

Plays III

Lady Charing is Cross

Sweet Coz

Reckoning

and Two One-Act Plays

Gordon Daviot
[Elizabeth Mackintosh]
1954

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Title: Plays III

Date of first publication: 1954

Author: Gordon Daviot (alias Elizabeth Mackintosh) 1896-1952

Date first posted: May 29, 2015

Date last updated: May 29, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150573

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

PLAYS BY GORDON DAVIOT



By the same Author

RICHARD OF BORDEAUX

QUEEN OF SCOTS

THE LAUGHING WOMAN

Published by Gollancz

THE STARS BOW DOWN

LEITH SANDS AND OTHER SHORT PLAYS

Published by Duckworth

*In accordance with the late Gordon Daviot's
wish, all author's profits from this book will
go to the National Trust for Places of Historic
Interest or Natural Beauty*

PLAYS
BY
GORDON DAVIOT

III

LADY CHARING IS CROSS

SWEET COZ

RECKONING

and Two One-Act Plays

LONDON: PETER DAVIES

FIRST PUBLISHED 1954

Printed in Great Britain for Peter Davies Ltd
by Richard Clay and Company Ltd
Bungay Suffolk

CONTENTS

LADY CHARING IS CROSS

SWEET COZ

RECKONING

BARNHARROW

THE STAFF-ROOM

Application for permission to perform any play in this volume should be made to the Author's Agents:

Pearn, Pollinger and Higham Ltd.,
39-40 Bedford Street, London, W.C.2

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

These plays have been printed from typescripts left by the author after her death. A few obvious mistakes have been corrected and an occasional obscurity has been cleared up as well as was possible in the circumstances. It is hoped that they are now presented substantially as they would have been had Gordon Daviot lived to pass the proofs.

Lady Charing is Cross

CHARACTERS

LADY CHARING

LADY TILlicOUNTRY

LORD CHARING

NEIL TUMMEL

CRIPPS, *a maid*

VICTOR, *a footman*

SCENE. *The first scene takes place in a part of LADY CHARING'S bedroom; for the rest of the play the action takes place in the small drawing-room at Charing House, W.1.*

TIME. *The middle of Edward the Seventh's reign.*

ACT I

SCENE I

It is a May morning in London, and we are looking at part of LADY CHARING'S bedroom at Charing House. The house is situated in a Mayfair Square, and the bedroom is on the second floor. Through the open window at the back one can see the tops of the trees in the sunlight, and from the square below there comes, since this is the reign of Edward VII, the faint clip-clop of horses' hooves and the purr of tyred wheels.

At the dressing-table, clad in a ravishing creation which she calls a wrapper, is LADY CHARING. Her hair is in the process of being arranged for the day by her maid, CRIPPS.

LADY CHARING was forty last month, but no one remembers the fact; partly because her beauty has an ageless quality, and partly because she is less a person than an institution. For more than ten years now Charing House has been the social centre of London. No climber 'arrives' until his name appears on the Charing House list; no fallen idol is 'cut' until his name is dropped from that list. There are those who say that LADY CHARING'S taste is a little too catholic; but these, no doubt, are such as have had to wait too long in the crush on the magnificent stairs when the Charings 'receive'. Neither the catholicity nor the crush prevents them from being on the stairs next time.

CRIPPS, too, is ageless. She comes of five generations of 'service', and in her own time she has been passed on from one generation to another, like a christening robe or any other valuable family possession. Occasionally she is sent to take lessons from a fashionable hairdresser. She translates her new knowledge with tact and success to her mistress's head; but her own hair is done as she first learned to do it thirty-odd years ago.

LADY CHARING (breaking the comfortable silence while she watches CRIPPS'S activities in the mirror) Well, Cripps, was it a happy reunion last night in the housekeeper's room?

CRIPPS Very pleasant, my lady.

LADY C. Have you left any of us a rag of reputation?

CRIPPS (*quietly reproving*) We are interested, my lady, but never censorious.

LADY C. And what have you gathered of interest? (*Referring to a lock of hair*) A little farther back, that.

CRIPPS Like that, my lady?

LADY C. That is better. Well, what is the gossip?

CRIPPS No less than five Americans have taken houses in the Square for the season.

LADY C. (*not particularly interested*) Oh? All railways?

CRIPPS I understand that none of them are railways, my lady.

LADY C. (*genuinely inquiring*) Dear me! What else do Americans make money in?

CRIPPS Beginning from the north end of the Square, Number Three is tintacks, Number Ten rubber goods, Number Seventeen toothpaste, Number Twenty-two lumber—that is something to do with wood, not second-hand things, my lady—and Twenty-eight is something new called Advertising.

LADY C. Are the Broomes not opening Twenty-eight this year, then?

CRIPPS No, my lady. They married the last daughter off at a Christmas ball.

LADY C. What, the fat one? What a little mistletoe will do!

CRIPPS They say it was the punch, my lady.

LADY C. What other news?

CRIPPS Lady Trundle has been stealing umbrellas again.

LADY C. The woman never had any sense.

CRIPPS It is said to be involuntary, my lady.

LADY C. (*not listening*) Imagine acquiring anything as convenient as kleptomania and squandering it on umbrellas.

CRIPPS They have engaged a gentleman to go round after her and pay for anything she takes.

LADY C. A gentleman?

CRIPPS The younger son of an impoverished baronet, I understand, my lady.

LADY C. (*having considered it*) Oh, well. I suppose it is no worse than chasing sheep in Australia. What else?

CRIPPS Old Sir Archibald is breaking up.

LADY C. Poor dear. His memory, is it?

CRIPPS No, my Lady, he has taken to carrying parcels in the street.

LADY C. I hardly think that is an infallible sign of decrepitude. In the winter one does things, even in town, that one would not dream of doing during the season.

[*There is a knock on the bedroom door: CRIPPS goes to the door and consults with the knocker, while LADY CHARING picks up a buffer and idly polishes her nails.*]

CRIPPS Lady Tillicoultry is downstairs, my lady, and wants to know if she may come up.

LADY C. But of course! Of course! (*As CRIPPS gives the message and comes away from the door*) I wonder what Poppy is doing out of bed at ten of a morning.

CRIPPS She is no doubt glad to have you back, my lady.

LADY C. No doubt. But it is a gladness that could be contained until luncheon. (*After a second's pause*) There was no gossip about the Tillicoultlys, was there? (*The accent is on the name, and she obviously expects the answer to be 'No'*)

CRIPPS (*a little shocked*) Oh, no, my lady. Certainly not. One would as soon expect gossip about our own household.

LADY C. (*having considered it a moment longer*) Perhaps she just had cramp.

[*With a sketchy knock at the door, LADY TILlicoultry comes in, and crosses to kiss her friend.*]

LADY T. Millie, my dear, how nice to have you back.

LADY C. (*genuinely glad to see her; holding out a left hand, presenting her cheek for the kiss*) Poppy! How are you? You are looking radiant.

LADY T. What a wonderful wrapper. How are you, Cripps?

CRIPPS I am very well, my lady, thank you. (*She provides a chair for the newcomer*)

[*LADY TILlicoultry—Venetia Mary Violet Graham-Grant-Moffat, Countess of Tillicoultry—is a year younger than her friend, but looks a little older. Her clothes, down to the last glove button, are as elegant as anything worn by the mistress of Charing House, but they have an odd air of having been put on by accident. Even her very fashionable and becoming hat is not quite straight.*]

[LADY T. *sinks into the chair that CRIPPS has supplied, which is placed so that the two women can see each other in the mirror.*]

LADY T. I know this is an absurd hour for anyone but the butcher's boy to call, but if I waited till luncheon there would be a dozen people and I would never see you again alone until August.

LADY C. (*dispassionately*) Your wig is crooked.

LADY T. (*equally matter-of-fact, putting up her hands preparatory to correcting the slant*) Which way?

LADY C. The usual way.

LADY T. (*adjusting it without looking in the mirror; equably*) Cosmo says that if I don't get a new wig he will acquire a mistress. I wish he would. No woman should have to endure the attentions of a devoted husband after eleven years of matrimony.

LADY C. Why don't you go back to your own hair? It must have grown by now.

LADY T. Oh, I could never endure to go through that every morning. (*She indicates CRIPPS' administrations*) If one must have measles one might as well get some advantage from it.

LADY C. You would make a profit out of Satan. Why did you want to see me alone?

LADY T. Because you are my best friend and I am in trouble. (*She sounds not at all perturbed*)

LADY C. Bills, bile, or blackmail?

LADY T. It's Kilcrannock.

LADY C. Kilcrannock! Why waste a May morning in London worrying about a Scottish county?

LADY T. It is not the county; it's the constituency. Didn't you read any papers in Nice?

LADY C. (*only half-serious*) Why should one? Nothing important happens in England when I am out of it.

LADY T. You'd be surprised what can happen in Scotland!

LADY C. The by-election, was it? What went wrong?

LADY T. They have elected the Socialist creature!

LADY C. But I thought young Whatshisname was all ready to step into old

Brigham's shoes when he died?

LADY T. So did everyone else. That is what went wrong! Everyone was so sure that no one bothered to vote. So the Socialist creature sailed in.

LADY C. (*half-amused*) Dear me! That must be a shock for a Tory stronghold like Kilcrannock.

LADY T. The situation is quite appalling. Nothing like that has happened to the Tillicoultrys in all their hundreds of years in Scotland.

LADY C. It serves you right for owning any part of the benighted country.

LADY T. Is it my fault that Charles the Second had an evening off in Perth? Don't be so detached, Millie. You must help me.

LADY C. Help you?

LADY T. One cannot allow oneself to be represented by someone so unrepresentable.

LADY C. What do you propose to do about it?

LADY T. Now that the creature is here in town his habits can be judiciously—supervised.

LADY C. Are you suggesting blackmail?

LADY T. (*indignant*) Certainly not! The creature has never done a wrong thing in all his stupid life.

LADY C. Then what *do* you suggest?

LADY T. I thought that you might, so to speak, take the rough off him.

LADY C. *I!*

LADY T. You know: give him tips about ties, and weed the grosser misconceptions from his mind.

LADY C. (*drawling*) My dear good Poppy! May I ask why you do not 'take the rough off' for yourself?

LADY T. How can I? We are not on speaking terms. I shall have to bow, of course, when we meet on the same platform. When I open bazaars and things. But we cannot have any converse. He objects to us even more than we do to him.

LADY C. (*silkily*) And you think he would not object to me?

LADY T. Well, you are a Liberal, and therefore of no consequence politically. It would not, I mean, be 'crossing the floor' to accept your hospitality. And you are, after all, Millicent Charing.

LADY C. Thank you, my dear.

LADY T. Has anyone ever refused an invitation to Charing House?

LADY C. Not that I can remember. So you think your wild man might put up with me? And can you tell me why I should be bored by having a piece of original conglomerate dumped in my drawing-room?

LADY T. But you would not be bored. You *like* creatures. Even if someone found him there, no one would think it odd. Everyone expects you to be a little promiscuous.

LADY C. My dear Poppy!

LADY T. Socially speaking, of course.

[LADY CHARING, *her hair-dressing finished, steps out of her wrapper, and is assisted into her morning toilette by CRIPPS.*]

LADY C. What is he called, your creature?

LADY T. Neil Tummel.

LADY C. (*puzzled*) Tumble as in fall?

LADY T. No, as in the river. T-u-m-m-e-l.

LADY C. (*without emotion*) Uncouth. I cannot do it.

LADY T. Oh, please, Millie. Pretty please. I do not ask for miracles. Just a corner off here and there, and a new suit or so. (*As this produces no immediate answer*) I promise you he is no duller than that Theosophist woman. Or than that pianist boy you took up last season.

LADY C. (*defending her choice without heat*) Stanislaus was a Pole, and amusing, and an artist. You ask me to put up with a Scot who is a politician and a reformer. It cannot be done. (*After a pause filled with the exigencies of dressing*) It's that *worthy* streak in the Scots that makes them so unbearable. If they were utterly damnable like the Irish, everyone would begin finding excuses for them.

[*A light tap at the door, and the door opens a little.*]

LORD C. (*off*) May I come in?

LADY C. Oh, good morning, Gussie.

[LORD CHARING *comes in. He is a kind little man, considerably older than the wife he still adores. If he had married a plain little woman with negative tastes he might have had the energy to give up the social life which puzzles and tires him and to retire to the country existence*

which he loves. But having acquired as a partner one of the great beauties of the day, he has resigned himself, not unhappily, to being the tail of a comet.]

LORD C. (*crossing to his wife and kissing the proffered cheek*) Good morning, my dear.

LADY C. How is the lumbago?

LORD C. Oh, gone, gone. Poppy, my dear. (*He shakes hands with her*) How nice to see you after all those months. How was the winter in Scotland?

LADY T. Wintry and Scottish.

LORD C. (*gallantly*) Better for the complexion than the Riviera, I dare say. How is Cosmo?

LADY T. Having his catarrh. On the first Sunday in May every year Cosmo has catarrh.

LORD C. Nothing if not a good Conservative. And the children? Well, I hope?

LADY T. (*making a little noise of qualified assent*) I doubt if we should have sent Marjorie to that school.

LORD C. Not in trouble, is she?

LADY T. Not exactly. Unpopular, I gather. She was asked to write an essay: Would she rather be beautiful or good? She said she would rather be beautiful and repent.

LORD C. Dear Marjorie. Great favourite of mine. You have a nice family, Poppy.

LADY T. I have done my duty. Two sons to be heirs, and two daughters to make alliances.

LORD C. You don't pull any wool over my eyes. You dote on your little brood—and rightly.

LADY C. (*continuing his thought, without malice, and without pausing in the details of her dressing*) Now Millicent never remembers that she has a family.

LORD C. (*hastily disclaiming his subconscious thought, and unaware that he has had it*) Oh, nonsense, Millie, my dear. I have never known you forget a birthday of either of them.

LADY C. If I didn't know you so well, Gussie, I might suspect you of irony. As it is, I will not have you burning incense under Poppy's nose right in front of my eyes. There is no enormity of which the woman is not capable. Do you know what she came hot-foot to suggest? That I adopt her Kilcrannock socialist and shake the fleas out of him.

LORD C. (*amused*) And you, of course, are going to.

LADY C. (*her attention caught*) What makes you think that?

LORD C. Am I wrong?

LADY C. You overrate my amiability.

LORD C. It was your curiosity I banked on, my dear.

LADY C. (*without heat*) Don't be absurd, Augustus. I am the least curious woman in London. Only last week some magazine said that I had 'an almost masculine indifference to tattle'.

LORD C. Oh, tattle—yes.

LADY C. Well, then?

LORD C. But you do like to discover (*he looks for a phrase*) what makes people tick.

