

THE FRENCH BUTLER

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Excerpt

ACT TWO

(A dinner party in progress. PHILIP is pretending to be the titular French Butler, in an effort to earn money. Which means he is subjected to:)

EMMA. Sir, what is your name, your family, your station, and your eligibility?

PHILIP. *Non...non parler l'anglais.* (I don't...don't speak English.)

EMMA. What did you say?

PHILIP. *Qu'est-ce que vous dites?* (What did you say?)

EMMA. Arnold!

(She storms up to ARNOLD who leads in MR. RICHARD, now dressed handsomely for the evening, although still wearing his large, fluffy slippers, and MADELINE who stares in horror at PHILIP.)

EMMA. Tell me why I cannot understand a *word* that man of yours says!

ARNOLD. What?

MADELINE. Philip! What in the world are you doing here?

MR. RICHARD. Philip! Why are you wearing Henry's clothes?

PHILIP. *Mon dieu!* (My Lord!)

ARNOLD. *(Rushing to PHILIP.)* Everyone, this is...*Pheeleepe Heegeens!* My new butler. I am afraid that he doesn't speak a word of English. So, if you will all....

MADELINE. *(Brushing past ARNOLD)* Nonsense. I'd know my fiancé anywhere I went. Philip what are you doing here?

MR. RICHARD. Fiancé!

MRS. DAVIS. Heavens, Arnold. Are all your parties like this?

MADELINE. Philip, why won't you speak to me?

EMMA. Miss! Everyone! *(They fall silent.)* I am sure there is a logical explanation to this predicament. However, if you will all kindly be seated...

(MR. RICHARD bends over MRS. DAVIS' hand and takes a seat near hers. PHILIP turns helplessly to MADELINE, but EMMA draws him back down on the couch with her. Undaunted, MADELINE sits smack dab next to PHILIP. With easy grace, ARNOLD takes his own seat and opens up his book.)

EMMA. ...We can argue more comfortably over champagne. Now, who will serve?

(Everyone except EMMA looks at PHILIP who gratefully sneaks out from his position and goes to the side table. It should be noted that everyone should have a bell nearby to summon PHILIP.)

EMMA. Now, Miss....

MADELINE. Applebaum. And you?

EMMA. Miss Emma Delamonde.

MADELINE. Curious that for one having a French surname, you know not a hint of French.

ARNOLD. Indeed. *Where* did you say you were from, Emma?

EMMA. Baton Rouge. Louisiana.

ARNOLD. Ah, yes. And what state is that in?

MRS. DAVIS. Honestly, Arnold! It's right next to Luxembourg!

ARNOLD. Where *no one* speaks French?

EMMA. We're on the Mongolian border.

ARNOLD. Oh, I *see*.

(ARNOLD rings his bell for hors d'oeuvres.)

EMMA. Besides, I have no reason for learning a different language. One is enough for me. My philosophy is that so long as most of the world does not comprehend me, I can speak as much as I like.

(EMMA rings her bell.)

MADELINE. You seem to enjoy speaking even when others speak English.

(MADELINE rings her bell.)

(EMMA rings her bell.)

(MADELINE rings her bell.)

(EMMA rings her bell!)

(PHILIP dithers and then yells:)

PHILIP. Ding!

(And goes to serve ARNOLD. Defensively.)

MR. RICHARD. You sound very much like my late wife, may she rest in peace, who followed your beliefs. She spoke of nothing in particular, and certainly was able to refrain from speaking of anything interesting at all!

MRS. DAVIS. Do you find this attractive in a woman?

EMMA. My dearest Philippe! Come, sit!

MADELINE. What did I tell you, Arnold? He *is* in love with another!

MR. RICHARD. As I said earlier today, Mrs. Davis, I am an inaccurate judge of anything concerning women. Evidence of this is marrying my wife. No doubt you have found similar instances in your marriage, Mrs. Davis?

MRS. DAVIS. Oh, no, Mr. Richard. I will be honest with you, and you must listen carefully for I try to *never* be honest. However, I will confide in you that I have never been married. I have adopted the title mistress rather than miss because it allows me the sympathy of friends for something other than old maidenhood.

MR. RICHARD. A wiser woman I have never met. Indeed, my first, and thus far, only wife would often do the reverse and introduce herself as miss rather than mistress. As a result I rarely saw her.

MADELINE. I hope *you* were never unfaithful to your dear wife, Mr. Richard.

MR. RICHARD. (*Laughing merrily.*) Oh, no, never! But I let her think I was. It kept her amused.

PHILIP. (*Disentangling himself from EMMA.*) *Oui! Amusee! Quelle bague! Ha ha ha! Hon hon hon!* (Yes! Funny! What a joke! Ha ha ha! Hon hon hon!)

MRS. DAVIS. Honestly, Arnold. Your servants....

(*ARNOLD looks up from his journal at the scene.*)

ARNOLD. I'm sorry, Aunt. *Philippe! Bee scilente!*

MADELINE. Er, Philippe. Philippe Heegeens. *Monsieur Philippe Heegeens. Dites-moi pourquoi vous avez compris la mal franglais d'Arnold?* Hmmm? (Er, Philippe. Philippe Higgins. Mister Philippe Higgins. Tell me why you understood Arnold's bad franglais? Hmmm?)

MRS. DAVIS. I must apologise for my nephew's bad behaviour.

MR. RICHARD. I do not blame him at all. I do believe that I have seen this French butler somewhere.

MRS. DAVIS. Have you? I thought so as well, but then Arnold explained where he had come from and I remembered that I had never seen him before.

MR. RICHARD. Quite right! In the last few days that my dearest wife was still on this earth she believed that she saw people who were not there. For example, my wife once believed she had fifteen men hidden in her closet. I told her this was clearly ridiculous, because even *I* could see they were sneaking out the balcony. She said they were relations.

MRS. DAVIS. Relations can be horrible. I should know. Arnold! Whatever are you doing? Can you not even pretend to be a proper host instead of writing all the time?

ARNOLD. But, my dear Aunt Ethyl, I *am* pretending to be a good host. Look. Read here.

MRS. DAVIS. Why so you have. I beg your pardon, nephew.

ARNOLD. Read a few lines down. You'll see I've already forgiven you.

MRS. DAVIS. Why so you have! Perhaps I misjudged you, Arnold. I did not think you were capable of eloquence. Certainly you show none when you are with Miss Delamonde.

ARNOLD. Your protégés bore me Aunt. They are all like you.

MRS. DAVIS. All the more reason for you to be nice to them. Consider Miss Delamonde your aunt, and I believe that all will work out well.

ARNOLD. I already consider her my aunt.

EMMA. Indeed you do, Arnold. For you show the same lack of manners for her as you do for me!

MADLINE. You needn't feel slighted, Miss Delamonde. Arnold treats everyone as if they were his aunt.

MR. RICHARD. Quite right. My late wife used to treat everyone as if they were her husband!

(Everyone looks at MR. RICHARD who giggles to himself and munches on the hors d'oeuvres.)

(Play continues.)