infinitely spatial and far too hot. There was a news and cigarette stand, a gift shop, a device for drinking water. No sign of food. His stomach gave a terrible rumble, which made him start and blush. All bodily noises are controllable by will except this one. He would almost as soon have died than greet Dr Parke, when he came, with another noise such as this. He looked about him again, hoping, at least, to see a bar of chocolate somewhere. There was none.

'Take your bags?' said a Negro porter.

Matthew replied, well, perhaps not now: he was waiting for somebody.

It was now twenty-five minutes past four, and all the passengers on his flight had gone their several ways. A new crowd came in: a new flight, Hamelin to Chicago, was called. He wanted to go to the lavatory, but dared not move lest Dr Parke should miss him.

After a while he began to have a curious feeling that he was part of the airport, that Gropius had built him and his cases into it for decorative effect. Though he was cramped, some instinct deterred him even from moving from one foot to the other.

Five to five. One of the automatic doors swung magically open, and through it came a little elderly gentleman, beaming, bright-eyed, a *craquelure* of rose upon his cheeks.

'Ah, Mr Pryar, Mr Pryar! Welcome to Hamelin. Welcome to Cobb. A little late, I fear, but better late than never.'

For one hungry, unmagnanimous moment, Matthew doubted this.

'Well, well, let's get along, shall we? No need to hang around. A little trouble with the car, that's what I had. She was a naughty girl, she broke down on the parkway. Nothing serious, but it took time, it all took time. Well, Mr Pryar, welcome once more to Cobb! These are your bags? I think we can manage them ourselves, eh?'

He seemed able to manage two: Matthew had to carry all the others.

Outside, an old Ford awaited them. Dr Parke looked at it as if he had never seen it before. 'Well, well, we'll have to make do somehow. No room in the trunk, sir, there's the eggs and my wife's phonograph. We'll have to put your cases in back.' He pulled the front seat forward and helped Matthew to heave the bags over it. 'You sit by me, there's plenty of leg-room.'

All this while Matthew had said nothing. Even now, as the Ford burped into life and, with a faint stench of hot rubber, began to move away from the airport, he said nothing.

'Pleased to have you with us, Mr Pryar, very pleased. You'll find we're a friendly community at Cobb. We're honoured by the presence of our Visiting Fellows, we treat them well. We know you'll be very happy. Are you acquainted with Miss Corall? I'm sure you are.'

Matthew was. She was one of the sights of Cambridge (England).

'Medievalist, most distinguished, honoured to have her. I'm afraid I haven't read your papers on Dorothy Merlin. I've never read anything by Miss Merlin, either. But as I always say, what are omissions for, if they're not meant to be repaired?'

Dr Parke sniffed delicately. 'I don't think it's the brake linings. No, I'm quite sure it isn't.'

Matthew found that the road wound uphill all the way, yea, to the very end. It wound past frame-houses with shrubs before them that looked like huge, swollen swags of pinkish-white lilac, past gas-stations, cabins labelled 'Antiques', endless advertisements for maple syrup. And all around was the officious beauty of the mountains, of the incandescent trees, of distances blue as Patenier's. (He made a note to mention Patenier in his first lecture, if a lecture should ever be forced

upon him.) Dr Parke's car seemed ill-adapted for climbing. It stopped more than once, while the smell grew worse. On one occasion it gave out a strange hostile growl, which, fortunately, coincided with, and obliterated, a protest from Matthew's empty stomach.

Now they seemed far from human habitation. There were no more small towns, small villages. Nature was supreme in her imperial colours. Of course there was no sign of human life, but Matthew, having been in the United States before, had long since ceased to be surprised by the total lack of pedestrians outside built-up areas. (Not that there were many inside them, either.)

'We're remote at Cobb, perhaps,' said Dr Parke, 'but we like it. A little place all to ourselves. Yes. And the college shop is excellent, quite compendious, ah yes! Twenty miles each way to the nearest township, what do you think of that? Aaaah, here we are!'

And there they were on the campus, the Ford running smoothly now, as if it had dismissed some intense moral anxiety from its mind and was simply relieved to be home again. The chapel clock announced the hour: a quarter past six. Bells rang. Young men in sweaters and dirty-white trousers, very tight across the buttocks, were hurrying in all directions. Matthew salivated. Now, he thought, for a drink!

'First of all we must show you the Centre,' said old Dr Parke. He swung the car dangerously and pitched it downhill again towards a brick building having a lot of glass in it which had not been there at the time of erection. The Centre had been built in 1902 and converted in 1959, with facings of glass and mahogany and a great amount of steel. The first things Matthew observed were gay projections of some incomprehensible nature from two of the first-floor windows.

'Chairs,' Dr Parke explained, 'they will prop open the