LADY C. (*with the ghost of a snort*) I know what makes Mr Neil Tummel tick. Ambition, vanity, and a Calvinistic love of interference. I see no reason to give him either tea or attention.

LADY T. There's me.

LADY C. You?

LADY T. Am I not a good reason?

LADY C. It is no great hardship to share a platform with someone, even if he does look like the wrath of God.

LADY T. But it is not only platforms; it's Westminster; everything! The member for Kilcrannock. I shall die of shame.

LADY C. I don't expect you'll die of anything. You'll probably talk your way out of even that. I wouldn't be surprised if St Peter sent you home in his own barouche.

LADY T. Make her be sympathetic, Gussie.

LADY C. The first time I met you, at the age of six, you got out of eating bread and butter by making your nannie heat the milk and pour it over the bread and butter so that it made a pudding, and you have been getting out of things ever since. It is time that you kissed the rod.

LADY T. (*in something approaching a wail*) My dear, not when the rod is six feet of pepper-and-salt tweed, with a shocking accent, no manners, and the most alarming ideas!

LORD C. (*referring to the thing she has missed out*) It would seem that his morals are above suspicion.

LADY T. Above rubies, my dear Gussie, above rubies. A monument of God-fearing fearsomeness.

LORD C. It might be interesting to meet Mr—— (*As she supplies the name*) Tummel, and find out exactly what he plans to do with us.

LADY T. Do with us?

LORD C. I take it he has plans for us. What I would like to know is whether the plan is capital—that is to say, a piece of rope and a lamp-post—or whether he would be content to see me working a small-holding. If he could really arrange that I spent the rest of my life in the country with my pigs, I would become his earnest disciple tomorrow.

LADY T. I forgot to ask for the pigs.

LORD C. Oh, they're nicely, thank you, nicely. Teme Valley Irene is going to sweep the board at the Five Counties Show in June. (*To his wife*) It is the 25th, by the way, Millie. You will see that we have nothing that will need me at the top of the stairs about then?

LADY C. The 25th. I shall remember.

LORD C. If Mr Tummel insisted on small-holdings I would never have to stand at the top of those stairs again.

LADY C. If he hanged you, you wouldn't either. I have to stand at the top of the stairs too.

LORD C. Yes, my dear, but you have a moral support that I lack.

LADY C. Support?

LORD C. No one says about me: Isn't he looking radiantly lovely tonight!

LADY C. (*she casts him a smile for that*) Why don't you get Augustus to civilise your monster for you?

LADY T. Oh, Gussie would be no use.

LADY C. You don't consider him a civilising influence?

LADY T. Can you imagine Gussie telling the creature that his tie is all wrong?

LORD C. If it is a question of Mr Tummel's wearing apparel, I beg to be excused. I hold that it is the inalienable right of every free man to choose his own ties.

LADY T. (*with a lift of her palms*) You see! No public spirit!

LADY C. Ah, well. Even Crusader blood grows thin after twenty generations.

LORD C. (*with his usual gentle amiability*) A damned interfering set of rascals.

LADY T. (*reproving*) They had faith and zeal, my dear Gussie.

LORD C. I sometimes think that all they had was high blood-pressure.

LADY C. Or domestic trouble. (*Coming to think of it*) I may have been wrong about your Mr Tummel. It may not, after all, have been his Calvinistic blood that sent him on his socialist crusade. He may have a shrew of a wife.

LADY T. He has neither wife nor an alibi.

LORD C. Just a natural inclination to sin.

LADY T. (*tartly*) Just a gift of the gab.

LORD C. (*preparing to go*) The Commons are going to be entertained, it seems. I wish something like Mr Tummel would relieve the awful tedium of the House of Lords.

LADY T. You may not have to suffer the tedium much longer. He is going to abolish you. He is going to abolish both of you.

LADY C. (*arrested in action like a pointer*) Abolish me?

LADY T. I take it you are 'the bedizened society women who make charity a pretext for decking themselves with gauds and aping the manners of the playhouse, what time'—what was it?—'what time men slave in pit and foundry to provide their finery, and their starving children cry in the gutters'.

LORD C. (*simply*) Good gracious!

LADY C. (*slowly*) My dear Poppy! I don't believe it. Nobody talks like that nowadays. It went out with Knox.

LADY T. There were better bits than that, but I remember that one because it was Cosmo's favourite.

LADY C. (*still slowly*) Dear me. It seems that Mr Tummel really does need educating, quite badly.

LADY T. (*aware of the nibble and playing the fish*) It is sad that you won't do anything about him; but then, of course, he might have refused to have anything to do with you, mightn't he? (*She makes it a statement, not a question*)

LADY C. You make me sound like an importunate parlour-maid.

LADY T. I expect those gauds stick in his throat. I wish they would choke the creature. What is a gaud, exactly?

LADY C. You think that if I invited the man to Charing House he would refuse my invitation? (*Considering it*) That *would* be a refreshing thing in my life.

LADY T. (*'daring' her on to it*) To be snubbed by a little Scotch nobody?

LADY C. It would be no sensation to be snubbed by a King. I suppose I couldn't use you as a reference?

LADY T. (*getting up to go; the fish practically on the grass*) Not if you want to make an impression. Are you going my way, Gussie? I can give you a lift.

LORD C. I am going round to the Club, but I think I had better walk, thank you. It is so easy to lose the use of one's legs in Town.

LADY C. (*in the unaccented tones of one resuming a former subject*) What was it you wanted done with Mr Tummel?

LADY T. (*matching the careless tone*) Oh, just (*she waves a hand for a phrase*) the bristles made a little less stubbly.

LADY C. (*as one accepting an instruction*) I see.

LADY T. (*going*) There is a yellow suit he wears that is my particular bane.

LADY C. (*startled*) Yellow?

LADY T. Well, a sort-of-mustard tweed thing. If you could get rid of that you would be doing the country a service.

LADY C. I shall make a note of it.

LADY T. You seem to think that he will come.

LADY C. I know he will.

LADY T. What makes you so sure?

LADY C. He will want to preach at me.

LADY T. You will be careful, Millicent, won't you?

LADY C. Careful?

LORD C. I don't want you carrying a candle through the City clad in a shift.

LADY C. If there is to be penance in this affair it is not Millicent Charing who will do it. (*There is an edge to that that has not been apparent in her light exchanges about references*)

LADY T. Well, my dear, I go. Let me know if the creature accepts.

LADY C. Are you lunching at home, Augustus?

LORD C. No, with Archie. He has a man from India he wants me to meet; the man who did that irrigation scheme. Watered a whole province. Wonderful.

LADY T. Au revoir, my dear. (*Pausing for a last word*) Oh, he has a frightful habit of saying Uh-huh. Perhaps you could do something about that.

LADY C. You aren't expecting me to make him into a Tory for you, are you?

LADY T. No; I am hoping that you'll make him a Liberal. Then he will be defeated at the first General Election.

LADY C. Your wig is crooked.

[LADY TILlicouLTRY *puts up her hands matter-of-factly to straighten it as she goes out with* LORD CHARING.]

LADY C. Has Miss Mair come, do you know, Cripps?

CRIPPS I expect so, my lady. It is half-past ten.

LADY C. Send a message down that the first free tea-time in my engagement book is to be given to a Mr Neil Tummel. Tummel as in the river: T-u-m-m-e-l. (*To herself*) Did anyone ever hear anything so uncouth?

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The small drawing-room at Charing House ten days later. The room is not part of the magnificent suite used for formal entertaining. It is a friendly and charming place, its impressiveness tempered by its obvious air of everyday use.

L. is the fireplace, and beyond it the door to the landing. Back, is the main window, looking out on the square; and down extreme R. is a small side-window looking out on one of the streets leading out of the square. Both windows have balconies. At the smaller window is a desk, half-sideways, so that the light falls from the writer's right front.

Since the room is on the floor below Lady Charing's bedroom, the trees that were mere tree-tops before are now a green forest outside. The room is full of their green light.

It is between four and five o'clock.

In a high-backed chair in the big window LORD CHARING is sitting reading a newspaper. All one can see are his head, his feet, and the newspaper. His chair is turned away from the door, and is of course well beyond it, so that anyone opening the door sees nothing but an empty room.

After a moment there is a murmur of voices, the door opens, and a FOOTMAN shows in NEIL TUMMEL, bows and goes.

NEIL TUMMEL is twenty-eight, tall but clumsily made; his profile excellent but dull, his eyes deep-set but too close together; his chin aggressive, but his mouth pettish and stubborn-weak. He is the owner of what is now known as an inferiority complex, but so deeply seated is it and so unsuspected (even by himself) that no vestige of it is apparent.

Both NEIL himself and the world in general would be surprised to know that he was not supremely sure of himself; in fact, neither would believe it for a moment.

His clothes are militantly non-conformist. He is wearing the famous yellow suit. It is, soberly speaking, not yellow at all, but it is sufficiently remarkable in a London drawing-room, a dirty pepper-and-salt in colour, and in texture reminiscent of a potato-sack.

Since he, like the FOOTMAN, takes the room to be empty, he advances a step or

two and stands irresolutely. He begins to eye the room, and presently his eye arrives at LORD CHARING. He is startled. He clears his throat to draw attention to his presence.

LORD CHARING, *startled in his turn, looks round the wing of his chair.*

LORD C. (*getting up hastily*) Dear me! I had no idea there was anyone—Victor must have thought the room was empty. I have usually gone to the Club by this time. Won't you——?

NEIL My name is Tummel. Neil Tummel.

LORD C. Oh, yes. How d'you do. Won't you——?

NEIL You'll have heard of me.

LORD C. Yes, yes, of course. Poppy told me about you.

NEIL (*repressive*) Poppy?

LORD C. Yes, an old friend of the family.

NEIL (*coldly*) I don't know anyone called Poppy. I was referring to my being the new Member for Kilcrannock.

LORD C. Ah, yes. The by-election. Quite an achievement. Won't you sit down? I expect you've called to see my wife.

NEIL (*in a tone which implies that LORD CHARING may suspect him of trying to sell something*) I was invited to tea by Lady Charing.

LORD C. Yes, yes. She will be here any moment. She is very busy over this Hospital affair. A committee is raging in the billiard-room at this moment. One of those historical pageants, and everyone wanting to be Queen Elizabeth. (*He suddenly remembers NEIL'S expressed opinion of charity dressings-up, and his never very fluent small-talk dries up completely*) Victor will have told her that you are here. (*Making an effort, since NEIL seems to be making none*) It is good to see the trees in the square green again, isn't it? It almost consoles one for living in town.

NEIL I like them bare.

LORD C. (*trying again, indicating the paper he has been reading*) I see that India chap got a decoration at the Palace this morning. That was a wonderful job. Ten years' work and his health gone. But what a thing! What a thing to look back on. A whole province saved from famine; saved for all time. It makes one envious.

NEIL (*disappointed that the new Member for Kilcrannock seems of no*

account and some unknown from India so admirable) I can't see that ten years on a dam in India is any more praiseworthy than ten years in the slums of Glasgow.

LORD C. (*genuinely interested*) Is that what you did?

NEIL (*at a disadvantage*) No. No. But I know the slums, of course.

LORD C. (*attempting a little joke*) When a man dies of thirst in Glasgow, I understand it's through drinking Red Biddy.

NEIL Neither the Glasgow slums nor Red Biddy is a joking matter.

LORD C. (*beginning to lose heart*) No. No, I expect not. (*As a last hope*) Know anything about pigs?

NEIL *Pigs?*

LORD C. (*humbly*) Yes.

NEIL (*warmly*) If you're at a loss for matter, Lord Charing, my favourite subject is Aristotle. (*It isn't. His favourite subject is NEIL TUMMEL, and matters allied thereto. But Aristotle is good enough to use as counter to a man who talks down to him to the extent of pigs*)

LORD C. (*surprised and charmed*) No! Really? What an extraordinary thing!

NEIL (*offended*) I fail to see anything extraordinary about it.

LORD C. But I find so few people who share my——They think it rather odd, you know. So you are an admirer of Aristotle?

NEIL Who isn't?

LORD C. Well, I have known men who found fault with his form. Personally I think it cannot be more satisfying. Shall I tell you something? When speeches grow too boring to be borne, I think about Aristotle. Extraordinarily comforting. Such an intelligent creature, too.

NEIL (*a little surprised*) Who?

LORD C. Aristotle. His sire, Arcturus, was fine to look at, but sottish, distinctly sottish. But Aristotle, there is a boar!

NEIL A bore! I thought you admired him.

LORD C. I do. Extravagantly.

NEIL Then how can he bore you?

LORD C. But—— (*Realising*) Oh! (*Deflated*) I'm afraid we are talking at cross-purposes, you know. You are talking about the Greek philosopher, aren't you?

NEIL Certainly.

LORD C. I am talking about a pig.

NEIL (*staggered*) You mean, *you* are interested in pigs?

LORD C. Yes. Yes, I'm afraid it is all I *am* interested in. I was hoping that you knew something about them.

NEIL (*who knows something about practically anything*) Oh, I know plenty about them. My grandfather kept pigs all his life.

LORD C. (*brightening again*) What breed?

NEIL Oh, just pigs.

LORD C. (*finally deflated*) Oh.

[*There is a slight pause. NEIL begins to simmer again. He comes from circles, both domestic and social, where he is the centre of interest. Being taken for granted he finds intolerable.*]

LORD C. (*descendant of Crusaders, coming back for more punishment*) I hope you are comfortable in London?

NEIL I'll get used to it, I expect. I have a Scotch landlady, so things might be worse.

LORD C. Ah. I had a Scotch nurse when I was a small boy. She taught me to knit, once when I was ill. Red garters, I remember. (*As NEIL ignores this triviality*) Tell me, Mr—er—Mr Tummel, I am greatly interested in your—in your policy. I don't know what that policy may be, but it would be interesting to know just what——

[*The door opens and LADY CHARING comes in, followed by VICTOR, the footman, with tea.*]

LADY C. (*greeting NEIL*) Mr Tummel. How delightful of you to come. Forgive me, won't you, for having kept you waiting. I don't need to tell you what committees are like. And when I tell you that I am not only chairman but holder of the casting vote, you will realise how miraculous it is that I am still in one piece.

LORD C. Is everyone in one piece?

LADY C. Yes. Babs Dacre is a little frayed round the edges, but at last sighting was still travelling under her own steam.

LORD C. Well, I shall leave you to——

LADY C. Won't you stay and have some tea, Augustus?

LORD C. Thank you, no, my dear. I should have gone some time ago. Those evening papers that come in the afternoon are a great snare. (*Shaking hands with*

NEIL) I am glad to have met you, Mr Tummel. Some day we must have a talk, and you can tell me about that policy of yours. (To LADY C.) Is it the Austrian Embassy tonight?

LADY C. Yes. Ten o'clock. We'll dine very sharp, if you don't mind, Gussie.

LORD C. I don't know why we dine at all. They give you marvellous food at that place. All I have ever been able to do with it is look.

[*He goes sadly out, ushered by VICTOR, who has been dismissed by LADY CHARING.*]

LADY C. (*beginning to dispense tea*) Ah, what peace. I hope my husband has been entertaining you?

NEIL He did his best.

LADY C. (*raising her eyebrows*) I gather that that was not enough. Are you not knowledgeable about pigs?

NEIL Even pigs have to be aristocratic here.

LADY C. (*apparently unaware of this last remark*) Indian or China?

NEIL Oh, just tea, thank you. Thick. I had better tell you straight away, Lady Charing, that the only thing that brought me here was curiosity.

LADY C. (*blandly*) How nice. I knew we should find something in common. Besides committees, I mean. Though I must say committees are a great bond. Have you ever sat on a Hospital Ball Pageant Committee, Mr Tummel?

NEIL That has not been one of my activities.

LADY C. Then I doubt if even you have known the full fury of committee life.

NEIL *Even I?*

LADY C. I understand that Socialists are great quarrellers. Among themselves, I mean.

NEIL No. Why should they be?

LADY C. I suppose, because when one is creating brave new worlds there is no limit to the variety. When one is merely making the best of this one, the choice is limited. But I am quite sure that ten Socialists fighting over ten quite different brave new worlds are lambs compared with the same number of women fighting over a charity pageant.

NEIL Why do you have a pageant, in the first place?

LADY C. It is good for trade. It is good for the hospital finances. And it gives all the

silly women in London a focus for their silliness.

NEIL Is that admirable?

LADY C. I think so. It keeps them faithful to their lovers. When you have fitted, and rehearsed, and thrown up your part daily for several weeks, there is little energy for much else. In extreme cases a lover has been known to carry over till next season.

NEIL (*in measured tones*) You're attempting to shock me.

LADY C. (*putting herself in the dock*) Am I? (*Finding against herself*) Yes.

NEIL It's no use.

LADY C. No, I suppose not. A Calvinistic mind must be a saturated solution of shock.

NEIL I never took chemistry.

LADY C. I mean, if one is shocked to the core by, say, the Continental Sunday, there can be no reaction to further shock, can there?

NEIL Your pageant shocks me a great deal more than your lovers.

LADY C. I am responsible for the pageant, Mr Tummel, but not for the private performances. What do you find so shocking about our pageant—apart from Mrs Tate in a stomacher, which you have not seen?

NEIL Lady Charing, does it not appal you that a woman in the West End is making you a fancy dress while some woman in the East End is half-naked?

LADY C. Not at all. The little woman who is making my dress supports a cripple mother and a schoolboy son. The only result of my not having the dress would be that four people instead of one would be half-naked. If I may borrow your exciting description.

NEIL But the State should support her invalid mother, and see to it that her work was productive. That she made things for the common good, not—not——

LADY C. Not gauds. I see. Ah, well, that will be something for you to do. (*Cheerfully*) Poor Rose! I hope she will enjoy making boots for the million as well as she does embroidering dresses for me. I hope they will *all* enjoy it.

NEIL Who are 'all'?

LADY C. All the people who are making money out of my pageant. The printers, the paper-makers, the bill-posters, the cooks, the waiters, the hair-dressers, the wig-makers, the gardeners, the bakers, the cabmen, the dancing-master. To say nothing of the little man who hires out the chairs. You will be kind to the little man who hires out chairs, won't you?

NEIL (*beginning a protest*) Lady Charing——

LADY C. I am sure that a well-run state will have all the chairs it wants, and he will be so lost. His whole life is in chairs. (*Having a thought*) Of course he may be dead by then. There is that possibility. How long do you think it will be before the state regulates breathing?

NEIL (*darkly*) Not so long as some people think. Society in its present form is cracking under our feet. You may think you're a benefactress, Lady Charing, but take it from me all you are is an economic outrage.

LADY C. It sounds horrid.

NEIL The people who produce the goods in this country want a share of the wealth that results. They aren't as ignorant as they used to be, they are asking questions, learning to combine, feeling their strength. They're on the move, I tell you. Men in the factory, the pit, and the yards. The working people of this country. The ferment's in them. Moving. Beginning to seethe. And what do you think the result of that is going to be?

LADY C. (*with a good imitation of a child being told a fairy-story*) What?

NEIL (*impressive*) Revolution.

LADY C. (*relaxed and matter-of-fact*) You may read economics, Mr Tummel, but I doubt if you read history. The people who make revolutions are the clerks. The middle-class malcontents. The lawyers without briefs, the writers without publishers, the climbers without cash. They lead me to the guillotine, and you to the wars, and bread goes up fivepence. That, my dear Mr Tummel, is revolution.

NEIL (*detached from his own concerns momentarily by this new view of her*) So history interests you?

LADY C. (*simply*) My dear Mr Tummel, I *am* history.

NEIL (*after a moment, leaning forward*) You may not believe it, Lady Charing, but so am I.

LADY C. (*considering him*) A Savonarola rather than a Caesar, I take it.

NEIL I'm not a second edition of anybody. I'm Neil Tummel.

LADY C. And in what role is Neil Tummel going to make history?

NEIL I am going to lead my people out of bondage.

LADY C. (*in a tone of surprise and disappointment*) Oh, you can't do that.

NEIL (*fiercely*) And why not, pray?

LADY C. That would make you merely a second Moses!

NEIL (*roused*) I am going to lead my people out of bondage if I am persecuted by every vested interest and laughed at by every Viscountess in the country.

LADY C. You wrong me, my dear Moses. I am greatly interested. I want to hear about this bondage and this persecution. Were you very poor as a child?

NEIL (*in his element*) My mother was a widow, and we were so poor that we had meat only once a week. She brought me up on milk and cabbage.

LADY C. What an excellent diet! Not much wonder you have such a good physique.

NEIL (*not sure whether to be annoyed that his pathos has miscarried or to be pleased at the compliment*) And when I went to college——

LADY C. You went to University?

NEIL I did.

LADY C. But I thought you were very poor.

NEIL Anyone can go to University in Scotland provided he has brains enough. My education didn't cost my mother a penny piece.

LADY C. Who paid for it? The State?

NEIL No. Bursaries. Scholarships. There's hundreds of them. People leave money to provide them.

LADY C. I see. Vested interests.

NEIL (*resenting the catch*) You could call them that, I suppose. (*Going back to the fascinating subject of his sufferings*) But there was food and clothes to provide. At college I lived on oatmeal. (*This is sheer imagination. It has been two generations since Scotch students brought their 'bag of meal' with them each term. But the tradition dies hard*)

LADY C. You lucky man!

NEIL Lucky?

LADY C. I adore oatmeal, but I was never allowed to eat it, because it was supposed to be bad for the complexion. *You* don't seem to have many spots.

NEIL (*definitely*) I haven't any. I don't suppose you can even imagine what it is like to face the same food day after day.

LADY C. (*cheerfully*) Oh, yes. I once lived for six weeks on nothing but bananas.

NEIL You were shipwrecked?

LADY C. No. Just a diet. It was supposed to be good for something or other. What did you do in the holidays?

NEIL I spent my holidays working on my uncle's croft.

LADY C. (*remembering*) I spent mine with my grandmother in a house smelling of bird-cages. There was nothing to do, and I shouldn't have been allowed to do it if there was. And when you left college?

NEIL I taught Junior English at Kiltrannock Academy.

LADY C. (*half-accusing, half-disappointed*) Then you are not a working-man at all?

NEIL My father was a blacksmith.

LADY C. But you say that honours shouldn't be hereditary, don't you? You can't take any credit for your father. You disappoint me, Mr Tummel. Here I was, all prepared to hear a tale of a starved and thwarted life. And what do I get? The account of a cossetting!

NEIL I? Cossetted?

LADY C. Practically tied up with blue ribbons. Compared with the freedom and consideration of your childhood, mine was a penal servitude. Are many of your party like you, by the way?

NEIL Like me?

LADY C. Men who have never produced goods to make wealth!

NEIL (*caught and annoyed*) I don't belong to any party. I'm an independent.

LADY C. But you managed to fight an election.

NEIL (*understanding the hint*) Some friends put up the money. (*Sliding away from this evidence of further 'cossetting'*) As a matter of fact, I went to see the regular Socialist crowd this morning. There was some talk of my joining them. They don't like Independents. But I decided against it.

LADY C. Too many Moseses?

NEIL They talked too much. I like to do the talking myself.

LADY C. I take it that your wife is a silent woman. Are you married, Mr Tummel?

NEIL (*his attention really arrested*) Did you not find out that I hadn't a wife before you asked me here?

LADY C. I beg your pardon?

NEIL Did you ask me here without my wife. I mean, without the wife I haven't got?

LADY C. Certainly.

NEIL (*full of offended virtue*) I wouldn't have accepted the invitation.

LADY C. Let me tell you something even more monstrous. I would also have invited your wife without you, if she had been the interesting one.

NEIL (*dropping the principle for the interest*) You find me interesting?

LADY C. Very. I could hardly wait to see this wild Caledonian from the North.

[NEIL, *who is charmed to be a wild Caledonian from the North, glows visibly.*]

LADY C. Is this your first visit to London?

NEIL Uh-huh. I've never been furth of Scotland till now.

LADY C. You must let me show you some of the lovely things.

NEIL (*who is feeling comfortable again*) On condition that you let me show you a slum.

LADY C. (*without emphasis*) No, *I'll* show you one. You won't know where to find the best ones.

NEIL (*staggered*) Do you?

LADY C. (*matter-of-fact*) Oh, yes. Before my marriage I used to work two days a week in the slums. I had a club for girls. And I used to help out sometimes at my aunt's crèche. But since I married I have had to be content with a hobby that takes less time.

NEIL (*struggling to recover lost ground*) A hobby! And what is it now? (*He tries to get a sneer into his voice but it is not very successful. He feels too much at sea*) Pageants?

LADY C. A cottage-hospital at Charing. It was my mother-in-law's creation, and I inherited it from her. Not so interesting as Rotherhithe, but it smells sweeter. What slum did you work in, Mr Tummel?

NEIL (*completely floored by the question; the only time he has ever worked in a slum was canvassing*) Well——

LADY C. (*having waited long enough for him to squirm*) Glasgow, was it?

NEIL (*snatching at the straw*) Yes, I can claim to know the Glasgow slums quite well. (*They are both aware of the prevarication*)

LADY C. It will be interesting for you to compare them with Cockney ones. And if you come with me you won't have things thrown at you.

NEIL (*trying to get his bearings and wondering vaguely how he*, NEIL TUMMEL,

has got himself into the situation where he is going to be vouched for in a slum by one of the hated aristocrats) Why should they throw things?

LADY C. They don't like snoopers.

NEIL But I'm a Member of Parliament, and a Socialist!

LADY C. The first is immaterial, and the second not immediately apparent. (*AS NEIL ponders this*) They might take you for an artist looking for copy.

NEIL (*scandalised*) An artist! Me! Why would they do that?

LADY C. Well—forgive me, but that is what the suit you are wearing would suggest.

NEIL You mean this suit makes me look like an artist?

LADY C. (*who likes artists*) I wouldn't go as far as that. It is the kind of suit that an artist might wear.

NEIL It's a good Scotch tweed.

LADY C. (*kindly*) I'm sure it is.

NEIL None of your Bradford shoddy. That's honest wool straight from the sheep's back and first time off the loom. (*Casting her a glance of contempt*) But perhaps the technicality of that is too much for you.

LADY C. (*gently*) Oh, no. I did a little hand-weaving once—as encouragement to a village industry.

NEIL (*pausing at that, longing to be caustic but deciding reluctantly to be gracious*) You're a much more knowledgeable woman than I had expected, Lady Charing.

LADY C. (*demurely*) Thank you.

NEIL I don't see why wearing a good bit of tweed should make one look like an artist.

LADY C. There is nothing derogatory in looking like a painter, is there?

NEIL It's not an impression I would like to make.

LADY C. Then I suggest that you cast your eye over your colleagues in the House, and pick out something that gives the required impression. The choice will be varied, though not, I'm afraid, sartorially excellent. You can't expect a body of men who habitually sleep in their clothes to look exactly natty.

NEIL Sleep in them? Where?

LADY C. On the House of Commons benches, of course.

NEIL (*grimly*) They won't sleep when I talk to them.

LADY C. No, I think perhaps they won't.

NEIL (*pausing to look at her a moment*) Does that mean you're impressed with me, or just that you think I've got a loud voice? (*For NEIL, this is tentative, not to say humble*)

LADY C. It means, Mr Tummel, that you are difficult to ignore.

NEIL (*considering it*) It's not exactly a *nice* attribute.

LADY C. No. It is a quality you share with Mount Everest and a boil on the neck. I suspect Moses had it too. He would never have been able to goad the Children of Israel into leaving Egypt if he had not been a bit of a gadfly.

NEIL (*scandalised*) Moses! But he *led* them out. Led them to freedom!

LADY C. That's the worst of you reformers. You know so little of human nature.

NEIL (*hotly*) I know that the fundamental desire of human nature is freedom.

LADY C. (*mildly*) It isn't. It's security. Freedom implies responsibility, and your average man hates responsibility like the devil. That is why he so often delegates it to such odd deputies. Anything to be rid of it. (*Her eye is frank and innocent; and, anyhow, NEIL has never thought of himself as odd*) Let me give you some more tea.

NEIL (*accusing*) Why do you hate reformers?

LADY C. I don't hate them. I merely distrust them.

NEIL Because they want to upset the world you know.

LADY C. No. They love to think that they are playing God, when all they are doing is playing old Harry. Did you take sugar? I forget.

NEIL (*takes sugar*) Lady Charing, what was your object in asking me here?

LADY C. Education.

NEIL (*justifying LADY CHARING'S gamble in telling the plain truth*) How can I educate you if you dislike me?

LADY C. But I don't dislike you, Mr Tummel. On the contrary. You remind me very strongly of a pet lamb I had once. A most endearing creature.

NEIL (*whose vision of himself is of a roaring lion*) A pet lamb?

LADY C. Very woolly, and earnest, and running round in circles, and butting its head into everything in sight.

NEIL (*swelling*) Lady Charing——

[The Curtain comes down on his protest.]

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE I

The Scene is the same as in Act I, Scene II; the small drawing-room at Charing House.

It is a night in June, and a reception is in progress.

The room is empty, but one can hear the distant strains of a string orchestra. The windows are open, and through the back one can be seen the blue summer night and the dark trees lit by the uncertain light of the lamps in the street. A log fire smoulders on the hearth. One has the impression that it is very late: early morning rather than night.

After a pause, filled with the distant music and the frou-frou of voices in the square, the door opens and LORD CHARING puts a wary head in. The room is, as he expected, empty, and he comes in, shutting the door behind him with a satisfied air. He is carrying a plate with a fork and some food on it. He comes down to the chair on the up side of the fireplace, and sits down with an air of relief. He is beginning in his deliberate way to consider the food on his plate when he remembers something. He gets up and fetches from under the cushion of a chair down L. what appears to be an agricultural weekly. He settles down happily with the food and the paper in his original chair, the paper on his knees and the plate in his hand. His knees and toes are turned inwards, and he looks rather like a small boy with an ice-cream. The orders he is wearing are incongruous.

Presently the door opens once more and LADY TILlicOUNTRY appears; jewelled, tiara-ed, and crooked-wigged as usual. She regards the unconscious GUSSIE with indulgent amusement.

LADY T. *(coming in and closing the door)* Gussie, you wicked creature. *(As he tries to get up)* No, don't move. You are a deserter and liable to be shot, but I am your ally. We can be shot together. *(Propping herself by LORD CHARING'S side on the narrow table that runs parallel to the fireplace)* Shall we be blindfolded, or shall we meet a deserter's desserts with our eyes open?

LORD C. *(relieved that it is only POPPY)* It is not desertion. Merely a strategical

retreat.

LADY T. (*looking at his plate*) I didn't see anything like that on the tables. Where did you get it?

LORD C. They keep it under the counter for me.

LADY T. What is it?

LORD C. Jellied eel.

LADY T. Really? Is it nice?

LORD C. Excellent.

[LADY TILlicOUNTRY *picks up a piece in finger and thumb, and tastes it.*]

LADY T. (*judicially*) I think it tastes rather like something that has been left out in the rain. (*Nevertheless she licks her fingers with no sign of distaste*) But perhaps I have had too much salmon. Each time I am landed with a bore I have another supper. I have had five suppers tonight, and a snack. The snack tried to borrow ten pounds from me. That Beamish creature. How does he manage to keep going, do you think?

LORD C. (*eating his jellied eel*) Lack of evidence.

LADY T. (*with a half-admiring, half-envious little sigh*) Ah, well, it has been the usual conspicuous success, hasn't it? Everything as smooth as a ballet. I've been watching Millie do this for ten years, and I still don't know how she does it. My parties look like a Sunday-school treat. Perhaps we have the wrong kind of staircase. I certainly have the wrong kind of profile. Talking of profiles, do you know who is here tonight?

LORD C. Everyone but the Shah of Persia.

LADY T. (*caustic for once*) I think I did see the Shah in a corner. No, Neil Tummel. Millie really has done a wonderful job on him. Even his dress-clothes looked as if they had been handed down rather than picked up. I wish his Kilcrannock friends could see him.

LORD C. Why?

LADY T. They don't put up any money to re-elect a man who wears a white tie in the evening.

LORD C. Dear me. I have always held that a man who wears a boiled shirt is an object for pity rather than blame. I shall be very glad to get out of mine. Why don't these people go? I sometimes think that the 'homeless' of London doesn't refer to the people on the Embankment at all.

LADY T. A great many have slipped away, but no one can go officially until the Balkans do.

LORD C. Most inconsiderate. Our own people left hours ago. Surely even in the Balkans royalty is taught when to go home.

LADY T. The trouble is, they're enjoying themselves.

LORD C. (*staggered*) Enjoying themselves!

LADY T. He has discovered Babs Dacre, and *she* has discovered the buffet. Even Millicent can't prise either of the couples apart. (*Her mind going back to MILLICENT'S achievements*) Gussie, would you say that Neil Tummel might turn his coat as well as change it?

LORD C. Shouldn't think so. A very bigoted young man. Why?

LADY T. He spent most of the evening talking to Lord Archibald.

LORD C. Did Archie appear to be listening?

LADY T. Raptly.

LORD C. Then he was probably reckoning how much he would have to pay his bookie on Monday.

LADY T. Oh, no; he was answering.

LORD C. Archie!

LADY T. He appeared to be greatly interested.

LORD C. Dear me. (*Reminiscent*) I tried to talk to the young man once, but he bit my head off. (*Considering it*) Of course, Archie *might* want him in the Liberal fold.

LADY T. Want the Tummel creature? Why?

LORD C. Oh, new blood. The party needs youth and enthusiasm. You must admit that your representative has been very noisy and conspicuous for a newcomer.

LADY T. He has been quite frightful.

LORD C. I expect Archie could use those qualities to Liberal advantage. What I don't see is what use the Liberals would be to Mr Tummel.

LADY T. They may be a dreary crowd of nonentities ...

LORD C. Thank you!

LADY T. ... But they *are* more respectable than the Socialists.

LORD C. I shouldn't say that respectability weighed greatly with Mr Tummel.

LADY T. He is probably tired of his soap-box, and wants to spread himself on a party platform.

LORD C. You Tories have been so long in office that we poor Liberals have almost forgotten what a platform looks like. We have nothing to offer a bright young man; office, honour, or employment.

LADY T. Bright young man! A foolish creature full of half-baked ideas and parrot phrases.

LORD C. (*mildly*) I like parrots. The only living creature gifted with human speech that is content to repeat exactly what it has heard without trying to make a good story out of it.

[*Enter* LADY CHARING. *She is radiantly lovely and very cross.*]

LADY C. Gussie, you wretch, you should be ashamed of yourself. And you, Poppy, for aiding and abetting him.

LADY T. We were only having a breathing-space.

LADY C. Put that mess down, Gussie, and come quickly. They are going.

LORD C. Ah, at last.

LADY C. It really is too bad of you to desert me so flagrantly.

LORD C. (*beginning to go with her*) No one ever notices that I am not there, my dear. Have they collected all their detectives and things?

LADY C. Yes; she has just sent for her wrap. Do hurry. Are you coming, Poppy?

LADY T. No. If I curtsyed any more tonight it would become a tic. (*To* LORD CHARING, *as he follows his wife out*) Take a look at her wrap, Gussie. We had a bath mat just like that when we were children.

[*When they have gone she dawdles to the mirror over the fireplace, picking up a piece of fish from LORD CHARING'S plate as she passes, and considers herself absently, straightening her wig automatically. As sounds of activity float up from the square she strolls over to the window, back, and out on to the shallow balcony, where she is half-hidden by the curtain.*]

[*Enter* CRIPPS, *the maid, and makes for the small window down R. This, being at the side of the house and looking on to the side-street out of the square, has no balcony big enough outside, but the window is wide open, and CRIPPS stands there watching the people leaving from the door, which is just below it. From the confused sounds of departure in the street there comes the voice of a menial calling: 'The carriage of*

their Majesties of Barlinnia.’ At that LADY TILlicOUNTRY *turns from watching the people in the square and comes down, still leisurely, to the little window.]*

LADY T. (*seeing* CRIPPS) Good-evening, Cripps. Or rather, good-morning.

CRIPPS (*startled, but self-possessed as always*) Oh, my lady. I didn’t see you.

LADY T. (*joining her at the window*) It seems that at last we are to be allowed to go home to our beds.

CRIPPS I hope your ladyship doesn’t mind my being here. (*She is not particularly apologetic*) When we have Balkan people in the house I am never at peace until they have gone.

LADY T. What are you afraid of—bombs or bugs?

CRIPPS An assassination at one of our receptions would be a major tragedy.

LADY T. It would be a nice break.

CRIPPS Nothing has ever happened at one of our receptions.

LADY T. My dear good Cripps, nothing ever happens at any reception. (*As the visitors come out on the steps below*) There they are. (*Having watched for a moment*) Cripps, does anything remind you of bath-time in the nursery at Lessowes?

CRIPPS No, my lady.

LADY T. Remember the bath-mat?

CRIPPS (*noticing the wrap*) Ah, yes. Yes, indeed, my lady. An extraordinary likeness. (*Having considered it*) They do say that her grandfather made mats in Asia Minor. Perhaps the wrap and the bath-mat had a common origin, my lady.

LADY T. It’s a lovely theory, Cripps, but her grandfather was a brigand in Albania.

CRIPPS (*slightly shocked*) Not really, my lady?

LADY T. Oh, it’s quite respectable. Albania’s like Ireland, I understand; everyone is descended from kings. You know—you sleep with the pig, but you’re all descended from Brian someone-or-other; up the Shamrock! Look at old Charlie Crale bowing the seat out of his breeches.

CRIPPS Sir Charles’s hobby is Royalty.

LADY T. Well, it is a better one than his wife’s.

CRIPPS What is that, my lady?

LADY T. Going to memorial services. She hasn’t worn colours since the old

Queen's Jubilee. (*Her attention on another departing guest*) If Julia Froude puts on any more weight she will have to go round with a show. Is it true that she has become a Christian Scientist?

CRIPPS Yes, my lady.

LADY T. What induced her to do anything so *outré*?

CRIPPS She says that it is such a comfort to know that there is no such thing as the body. (*Considering the crowd on the steps below*) You know, my lady, the world is changing. When I was young one knew every face at a reception. Nowadays, even at our own receptions, one wonders sometimes—— (*She cannot find it in her heart to put it into words*)

LADY T. (*cheerfully supplying the words for her*) One wonders how they got in.

CRIPPS Some of these people here tonight are nothing but Members of Parliament.

LADY T. Well, it's nice to see even a Member of Parliament enjoying himself. Don't grudge them their little sup of champagne. It must be sad to belong to a trade that is both unskilled and unpaid.

CRIPPS But they are talking of paying them now, my lady. Four hundred a year.

LADY T. (*dawdling*) I don't know what one could do with four hundred a year.

CRIPPS Victor the footman says that you could get two good half-backs for the same money.

LADY T. Half-backs?

CRIPPS Football, my lady. They are paid for playing, it appears.

LADY T. (*beginning to go*) What curious ways people earn a living. (*Dawdling towards the door and straightening her wig at the mirror as she goes*) I remember being frantically in love with the most magnificent creature one summer at Weymouth when I was sixteen. I even planned to elope with him. But when I found what he did for a living I was cured overnight.

CRIPPS What did he do, my lady?

LADY T. (*serious, absent-minded, and sleepy*) He put the eyes in dolls' heads. Good-night, Cripps.

CRIPPS Good-night, my lady. (*She, too, has not smiled*)

[CRIPPS stands a few moments longer; watching the traffic below. As she turns to go, the door opens and VICTOR, the footman, comes in to tidy the room. He replaces LORD CHARING'S paper on a side table.]

CRIPPS You had better put another log on the fire, Victor. Her ladyship dislikes a dying fire.

[Exit CRIPPS.]

[VICTOR takes a log from the log box and puts it on the embers. He considers himself in the glass, tries to see himself in profile, looks at his tongue. He picks up LORD CHARING'S plate of jellied eel, samples it, disapproves of it, and is carrying it away when LADY CHARING comes slowly into the room. He holds the door for her, and shuts it as he goes.

[LADY CHARING comes down to the mirror and considers herself in her turn. She sits down wearily in the chair that LORD CHARING has occupied. After a moment she unpins her heavy tiara, and lifts it off her hair, leaving it lying on her lap.

[Presently the door behind her opens, and NEIL TUMMEL appears. He is carrying a small tray on which there are dishes and a bottle of hock. He comes down and puts the tray on the table at LADY CHARING'S elbow.

[LADY CHARING looks up, startled. At the sound of the door she has asked, without moving:

LADY C. Is that you, Gussie? Mr Tummel!

NEIL You haven't had a bite to eat all night. I've been watching you.

LADY C. (*still a little staggered*) How kind of you.

NEIL Your Chief Lackey says this is what you like.

LADY C. Yes. It was charming of you to think of it. I hope you enjoyed your evening?

NEIL I found it very interesting, thank you.

LADY C. You are looking very chic. You must admit that what you call 'the badge of the bourgeois' is vastly becoming.

NEIL (*who is very pleased with the figure he cuts in his not-very-well-fitting garments*) It is very silly. And most uncomfortable.

LADY C. I hope you have had some supper.

NEIL No.

LADY C. Why not?

NEIL I couldn't see anything I recognised.

LADY C. Do you have to be on *bowing* terms with your food?

NEIL If a ham looks like a ham I want to eat it. If it looks like my sister's wedding-bouquet, I lose interest.

LADY C. You have a sister?

NEIL I have. What is so surprising about that?

LADY C. I had somehow taken it for granted that yours was a unique birth. Why have you never mentioned your sister? Isn't she mentionable?

NEIL She is of no interest whatever.

LADY C. I see. She married well, dresses charmingly, enjoys life, supports all the local charities, and disapproves equally of you and revolutions.

NEIL I thought you——

LADY C. Well, I disapprove of you too, but I cannot eat supper alone. Do you think you could pick up sufficient courage to nibble at a mystery while I eat?

NEIL Are you inviting——

LADY C. I suggest you go back to the dining-room, ask Parker to give you a tray, do 'Eenie, meenie, minie, mo' among the dishes, and bring the results here.

NEIL Well, since you suggest it, I am a bit feeown. (*As an apparent afterthought*) And of course it would be very pleasant to have supper with you.

LADY C. Tell Parker to give you a bottle of my own hock. Not any of the caterer's stuff.

NEIL You forget that I'm T.T.

LADY C. You won't be once you have tasted hock. If you don't hurry up I shall have finished before you come back.

[*Exit* NEIL.]

[LADY CHARING *pours out some hock for herself, and begins to sip it.*

[*The door opens once more and* LADY TILlicOUNTRY *appears, cloaked and ready to go.*]

LADY T. Millie, darling, I don't know how you do it. I only wish *I* could.

LADY C. Solitary drinking, you mean?

LADY T. No. Public entertainment. I begin to suspect that it is hypnotism. You've even lured Neil Tummel into good behaviour and a white tie. I do congratulate you

on that job of work, my dear. Just a little more, and you will have jockeyed him out of the Socialist race altogether.

LADY C. I promised to make him pretty for your platform, not to alter his convictions.

LADY T. (*her attention arrested*) Do you think he has convictions?

LADY C. What do you call them?

LADY T. A political point of view. Where do you think he got those tails?

LADY C. I expect he borrowed them.

LADY T. That is what they look like.

LADY C. Not being accustomed to the usages of good society, it would not occur to him to order something he could not pay for.

LADY T. (*her attention thoroughly wakened; after a pause*) Millie, dear, you are not overdoing it, are you?

LADY C. Overdoing what?

LADY T. The Tummel business. You're not growing *interested* in the creature?

LADY C. Don't be absurd, Poppy.

LADY T. You *have* been taking him about quite a lot.

LADY C. You can hardly call a private view 'taking him about'. It is impersonal and educational in the extreme. You *asked* me to cut his hair, and when I do you——

LADY T. Oh, I know he is a stupid creature, that no woman in her senses would waste her time on. It's his profile I'm afraid of. Give a man a good profile, and no one notices how silly his face is. If half those people on coins turned front face, no one would bother to collect them.

LADY C. If you let your absurdity grow, Poppy, people will collect you one morning in a plain van. Why should you imagine for a moment that I am interested in Neil Tummel?

LADY T. I didn't, until you mentioned his convictions. And now I keep remembering a very odd story that I dismissed as too silly for belief.

LADY C. A story about me?

LADY T. Yes. Someone said that you had been seen riding in a bus, with a young man.

LADY C. Is the gravamen of the charge the bus, or the young man?

LADY T. So it was you?

LADY C. I like buses. A sort of public Musical Chairs. All Change, and who gets a seat? Your wig is crooked.

LADY T. Millie, you are being outrageous.

LADY C. Oh, nonsense, my dear. A bus is a most respectable means of——

LADY T. You know that I am not talking about buses. It is your own business if you choose to be odd. But Neil Tummel is my affair, and you are spoiling everything. I asked you to tone him down, not to take him up.

LADY C. Well, I am toning him down very nicely, and I think you are very ungrateful.

LADY T. You are spoiling him. Running round the town with him, and falling in with his absurd ideas. Don't tell me that the bus-riding was your idea. (*'For I shan't believe it'—she means*)

LADY C. No. He is teaching me to be democratic. (*A dimple shows wickedly for a moment*) You must allow me a *little* fun, Poppy. (*As an afterthought*) And if you ever tell him how you and I hopped in and out of buses in our youth, I shall slay you.

LADY T. I could kill *you* at this very moment. That creature's head must be swollen past recovery.

LADY C. Oh, no. I keep him tolerably humble.

LADY T. I suppose he is besotted about you?

LADY C. Oddly enough, I don't exist except as a brand to be plucked.

LADY T. (*pouncing*) Ah! And you find that exciting.

LADY C. (*demurely, with an edge to it*) He considers that I am very intelligent, and has hopes of making me a useful member of society.

LADY T. Society?

LADY C. With a little S.

LADY T. He has a confounded impudence. And you, Millicent Charing, are a confounded humbug. You sit there and preen yourself on your intellectual amusement. Believe me, my dear, if he had a profile like a new moon, you wouldn't be in the least amused. So 'lay not that flattering dudgeon to your soul'.

LADY C. 'Unction'!

LADY T. What?

LADY C. 'Flattering unction'.

LADY T. (*unabashed*) Oh, well, unction. Though I think dudgeon is a much better word. You can't see farther than his nose.

LADY C. (*coldly*) I have said already, Poppy, that you are very absurd. (*With growing warmth*) If you admire his profile so extravagantly, why couldn't you sit on the same platform with it, and so save everyone trouble?

LADY T. If a man wears a yellow suit it doesn't matter to me if he looked like the Archangel Gabriel.

LADY C. But you think that I am more susceptible.

LADY T. Well, you don't really mind yellow suits and things; you positively rejoice in them.

LADY C. *Nostalgie de boue.*

LADY T. So there is nothing to keep you from noticing his profile.

LADY C. You should have thought of my deplorable weaknesses before you entrusted me with your oddity.

LADY T. You needn't be sarcastic with me. (*The emphasis is on 'me'*) All I entrusted you with was his ties.

LADY C. Well, I got him into tails for you. He is an ornament to any platform. And all the thanks I get is a lecture on behaviour.

LADY T. I'm not lecturing. I'm grieved. (*Her dignified pose wilting under emotion*) I—I churn inside when I think of your encouraging the creature.

LADY C. Do you imagine that a Calvinistic Socialist can be induced to knot a white tie round his neck without encouragement? Really, Poppy, you are illogical, unreasonable, ungrateful, and tiresome.

LADY T. And you are far too fond of being godmother to squids, and octopuses, and Hottentots, and moth-eaten lions. (*Without any pause or change of tone*) We are not quarrelling, are we?

LADY C. (*also without change of tone or tempo*) Of course not. I think it is very small of you, Poppy, to come and create a scene when you know what an exhausting evening I have had.

LADY T. (*unimpressed*) You've had a lovely evening.

LADY C. (*her mind reviewing the exhausting evening*) The Queen would insist on spitting out the stones of her dates.

LADY T. (*staggered for a moment*) The Queen? (*Realising*) Oh, the Balkans. A woman who wears a bath-mat is capable of anything. And I *didn't* come to make a scene. I came to tell you how lovely everything was. (*She sounds suddenly like a child whose party has gone wrong*)

LADY C. (*relenting*) All right, Poppy dear. It was generous and charming of you. I expect we are both tired.

LADY T. Yes; it is silly to quarrel over anything so—so trumpery as Neil Tummel. Forget what I said, darling. I was just a little peeved that you were being nice to the creature, forgetting that being nice is a habit with you. I know that you could never waste an unnecessary moment on the silly bag of wind. Good night, my dear. I expect Cosmo is growing impatient. Are you going to the Tavenders' on Thursday? (*As LADY C. assents*) Then I shall see you there. Meanwhile I shall leave you to your solitary supper.

[*She is making for the door when it opens to admit NEIL TUMMEL carrying a tray with food and a bottle. Sensation—as the old scripts used to say.*]

LADY C. (*smoothly, into the gap*) Lady Tillicoultry, do you know Mr Tummel?

[*LADY T. inclines her head in cold recognition of the introduction.*]

NEIL Lady Tillicoultry doesn't know me, maybe, but I know her well enough.

LADY T. Really?

NEIL My father used to shoe your father's horses.

LADY T. (*cold and detached*) Did he get paid?

NEIL (*at a loss*) Of course.

LADY T. Your father must have been a remarkable man. My father never paid anything but blackmail. Good night, Millicent. It has been a charming evening.

[*She goes out.*]

NEIL (*in righteous disgust*) That's no way to speak about her father. (*Carries his tray down and places it on the opposite side of the table from hers*)

LADY C. Don't you believe in telling the truth about one's parents? But, of course, being a blacksmith, your father was no doubt admirable. Now I think of it, I have never seen any account of a blacksmith appearing in court. Now carpenters are always in trouble. Such nice clean work, too; you would think they would be content.

NEIL You have an incurably frivolous mind.

LADY C. I don't consider every dandelion a portent, if that is what you mean. (*As NEIL undoubtedly does, she means*) As for carpenters— (*She notices what is on NEIL'S tray; eight or nine very small plates, each with a different kind of food. In an astonished drawl*) My dear Neil! What is all that?

NEIL (*succinctly*) Samples.

LADY C. (*counting*) ... six, seven, eight, nine. Good gracious!

NEIL I took a little of everything I didn't know.

LADY C. But is that wise?

NEIL I consider that this is part of my education.

LADY C. Then I can only say that by tomorrow morning there will have been at least one part of your education that you will have paid for. However, I am glad to see that you have brought a bottle.

NEIL I'm ashamed about the bottle.

LADY C. *Nobody* has cause to be ashamed of *that* hock.

NEIL By the time I had made them give me all those little plates, I had no courage left to refuse the bottle. But of course I'm not going to drink it.

LADY C. (*pouring out some*) Of course you are. The Rhine is a dull river, and the Germans a deadly race, but between them they produce a unique beauty. That is it in your glass. Taste it, you bleak northerner. It has nothing in common with what you call drink, (*dropping her voice a perfect fifth*) which I take to be 'something to keep the wet out'.

NEIL (*twirling the stem of his glass doubtfully*) Nevertheless, that is the stuff that ties up a man's tongue (*he thinks first of speech, of course*)—or loosens it. That makes his will like water, and his judgment of no account. Because of that promises were broken, and obligations unmet.

[*He is beginning to enjoy the sound of it. LADY CHARING is eating her supper without glancing at him.*]

NEIL Fine aspirations died, and unworthiness found sweet excuse. Because of that causes were lost, leaders betrayed. Because of that sacred things were sold. Because of that Empires fell.

LADY C. (*not glancing at him; with finality*) Most Empires fell because the rain didn't.

NEIL (*with a swift return to the matter of fact*) This will be the first time in my life that intoxicating liquor has ever passed my lips.

[*She casts him an amused glance, but his eyes are on the glass.*]

NEIL I never made a pledge, of course. (*After a further pause he lifts the glass and tastes the wine cautiously. After a second more appreciative mouthful he*

sets it down) I see what you mean about it's not being drink. Just a (*he looks for a word*) fragrance.

[*She likes that and glances approvingly. It is in moments like these that she forgets his faults and remembers only his profile.*]

NEIL Is it potent? (*He picks up a fork and begins on the first of his samples*)

LADY C. Oh, no. It is the recognised tippie of maiden ladies.

NEIL I've known some maiden ladies with a real taste for the potent, including clay pipes. What is this? (*He refers to the dish he is eating*)

LADY C. Lobster mayonnaise.

NEIL (*holding up some cress on his fork*) What do they put the grass on it for?

LADY C. The cress is mere garnish, like a man's tie. Who tied *your* tie for you, Neil Tummel?

NEIL My landlady's son. It's his tie. If it comes to that, it's his suit too.

LADY C. I congratulate your landlady.

NEIL On what?

LADY C. On her very handsome son.

[*He casts her a doubtful glance at the implied compliment, but her mind has gone elsewhere.*]

LADY C. You know, Neil, you are improving.

NEIL Because I am dressed up like a monkey?

LADY C. (*suddenly out of temper*) Oh, don't be so stupid. That is the first entirely democratic outfit you ever wore. In tails all men are equal.

NEIL There *is* a difference in cut.

LADY C. Of course. But that is a matter of individuality, not of social standing. The best-cut tails I saw tonight were on Barney Cohen. The Duke of Sidborough, on the other hand, looked as if he had picked up a comedian's outfit at the last moment.

NEIL Then if it wasn't my clothes, in what way have I 'improved'?

LADY C. You haven't told me how many working-class families could be fed for the cost of my party.

NEIL (*grimly*) I'll tell you now. Five hundred families for a week, or fifty families for two years.

LADY C. It must be a dreary way to enjoy a party, reckoning what one could have

bought instead. Does the Tummel family never give a party?

NEIL Of course they do.

LADY C. When your sister got married, for instance?

NEIL Yes.

LADY C. How many people came?

NEIL We invited fifty, but fifty-six came.

LADY C. How awkward! And did you reckon how many families could have been fed for the cost of it?

NEIL No.

LADY C. Why not?

NEIL That's quite different.

LADY C. The only difference is that you have fifty friends, and I have nine hundred.

NEIL I don't suppose you knew half those people here tonight by sight even!

LADY C. No. But they know me. And expect to be asked to my house. And because they come to my house and drink my hock, someone in your beloved Kilcrannock eats a little better.

NEIL (*pausing in his supper at what seems to him this monstrous perversion*) Well, of all the——!

LADY C. (*interrupting him*) Little Señor So-and-So goes back to his South American home. He has been entertained at Charing House. He is pleased, he is flattered. He puts his docile women folk into English tweeds, and the mills of Kilcrannock work overtime.

NEIL (*scornfully*) Overtime!

LADY C. (*smoothly*) Yes. All those South American women are ten miles round. And when I am hanging on a lamp-post, Neil Tummel, the cost of entertaining little Señor So-and-So will come out of *your* pocket. (*As one contemplating a pleasing prospect*) What a *lot* of things are going to come out of your pocket when I have stopped paying for them. I shall be surprised if you have the price of a drink left. (*Noticing that NEIL is eating*) Don't you think you had better leave that till later? I think it is vanilla soufflé.

NEIL (*who has a sweet tooth and no palate*) It's fine, whatever it is. (*He goes on eating it*) So you give parties just to keep the poor of Kilcrannock happy?

LADY C. No. I give parties because I like it, and because I do it well. That is lucky because it happens to be my duty to give them, and it is very hard work.

NEIL Work! What would you do if you had seven children and a husband who earned two pounds a week?

LADY C. Make a success of it. I should have made a very good wife for a working-man.

NEIL You! I don't suppose you know the price of a pound of butter.

LADY C. (*reasonably*) No. But I should only have to be told once.

NEIL And tomorrow you'll no doubt lie in bed till noon recovering from tonight.

LADY C. On the contrary. I have a Pageant Committee meeting at ten o'clock. Queen Elizabeth has abdicated, and there are eleven claimants to the crown.

NEIL Have you a part in this pageant?

LADY C. I am to be Boadicea. (*This lady is now known as Boudicca, but in the Edwardian age they were satisfied with a smaller degree of accuracy*)

NEIL (*mildly*) Why Boadicea, the poor savage?

LADY C. (*matter-of-factly*) Because I look well with my hair down—— (*AS NEIL, after a delayed take, pauses and stares*) What is the matter?

NEIL (*after a pause, still staring, slowly*) It's an odd thing, but until this minute I never thought of you as a real woman.

LADY C. Was I ogre or goddess? (*AS NEIL still stares; a trifle dryly*) Not a Gorgon apparently. (*AS NEIL is still silent; a faint impatience showing*) Well, what was I?

NEIL (*still wrapped in his own thoughts*) A thing with a ticket on it.

LADY C. A ticket?

NEIL A label.

LADY C. Merciful heaven, a museum piece!

NEIL (*not having heard her*) In my mind you were always 'Rich aristocrat' or 'Famous Beauty'. Never a person with bones and flesh and blood.

LADY C. You must have granted me a stomach, or you wouldn't have brought me this supper.

NEIL No, I suppose not. I expect it was beginning to dawn on me.

LADY C. Well, now that you realise that my hair lets down, am I to be removed from your collection of untouchables?

NEIL (*grasping after his lost detachment*) It makes no difference at all in my opinion of you.

LADY C. I am still a parasite.

NEIL You are still the woman who wore that gewgaw tonight. (*He indicates with the point of his fork the tiara, which is lying on the table*)

LADY C. Didn't you think it becoming?

NEIL I thought you looked very silly in it. (*Having tasted a new dish*) I suppose this is caviare?

LADY C. Yes.

NEIL (*pushing the small dish away and drawing another into its place*) Well, I've tasted it.

LADY C. You don't like it?

NEIL Every man has his Waterloo.

LADY C. That is what Macrae, the Head Gardener at Charing, said when he lost the first prize for onions after twenty years.

NEIL (*scornfully*) I suppose you have a dozen gardeners?

LADY C. (*mildly*) Fourteen and a boy.

NEIL It's iniquitous that any individual should pay fourteen gardeners to keep his place tidy.

LADY C. If *we* didn't pay them, you would have to.

NEIL I?

LADY C. Would you destroy the gardens? In your revolution.

NEIL Of course not.

LADY C. Then the State would have to pay fourteen men and a boy. It is Augustus's dream, I may tell you. To get someone to take those gardens off his hands. He is always trying to filch sixpence from the peaches for his pigs. And he is terrified, of course, of Macrae. (*Contemplatively*) The Revolution is going to have a difficult time with Macrae. I hope you will be kind to our tenants, by the way. They are used to being looked after.

NEIL (*in a scornful summing up*) Cake in a basket.

LADY C. (*demurely*) No. Rent in abeyance. What will the State do with people who can't pay their rent?

NEIL (*lofty and repressive*) The State will look after the deserving.

LADY C. It wasn't the deserving I was thinking about.

NEIL At least there will be no more exploiting by landlords.

LADY C. The only landlord who makes a profit at Charing is the landlord of the George. You really must come and meet our persecuted peasantry. Come this week-end.

NEIL At the week-end I am going to Kilcrannock.

LADY C. You can go there next week-end.

NEIL No. I have a committee meeting on Saturday.

LADY C. (*airily*) Postpone it, my good creature. Postpone it.

NEIL It's my own parliamentary committee.

LADY C. All the more reason that they should wait.

NEIL What I have to say to them won't wait.

LADY C. No?

NEIL I am going to tell them that I can no longer represent them in Parliament. (*He goes on eating matter-of-factly*)

[LADY C. *stops eating, stares a moment, puts out a swift arm to NEIL'S bottle of hock and lifts it to the light, realises that the explanation is not there—NEIL is thirsty and has done justice to the wine, but even a teetotaller could not be greatly deranged by the amount he has consumed—and puts it down.*]

LADY C. It can't be that. Are you serious?

NEIL Perfectly.

LADY C. You are going to give up your seat? But why?

NEIL Because I have no right to keep it. I was sent to Parliament to represent the working-classes of Kilcrannock, and look at me! Dressed up like a dummy in a suit that doesn't belong to me, having supper with a countess.

LADY C. Does that prevent you from going to the House tomorrow and speaking for your Kilcrannock friends?

NEIL (*without heat*) It's a betrayal. That's what it is. A betrayal.

LADY C. My dear Neil, don't be absurd.

NEIL The money to send me to Westminster was scraped together by people who could ill afford it. They have a very clear idea of the kind of man they want to represent them. They thought I was that man. So did I. We were both wrong.

LADY C. But, for Heaven's sake, why——

NEIL The kind of man they want wouldn't be found dead in this house.

LADY C. Then I should have thought that the obvious course was to give up this house, not your constituency.

NEIL Giving it up wouldn't alter the fact that I liked coming to it.

LADY C. (*surprised and gratified*) You liked it?

NEIL (*airily*) Oh, ay. I pretended to myself that I came here just to look down my nose. And when I went about with you, and made you take buses instead of your car, I thought I was educating you; and all the time I was just flattered at being seen about with a countess and the most beautiful woman in London. Do you think a man like that is the right one to represent Kilcrannock weavers?

LADY C. But you also represent, I take it, the ...

NEIL I thought I was a Moses, and all I am is a Samson. A poor silly lump of a fellow that got his hair cut. And on Saturday I tell my committee that, and they can look for a better man.

LADY C. I have never heard anything so quixotic and nonsensical. When did you reach this curious decision?

NEIL (*without thinking*) Tonight. (*As soon as it is said he looks as if he would like to take it back, but he is too late*)

LADY C. And what are you going to do if you give up your political career?

NEIL I'll begin again, some other way. Find work in a factory, perhaps.

LADY C. Why not a stone-breaker? You know; a can of cold tea and strings round your knees. (*AS NEIL pursues his way through the samples on the plates without heeding her*) Or must you have an audience? (*Dropping the ironic manner*) My dear Neil, the whole thing is absurd to the point of fantasy.

NEIL (*dryly*) I didn't suppose you would understand it.

LADY C. You actually propose to give up your seat in Parliament because someone induced you to wear a white tie?

NEIL No. Because I'm a poor thing, but taking money under false pretences isn't one of my failings. Do you realise that my committee actually pay for my lodgings in London?

LADY C. And anyhow, to consider manual work as some sort of salvation is merely being perverse. Now, when you have caught the public eye——

NEIL It's not so long since you giped at me for not working with my hands.

LADY C. (*not listening*) I know! Let me talk to Lord Archibald——

NEIL (*startled, almost shouting*) No! (*Collecting himself at her surprise,*

more mildly) No. Certainly not!

LADY C. You wouldn't mind being a secretary for a little?

NEIL (*who hasn't been thinking of secretaryships; at a loss*) Secretary?

LADY C. Archie, being head of the Liberal Party, can always do with an extra secretary or two.

NEIL Are you deliberately insulting me?

LADY C. Insulting? I'm only——

NEIL If I want to stay in London as a working-man's representative, do you think I would stay as a hired lackey?

LADY C. You're terribly fond of the word lackey. It's a sort of shibboleth.

NEIL I didn't expect you to understand what conscience can do to a man, but I did think that you would——

LADY C. My dear, I am merely trying to bring a little realism into your——

NEIL Realism! God bless realism! and let us look to our personal profit, and the buttered side, and percentage, and perquisites, and feathers for our nest, and all the other rewards for keeping a sensible point of view, and not letting conscience talk too loudly. You can keep your realism, and I'll keep my conscience. And now, having been educated both spiritually and gastronomically. (*Getting up*) If you'll forgive me, I'll be going.

LADY C. No, Neil, wait. Let us discuss this calmly. I——

NEIL There is nothing to discuss. I made a mistake, and I am going to rectify it. That is all. I undertook something and failed to carry it through. Other men have failed before now. (*By this stage he is believing it himself*)

LADY C. But I——

NEIL Anyhow, it has nothing to do with you.

LADY C. But I feel that it has. If I had foreseen ... If I ...

NEIL You have nothing to reproach yourself with. You have been very kind, and if I have been uncouth I hope you'll forgive me. That I'm a failure is my own fault, and no one else's. (*He is enjoying himself so much now that he is almost in tears of admiration*) Thank you very much for your hospitality.

[*That is the phrase they use in Kilcrannock. He shakes hands with a speechless LADY CHARING, who has also risen by now, and makes for the door. At the door he turns.*]

NEIL And I want to tell you something. I didn't think you looked silly in that thing. (*He indicates the tiara*) I thought you looked like a queen. (*Amending hastily*) I consider Royalty a deplorable anachronism, of course. But you did look like a queen tonight.

[*He disappears.*]

[LADY CHARING *stands where she is, gazing at the closed door. As she turns slowly, she catches sight of her reflection in the mirror.*]

LADY C. (*to her reflection, as a nurse says it to a child who has broken something*) Now look what you've done.

QUICK CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE I

The Scene is the same. It is mid-morning in July.

LORD CHARING *is sitting in his chair by the window, reading a newspaper. Several more are strewn on the floor by his chair.*

Enter LADY CHARING, *making for the little desk by the side window. She is dressed to go out, and is carrying her gloves and a feathery thing that is destined to go round her neck. Half-way across the room she notices her husband.*

LADY C. (*not pausing*) Gussie. I thought you had gone to the club.

LORD C. I am getting up my courage.

LADY C. What do you want courage for?

LORD C. An unsuccessful Liberal is a fearsome thing, but a crowd of Liberals all cock-a-hoop is a thing to make a man blench.

LADY C. (*smiling: she is in a very good mood*) You are a disgrace to the party, Gussie. (*She sits down at her desk and prepares to write a note*) You ought to be standing on a chair and cheering. Nothing like this has happened to the Liberals within the memory of man.

LORD C. Oh, it's wonderful, of course. A landslide. A positive landslide. But where does it leave me? At the head of those stairs. (*At his paper again*) Did you see that the Tories have even lost Strake. A safe seat like that. Lost it by nine thousand votes. The thing's incredible. And Carlimmon. A Liberal majority of twelve thousand. God knows the Tories had been too long in power, but who would have expected anything like this? (*He chews over the news while she ignores him*) And Larborough... No, I'll never get away from those stairs now.

LADY C. (*writing*) Do you think it would be tactless to ask the Tillicoultrys to the dinner next week?

LORD C. I expect the Tillicoultrys and all their Tory clan are in deep mourning. Have you quarrelled with Poppy, by the way?

LADY C. Have you ever tried to quarrel with Poppy?

LORD C. I have not.

LADY C. The thing is an impossibility. It would be like hitting a feather-bed. (*After*

a pause) Why did you think we had quarrelled?

LORD C. It must be nearly a month since I came across her in the house. Not since that reception, if I remember. (*He is quite without guile, and not greatly interested*)

LADY C. That was just before the Tories resigned. And since then everyone has been in the country. (*She means the provinces*)

LORD C. (*going back to his paper*) Yes. Everyone has been kissing babies. The Liberals seem to have kissed to some purpose. (*Murmuring, as he scans the lists*) A landslide, indeed. Swinnington, five thousand.... I see your wild man has won Kilrannock for the Liberals. Does that mean an end of yellow suits?

LADY C. I don't know. I haven't seen him since that reception a month ago. I must say, it is a great relief to me that he has found a niche for himself. (*There is a faint shade of puzzlement, all the same, in that last sentence*)

LORD C. He owes you that, my dear.

LADY C. Because I changed his ties, you mean?

LORD C. No. Because you got him to the reception that night.

LADY C. What has that to do with it?

LORD C. It gave him a chance to work his spell on Archie.

LADY C. On *Archie*?

LORD C. Archie was so mellow that he not only offered to back him for Kilrannock—— (*He is not so greatly interested that his attention is entirely weaned from his paper, and now he catches sight of something else*) Did you see the majority at Hanborough?

LADY C. Archie! Offered him backing? Offered him *party* backing? (*She can't believe it*)

LORD C. (*coming to for a moment, and looking up with a reminiscent smile*) Yes. Young Bisset has been nursing Kilrannock for years——*with* the Party's blessing—but after an hour of Neil Tummel, and two bottles of Johannisberger, Archie changed his mind.

LADY C. It is not possible! (*She is referring not to ARCHIE'S behaviour but NEIL'S*)

LORD C. My dear, Archie was so mellow that he not only promised him party backing, but he told him that the Tories were going to resign within a week.

LADY C. I don't believe it.

LORD C. (*taking it for granted that it is ARCHIE'S indiscretion she finds*)

incredible) Oh, Archie didn't mind. When he told me next morning in the Club he said that anyone who could talk him into tears after twenty years in the Commons was worth a thousand votes to any party. The tears probably came out of a bottle. (*Shrewdly*) I think myself that Archie was looking for a Scotch counterweight to that little Welsh lawyer.

[LADY CHARING *is sitting very still, all her radiance gone, but* LORD CHARING, *busy with the ever-surprising contents of his paper, is unaware of any oddness in the atmosphere. He goes on, after a little.*]

LORD C. Well, it's nice for the young man to come in on a flood-tide. (*Reading another item*) Lanbovery West, eleven hundred. I shall be sitting at the top of those stairs in a bathchair before the Liberals go out of office.

[*He scans the paper again. LADY CHARING makes some attempt to go back to her note-writing.*]

LORD C. A landslide. A positive landslide.

LADY C. (*in a burst*) Gussie, if you use that phrase again I shall divorce you!

LORD C. Sorry, my dear.

LADY C. (*after a short silence, in her ordinary voice*) Am I sometimes impatient with you, Gussie?

LORD C. (*cheerfully*) Quite often, my dear.

LADY C. That is horrid of me. (*She says it simply, accenting no word more than another; which adds to its force*) There is no one in all the world as nice as you, Gussie, and I don't deserve to have you for a husband.

LORD C. (*in his gentle voice*) A very proper sentiment, my dear.

LADY C. (*casting him a fleeting smile for that*) Wretch! (*She makes some pretence of writing, but her mind is not on the paper. Writing*) Gussie.

LORD C. (*reading*) Yes, my dear?

LADY C. (*looking up*) Did you have a hero, when you were little?

LORD C. A hero? Yes. Let me see. Richard Lion-heart.

LADY C. (*scribbling on the blotting-paper*) Mine was Jack the Giant-killer. (*After a pause*) All my life I have kept expecting people to be Giant-killers. And all they ever prove to be are Jacks climbing the bean-stalk.

[*He becomes aware that there must be an origin for this line of thought, and turns his head to look at her, thoughtfully. She has gone back to*

her note.]

LORD C. (*after a moment, slowly*) I discovered later, of course, that Richard was a most deplorable bounder. (*He goes back to his paper, but henceforth he is aware of her*)

LADY C. How do you spell conceive?

LORD C. E-I. Who is conceiving?

LADY C. The conception is mental. We are not going to invite the Tillicoultrys next week, then?

LORD C. (*agreeing with her previous suggestion*) It might be a little tactless, certainly. (*A new thought striking him*) I wonder how Poppy likes the prospect of being represented in Parliament by Mr Tummel for years to come. Poor Poppy!

[*The door opens and POPPY appears, half-in and half-out.*]

LADY T. Who is sympathising with Poppy? (*Coming in*) And what about, may I ask? (*As the OTHERS greet her*) Victor said that I might come up. How are you, Millicent? He's a nice creature, Victor. He has decided that he still knows me, even if I am a defeated Tory. Was that what you were poor-Poppying about, Gussie? The slump in my political value?

LORD C. No, as a matter of fact, I was sympathising with you on the permanence of Mr Tummel.

LADY T. (*equably*) Oh, well. If we have to be represented by a Liberal, I don't know that Neil Tummel is worse than the next man. Especially now that Millie has prettied him up so nicely. You should have seen him in Kilcrannock, my dear. He was a credit to you. He has even got himself a new suit. Very chaste and slightly Foreign Office. As for his politics he might have been a Liberal from the cradle.

LADY C. (*extra sec*) Very gratifying.

LADY T. It's fantastic. A month ago he wanted the earth; now he's promising it. If reports are true he's promising the moon too.

LORD C. A charmer, Mr Tummel. I wonder if he is still interested in small-holdings? I was pinning my faith to that.

LADY C. If you pin anything to Neil Tummel you'll lose even the pin.

LADY T. Don't you like him any more, Millicent? Oh, dear, I hope you are not tired of him. I was going to ask you—I *was* going to suggest——

LADY C. What is it now? His shoe laces? Perhaps he does them in a V and you

prefer them straight across.

LADY T. (*ignoring any sarcasm*) Oh, no. Nothing like that. Nothing like that at all. I was hoping you would bring him to tea.

LADY C. (*regarding her*) Really, Poppy, you are quite shameless.

LADY T. I don't know what you are talking about. Now that he is a perfectly respectable Liberal there is no reason why we should not be on speaking terms. It looks well on a platform. And there are one or two little things in the constituency that I want done. So I thought the nicest way would be for you to bring him to tea one day. Tea is a nice informal thing, and doesn't commit one to much.

LADY C. I think Mr Tummel is quite capable of bringing himself to tea.

LADY T. But I should have to ask him. That is quite impossible.

LADY C. In any case, I shall not be seeing Mr Tummel either soon, or much.

LADY T. I don't know about much, darling, but you will certainly be seeing him soon. (*Answering LADY CHARING'S unspoken question*) I passed him just now in the carriage. Striding along Grosvenor Street. There was one of those dotted lines from his nose to this door.

LADY C. But why to this door? I have not heard from him for weeks. Why should he come here?

LADY T. He is coming to be admired, of course. Don't you *know* the creature?

LADY C. (*murmuring*) I begin to.

LADY T. He is bringing his sheaves, or his scalps, or whatever it is, to show you.

LADY C. (*looking at her watch with deliberate control*) Then he will have to leave his sheaves on the doorstep. I am due at Lady Archibald's in fifteen minutes. I think it would be a graceful thing if you came along with me, Gussie, and paid your respects.

LORD C. Oh, must I, my dear? I find her such a terrifying woman.

LADY T. Such a pity to have a Prime Minister's wife who looks like a horse.

LADY C. You have only to say how pleased we all are. And then you can go to your club. It will not look nearly so bad after Lady Archie.

LORD C. There is that. (*Beginning to make a move*) I suppose it is time I made a move anyhow.

LADY T. Do you hate your club, Gussie?

LORD C. Oh, no, no. The building is quite charming. Seventeenth century. But I look round at my fellow members and can't help thinking how much more interesting

they would be if they were pigs. Shall I meet you in the hall, Millicent? (*Looking at his watch*) At a quarter-past?

[*She agrees to 'ten past'.*]

LORD C. How is Cosmo? Not too shocked over the Tory defeat, I hope?

LADY T. At the news that we were going to be represented by a Liberal, Cosmo decided to go into a nursing-home. But when he found that everyone else had a Liberal too, he cheered up wonderfully.

LORD C. They do say that misfortune shared is misfortune halved.

LADY T. Well, I confess I was relieved. Nursing-homes are more expensive than grouse moors these days. Delia Delany sent for the crusts off her toast, and they charged it extra on her bill.

LADY C. (*amused and disbelieving*) Oh, my dear Poppy——!

LADY T. I do assure you. 'Crusts: five shillings.'

[*She lifts an elegant hand to the smiling LORD CHARING, as he goes out.*]

LADY T. I expect——

LADY C. Poppy, dear, you won't mind if I throw you out, will you? I must finish these notes before I go, and we can't be late at Lady Archibald's.

LADY T. (*airily*) You won't be late, my dear. You have plenty of time. Give the woman a chance to get out of her curlers.

LADY C. But——

LADY T. You go on with your notes, and I shall sit quietly here and rest for a little. I shan't interrupt you, I promise. It is a charming room to rest in. I have always wanted one like it.

LADY C. (*resuming her writing; tartly*) If it is my drawing-room you want now, Poppy, let us have an understanding at once. You cannot have it.

LADY T. (*without heat*) I don't think that sounds very nice. (*She is sitting where she can see from the window into the square*) One would think I was a cadger!

[*She can now see NEIL TUMMEL approaching below.*]

LADY T. I have my faults, but if there is one thing I am not a cadger. (*In a scientific, detached voice*) Are you a little dyspeptic this morning, Millicent?

LADY C. (*scribbling furiously in an effort to finish her letters and get out of the house before NEIL TUMMEL descends on it, but rising to the dyspepsia gibe*) I

have *never* had dyspepsia.

LADY T. I only wondered. You sounded a little impatient. Not to say peevish. Here I come rushing to congratulate you on the Liberal victory, and you——

LADY C. (*casting her a glance and going on scribbling*) It couldn't be, could it, Poppy, that you didn't remember me until your eye lighted on Neil Tummel headed this way, and that you then remembered that you wanted Government backing for your Kilcrannock soup-kitchens?

LADY T. No; for my Poor Children's Holiday Home.

LADY C. And that when I refused to bring him to your house you settled down here in the hope that he would come before you left?

LADY T. (*getting up; she has watched NEIL TUMMEL go round the corner of the square to the door below the window*) That is very unkind of you, Millie. Very unkind. If that is what you think I shall go at once. At once.

LADY C. Oh, sit down, Poppy, and don't be tiresome. We can go together in a moment.

LADY T. No, if I go now, I can at least prove that I am not using your charming room as a place of assignation.

LADY C. (*almost restored to good humour by this absurdity; half-smiling*) You absurd creature. I ...

LADY T. If I don't see you before then, we shall meet at the opening of Parliament. (*Kindly, as she is going*) And you really ought to try those little tablets that Cosmo has, my dear. I don't think your digestion is as good as it ought to be.

LADY C. (*calling after her*) Your wig is crooked.

[*As soon as the door closes behind her, LADY CHARING hurries to the bell-pull.*]

LADY C. (*as she crosses to the bell*) What a morning! (*Pausing with her hand on the bell; she is about to say that she is not at home*) No, perhaps not. I shall be gone before he comes.

[*She hurries back to her notes and thrusts them into envelopes. While she is engaged in that the door opens and again LADY TILlicOUNTRY appears leading in NEIL TUMMEL.*]

LADY T. (*as cheerfully as if they were meeting for the first time*) Millicent dear, look what I found on the stairs. (*As NEIL, very confident and pleased with himself,*

moves forward to shake hands) Your new Liberal, and our new Member of Parliament. He has brought his scalps.

NEIL My what?

LADY T Your sheaves, you know.

NEIL (*to LADY C.*) I came to thank you for your good wishes. It was kind of you to send the telegram.

LADY C. I sent three hundred telegrams.

LADY T (*too much occupied with her own concerns to notice LADY CHARING'S attitude*) Oddly enough, we were talking of you a moment ago.

NEIL (*with difficulty taking his attention away from LADY CHARING'S reception of him*) Yes?

LADY T I was hoping that you would help me with one or two little things in the constituency.

NEIL Provided I approve of the one or two little things, Lady Tillicoultry, I'll help you with pleasure.

LADY T It's mostly about my Poor Children's Holiday Home. I take it you would approve of that.

NEIL I don't know. I would have to see the books.

LADY T The books?

NEIL The accounts.

LADY T Oh, it is all most painfully honest. We're in debt. (*Her second sentence is meant as proof of her first*)

NEIL No doubt, but that's no evidence of honesty.

LADY T (*genuinely surprised*) Isn't it? (*Dismissing the problem*) Oh, well, you must come and see for yourself, and make sure that I am not baby-farming, or whatever it is you suspect me of, and then we can get the grant or the subsidy, or whatever it is, and get the new hot-water pipes in. I won't keep you now, because I know you want to tell Millicent all about your triumph. Such a wonderful majority. Wasn't it, Millie?

LADY C. Very remarkable.

[*Again NEIL casts her a puzzled glance.*]

LADY T I think he is going to be a great asset to Kilcrannock.

LADY C. Providing his Cabinet duties don't prove too distracting.

LADY T. Cabinet? But he isn't in the Cabinet.

LADY C. No, but he will be.

LADY T. You see the faith she has in you. (*Going*) I am almost ashamed to bother such a brilliant young man with my hot-water pipes.

[NEIL *murmurs that he will be charmed.*]

LADY T. *Au revoir*, Millicent. *Au revoir*, Mr Tummel; we are going to work together beautifully.

[*Exit* LADY TILlicOUNTRY]

NEIL (*after a pause*) Have you faith in me?

LADY C. If you mean, do I believe that you can reach Cabinet rank; yes. If you mean, could I trust you not to give me a bad half-crown—no.

NEIL I seem to have become a petty crook with remarkable rapidity.

LADY C. Almost as rapidly as you became a Liberal.

NEIL (*thinking he sees the light*) So *that's* what you're angry about?

LADY C. I'm not angry.

NEIL Och, woman, there are daggers shooting from your eyes. And the hand you gave me was like a haddock. (*Puzzled*) I thought you would be pleased about it. All the way down in the train I kept thinking how pleased you would be. (*He sounds like a child deprived of a promised treat*)

LADY C. You must forgive me if I am slow in getting used to the idea. When you left this room it was to become a stone-breaker or something of the sort.

NEIL (*indulgently*) Oh, well, that was a figure of speech.

LADY C. (*with an air of innocent inquiry*) A—fib, you mean?

NEIL (*hastily*) No, no. A—a dramatisation.

LADY C. And did you 'dramatise' yourself into a Liberal frame of mind?

NEIL Oh, no. That was logic. Pure logic.

LADY C. Really?

NEIL It seemed to me that if I was resigning because I was too fond of Liberal ways, the obvious solution was to become a Liberal. Don't you approve of me as a Liberal?

LADY C. My dear Mr Tummel, I have never approved of you.

NEIL (*eyeing her*) You gave a very fine imitation of it.

LADY C. Perhaps you were misled.

NEIL By what?

LADY C. My natural good manners. In polite circles disapproval does not necessarily mean a spit in the eye.

NEIL But it does in mine, you mean.

LADY C. (*considering it*) Perhaps not in the eye; but certainly a spit.

NEIL Well, thank God I am no hypocrite!

LADY C. (*sweetly*) No?

NEIL No! Do you suggest that I am?

LADY C. (*still sweetly*) I don't suggest it. I give it as my considered opinion that you are the most colossal hypocrite that it has ever been my unfortunate lot to meet. (*Going on as he is about to interrupt*) When you burst into this room three months ago you were a Moses. Do you remember? You were going to lead your people out of bondage. Because we did not subscribe to your beautiful theory that some inherent wisdom and virtue pertains to a man who earns less than two pounds a week we were knaves of the deepest dye. We were tyrants, and exploiters, and oppressors. I take it that we are still tyrants, and exploiters, and oppressors, but Neil Tummel is no longer a Moses.

NEIL (*interrupting*) I can do far more for my people as a member of a party than I ever could as a lone voice in the wilderness.

LADY C. But what became of Samson?

NEIL (*puzzled*) Samson?

LADY C. You came into this room a Moses, but you left it a Samson. Had you forgotten? You were a poor heart-broken creature who had had his hair cut and had betrayed his people and was going to hide his shame in a factory.

NEIL (*rubbing his hand over the back of his head with a rueful gesture*) Oh, well. There's no denying my tongue runs away with me sometimes.

LADY C. (*interested*) Is *that* what you call it—a slip of the tongue?

NEIL (*indulgent*) An excess of imagination, let us say. I was giving up my dream of being a Moses, and maybe I dramatised myself a little. There's no hypocrisy in that.

LADY C. No? Perhaps you don't remember how noble you were? How you sacrificed your dreams for conscience' sake? How you were going out into the wilderness to begin again.

NEIL Well, I——

LADY C. And all the time you had your first Liberal pay in your pocket.

NEIL (*startled*) What? What pay?

LADY C. The promise of Party backing for Kilcrannock. And the knowledge that the Tories were going to resign.

NEIL (*after a pause*) So you know that? (*With a naïve frankness*) I didn't think Archie'd mention it. He had no right to tell me things like that, you know. He wouldn't have, if it hadn't been for the bottle.

LADY C. You underrate your charm.

NEIL (*eyeing her*) You're a very nasty woman when you like.

LADY C. You sat there and ate my food and drank my wine and told a pack of silly lies——

NEIL (*indignant*) They *weren't* silly. They were very fine lies.

LADY C. *Silly* lies for no other reason than to make yourself important.

NEIL Well, that's no bad reason.

LADY C. To hide what a very shabby, timid, time-serving little man ...

NEIL I'm five feet ten, I'd have you know.

LADY C. So you are, and make yourself look big and fine and courageous in my admiring eyes.

NEIL Well, it serves you right for trifling with my affections.

LADY C. Tri—— (*Words fail her*)

NEIL Do you deny that you trifled with my affections?

LADY C. (*coldly*) My dear Neil Tummel, I never trifle; and I doubt whether you have affections.

NEIL You took me up. That's the phrase, isn't it? You took me up, the way you would a new kind of dog, or a clever nigger——

LADY C. (*automatically*) Negro.

NEIL —you took me round town with you, you flattered me——

LADY C. (*hotly*) I have never flattered you!

NEIL Oh, yes, you did. You flattered me by deferring to me, by letting me think that I was educating you, by—oh, in all the thousand ways that a woman like you knows how to flatter. You didn't even have to *say* anything; you had only to look as if you were listening; or to smile your own special kind of smile; or to put your

finger-tips on my arm to draw my attention to something. What defence has a man like me against a woman like you? It's your own fault if you get lies told you. When I am Prime Minister—— (*Pausing at sight of her smile*) You don't believe that one day the King will send for me?

LADY C. No. You will send for the King.

NEIL When I am Liberal Prime Minister——

LADY C. (*correcting*) Tory Prime Minister. By that time you will be a Tory.

NEIL (*with stubborn emphasis*) When I am Prime Minister—— (*Coming to a full stop—testily*) Now you've made me forget what I was going to say.

LADY C. (*smoothly*) You were going to say that by the time you reach that eminence you will stop telling lies because you will not have to impress anyone, even yourself. Believe me, being Prime Minister is no cure for anything. On the contrary. I have never known a Prime Minister who was not an exaggerated version of what he was as a Sixth Form boy. (*Regarding him*) An exaggerated version of Neil Tummel is something I shudder to contemplate. However, England has survived even stranger things at Number Ten. (*Picking up her gloves and beginning to put them on*) Which reminds me that I am due there now.

NEIL (*considering her*) Are you dropping me?

LADY C. (*absorbed in the painstaking process of donning kid gloves*) I am—I must confess to you—a born buyer of gold bricks. You are my latest gold brick.

NEIL You mean that you are putting me into the wastepaper basket just because I don't fit some sentimental picture you had of me?

LADY C. It is not sentimental to expect sincerity in a person.

NEIL (*with a sneer*) And how sincere are you?

LADY C. (*taking the wind out of his sails*) Socially I am a monument of insincerity.

NEIL Well, then?

LADY C. Morally I am an honest woman. (*As NEIL is about to interrupt*) And I consider it immoral for one person to engage the emotions of another by telling lies.

NEIL (*jumping at it*) So your emotions *were* engaged?

LADY C. (*smoothly*) Certainly. I was never so sorry for anyone.

NEIL (*dashed*) Sorry?

LADY C. Did you expect *me* to weep over that touching picture of a broken idealist? And then I find that I have been squandering my sentiments on a

mountebank.

NEIL Don't you dare call me that. Just because I got a bit carried away one night. Do you think I'm not sincere about my mission? About the improvement of the world?

LADY C. Provided the fortunes of Neil Tummel are improved at the same time.

NEIL You think me a complete hypocrite? (*Rage and incredulity struggle for mastery*)

LADY C. If you remember, I began this conversation by saying so.

NEIL You believe that I don't care a hoot what happens to the working-classes as long as I'm all right?

LADY C. I wouldn't go as far as that.

NEIL (*hastily*) Well, that's something.

LADY C. I think your interest in their salvation would be less urgent if you were not their saviour.

NEIL That is a——

LADY C. If the redemption of the world depended on your remaining an obscure little teacher of Junior English, I suspect the world would stay unredeemed.

NEIL But that's an outrageous thing to say. It makes me a—a monster of vanity.

LADY C. (*kindly*) I shouldn't worry if I were you. Most saviours are very vain.

NEIL Why are you being so cruel this morning? (*It is an expression of curiosity, not a protest*) Stabbing away at me like that. Brushing me off as if I was a golochan you found in your dress.

LADY C. A what?

NEIL An earwig.

LADY C. I think the earwig is a charming insect by comparison.

NEIL You can't be as angry as that merely because I turned my coat.

LADY C. Of course not. You could have turned your coat a dozen times with my blessing, provided you had been honest about it. Political quirks I am used to, but not—— (*she hunts for a phrase*) not crocodile tears on my drawing-room carpet.

NEIL I tell you, my tongue ran away with me. I was excited that night, having supper with you, and Lord Archibald approving of me, and drinking wine for the first time, and you looking like all the pictures in the world—do you realise that was the first time I had seen you in evening-dress?—and the summer night outside, and everything; I just *had* to make something to match it. But to damn me as a hypocrite,

body and soul, just because on one occasion I let my imagination get the upper——
(*As LADY CHARING, still busy with her gloves but nearing an end of them, casts her eye round to see where her feather ornament may be*) Look, before I went north, that night at supper, you asked me to Charing for the week-end. Let me come one week-end and—I can't talk to you now, you aren't even paying attention to me; you're just as interested in that feather thing (*even at this moment his vanity is uppermost*)—let me come one week-end when there will be time to talk——

LADY C. (*smoothing her gloves*) I shall not be much at Charing this autumn, I am going yachting. I am always very sick, but a good retch now and then is excellent for the complexion.

NEIL You are running away!

LADY C. From what?

NEIL From me.

LADY C. (*with a light and very successful little laugh*) My dear Neil!

NEIL You couldn't be all that angry if—if what I did didn't matter to you.

LADY C. (*explaining her anger*) I don't like being fooled, any more than the next woman. Nothing riles a woman like a misspent tear.

NEIL (*repeating his conviction*) You are too angry. If I was just 'an earwig', you wouldn't be so angry.

LADY C. (*considering him*) Your vanity is really pathological, isn't it? If someone is angry with you, that is the measure of your importance. If she takes a holiday, she is running away from you. Let me make it quite clear. Anger is very ageing, and therefore a luxury I don't indulge in; and I am going yachting because for the last three months, like everyone else, I have consistently over-eaten. The Romans tickled their throats, and we go to Marienbad. I, personally, find yachting more effective. And now——

NEIL That is just a lot of words. You can say what you like, but you *are* angry

LADY C. (*correcting*) Annoyed.

NEIL Well, call it what you like, but what I did was important to you. If it hadn't been, you'd have been all social-insincerity this morning, and not cared two shakes of a lamb's tail whether I had pretended to be better than I was or not. You'd have been full of polite gush like that silly Tillicoultry woman, who is ready to——

LADY C. You should be grateful to Poppy Tillicoultry.

NEIL For what, may I ask?

LADY C. But for her, we should never have met.

NEIL (*puzzled*) But you asked me to tea.

LADY C. Yes. Poppy persuaded me to invite you.

NEIL *That* woman did? Why?

LADY C. She didn't like your ties.

NEIL What has that to do with it?

LADY C. She hoped that I might change them. (*As NEIL is silent, taking this in*) You must admit that I have been very successful. Your present cravat would not disgrace the Foreign Office.

NEIL (*slowly*) So that is why you invited me.

LADY C. To make you pretty for Poppy; yes.

NEIL And did it need so much—— (*he looks for a phrase*) personal attention to change a bit of silk round my neck?

LADY C. (*with disarming frankness*) Oh, no. I grew interested in you.

[*NEIL'S stiffness momentarily relaxes.*]

LADY C. I found you most attractive. I thought it was your principles. But I think Poppy was right; she said it was your profile.

NEIL Between the two of you, I seem to have been well chewed over.

LADY C. Between *you* and *Poppy* I have been put to a great deal of inconvenience. However, since you are both the better for it, I cannot grudge my wasted interest. And now I must go, or I shall be late at——

NEIL You can't make yourself the most important thing in my life and then walk out of it as if you were stepping into your carriage. (*There is more threat than appeal in that*) What do you think I am made of? What do you think I am? A doll to be dressed and undressed? A dummy to be pushed about on a board for your pleasure?

LADY C. (*regarding him*) No, I think you are a very silly and snobbish little climber, who didn't even notice that I was a woman as well as a Viscountess, until it was brought to your notice that my hair let down. If I have been important to you, believe me I am not irreplaceable. Peeresses in the Liberal Party are two a penny. It is absurd to suggest——

NEIL Stop it!

[*In sheer surprise she stops.*]

NEIL You know very well what I mean, and it has nothing to do with climbing or snobbery. It has to do with you and me.

LADY C. The only thing that you and I have in common, Mr Tummel, is the Liberal Party.

NEIL (*who has come close enough to her to look into her eyes, speculatively*) I wish I could see what you are thinking. All these words, and what do they mean? What did you want of me that you're so angry with me now? (*As she does not answer, but meets his gaze calmly*) Not a lover. Your virtue's a byword all over London. I suppose that means you're a cold woman. Then what did you want of me?

LADY C. I have told you. I thought your principles matched your profile. But I was wrong. You are, after all, a little man. You have a blind eye, but no telescope to put to it.

NEIL (*still considering her*) If it's a Nelson you're looking for, they're few and far between.

LADY C. I shall go on looking.

NEIL And meanwhile?

LADY C. Meanwhile?

NEIL All the 'little' fellows you have encouraged and discarded die of shame.

LADY C. That is something you are not likely to die of.

NEIL Not me. I'm Neil Tummel. I may be just a parlour game to you, but I'm going to be history to a lot of others. I'm on my way up; and you're going to watch me go. And if this is good-bye, let me give you something to remember me by. (*He takes her to him with one arm, tilts her chin with the other hand, and kisses her heartily on the lips. Releasing her*) I've wanted to do that for a long time.

LADY C. (*who has suffered the embrace without moving*) I have wanted for a long time to do something for you. Something that your mother should have done.

NEIL (*with his too-ready resentment*) My mother did everything for me!

LADY C. Except put you across her knee. However—(*picking up her wrap*)—the House of Commons will do that. So will your wife.

NEIL My wife?

LADY C. You will marry for prestige, of course; and to your last day you will never know what your wife is really thinking. As for your children ...

NEIL If you think my children will be snobs (*there is the faintest emphasis on the word 'children', since he is unconsciously admitting the truth of her first prediction*) you are wrong; they ...

LADY C. On the contrary they will disgrace you by being Socialists. You will be forever explaining away your son's antics. By the time you are forty you will have the whole world for audience, and no one to talk to; and I am very sorry for you. (*She does not sound particularly sorry*) You set out to be a Moses; then you thought you were a Samson; and all you are is an Esau.

NEIL Esau?

LADY C. A man who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. (*Following NEIL'S thought perfectly*) And if you think that the pottage may prove worth it, let me tell you here and now that it will be dust and ashes in your mouth, for one reason.

NEIL Go on. Curse me.

LADY C. (*ignoring the gibe*) However far you go, however long you live, there will be a label round your neck that you can never get rid of. They will whisper the tag behind you at assemblies, state it openly in your biographies, quote it against you in opposition, and repeat it in your obituary. 'Of course, Millicent Charing made him', they will say. 'Millicent Charing made him, of course.' And your achievement will be dust and ashes in your mouth.

NEIL (*staring at her; light and conviction dawning simultaneously; not in triumph but in a kind of wonder—slowly*) You were in love with me.

[*The door opens to admit LORD CHARING, a placid and unemotional little presence.*]

LORD C. (*in his gentle, matter-of-fact voice*) Millicent dear, I don't think I shall wait for you. It is really time that I looked in at the Club, and—— (*Catching sight of NEIL*) Oh! I thought you had Poppy with you. My dear Mr Tummel, allow me to congratulate you, and to welcome you to the Liberal Party.

[*He shakes hands with NEIL.*]

LORD C. It's a curious world, isn't it? A month ago we Liberals had nothing to offer a bright young man, and now it seems the Party is a land of infinite opportunity.

LADY C. Of which Mr Tummel will take definite advantage. I think you had better come with me (*emphasis on 'with'*) Gussie, just for a moment, to pay your respects.

LORD C. Very well, my dear. Can we drop you somewhere, Mr Tummel?

LADY C. (*going out*) Mr Tummel may as well come with us to Number Ten. He is on his way there in any case.

CURTAIN

Sweet Coz

CHARACTERS

DINAH PARTRIDGE

HECTOR PARTRIDGE

JOB

MRS BINT

JEMIMA CLAMP

ACT I

The living-room of a small flat on a morning in early Spring. It is a pleasant room, modern in furnishing and decoration without being mannered. It is also a woman's room, without being particularly feminine. In the rear wall is the entrance to the passage, off which are the bedrooms. In the left wall the fireplace, with an electric fire burning. In the right wall the window, and down from it the door to the vestibule and kitchen.

A table near the fire is half-set for breakfast.

Enter MRS BINT.

MRS BINT *'obliged' for years, owing to the 'ongoings' of her husband, but when she met* DINAH PARTRIDGE *she ceased 'obliging' and slept in, and so became a housekeeper. At the moment she is carrying a tray filled with what she calls 'the rest of the dry things'. That is, with everything necessary for breakfast except the actual food. She mutters to herself in a worried fashion as she lays the things. When she has finished she lingers in front of the table and tries what is apparently a rehearsal.*

MRS BINT *(addressing an imaginary presence behind the table)* If it's all the same to you, miss, I'd like to——*(Trying again)* I'm sorry to say it, miss, but I've decided——*(She gives it up for the moment, fetches a chair, places it on the side nearest the fire, and tries again)* Things bein' as they are, miss, I think it's only right to tell you——*(She pauses and gives it up once more. She picks up a teaspoon from the saucer, beats on the edge of the saucer with it, replaces it, and goes out to fetch the rest of the things. She comes back with a substantial breakfast for one: coffee, eggs and bacon, and toast. No one has come from the bedroom, so she beats a second tattoo with the spoon and waits with it poised)*

DINAH *(off)* Coming!

[*AS* MRS BINT *is setting out the dishes,* DINAH *comes in from the passage. She is twenty-eight; good-looking without being a beauty, tailored without being mannish, independent without being farouche. A pleasant creature; just a little smug, just a little professionally bright, just a little too conscious of 'owing not any man'. But charming withal.]*

DINAH (*brightly*) Good morning, Mrs Bint.

MRS BINT (*with reserve*) Good morning, miss.

DINAH (*making straight for the table, with a glance at the clock as she comes*) Nearly half-past eight, I observe. That is the result of an evening out. It is just as well that Annual Balls are annual. Is this the new bacon?

MRS BINT That's the new bacon, miss.

DINAH Still very fat. Tell Rapson we like some protein.

MRS BINT Yes, miss.

DINAH (*eating*) It's very warm in here. You might turn down the fire a little. What is the outside temperature?

MRS BINT I don't know. I haven't looked this morning.

DINAH (*mildly*) Look now, then.

MRS BINT (*crossing to the window and opening it*) I don't know what a drop of mercury's likely to know about the weather.

DINAH (*scenting the atmosphere*) Your lumbago troubling you this morning, Mrs Bint?

MRS BINT No, thank you, I've no lumbago. (*She looks at the glass hanging outside the window and gives the figure*)

DINAH Mild for February. Everyone will be wanting tonics. Any telephones when I was out last night, Mrs Bint?

MRS BINT Just one. The message is on the pad.

DINAH What did it say?

MRS BINT It said that Mrs Snitcher's stomach's settled nicely.

DINAH I find it in my heart to envy Mrs Snitcher. Either I am getting too old for Hospital Balls, or I am developing a liver. I forgot to look at my tongue this morning. All right, Mrs Bint, you needn't wait. Do what you like about dinner. I'm too late to think about it. Chops, fillet of sole, anything.

MRS BINT If I could speak to you for a minute, miss.

DINAH Won't it keep till tonight, you masterpiece of worry?

MRS BINT No, miss, I'd like to get it off my chest.

DINAH What is it? A breakage?

MRS BINT Oh, no. There ain't nothing broken.

DINAH Don't tell me your husband has turned up again.

MRS BINT Oh, no. According to the law of averages he ain't due yet a bit.

DINAH What is it then?

MRS BINT (*taking her fence with a rush*) I should like to give a week's notice dating from today, miss.

DINAH Mrs Bint! Why? Are you ill, or something?

MRS BINT No, miss. I'm very well, thank you.

DINAH Then why do you want to leave me? All suddenly like this. Have I said anything to offend you?

MRS BINT No, it ain't anything you said——

DINAH I know I'm crotchety sometimes, but you must make allowances. In my job the stink of iodoform gets into one's hair. You have always made allowances so far. We have always agreed so well, I thought you——

MRS BINT Oh, yes, miss, I'm not denying that. A nicer lady in the way of manners you couldn't meet——

DINAH I thought you had been so happy this last year——

MRS BINT I have, miss, I have indeed. After obliging by the day for twenty years, it's been a grand life. I've always said so, and I shall always continue to say so. You've been very kind to me, and a nicer lady to work for there never was.

DINAH (*losing her poise*) Then if I'm an angel with seven haloes, what in thunder do you want to leave me for?

MRS BINT I don't *want* to. I'm driven to it. You see, everyone has something they won't stand for. Some doesn't like green, and some gets sick at the sight of snails, and——

DINAH And what, may I ask, is your breaking-point?

MRS BINT Riotous living.

DINAH (*taken aback*) What!

MRS BINT Maybe I'm narrow-minded, but that's the way I was brought up, and I can't help it any more than I can help the size of my feet. I'm a respectable woman.

DINAH (*dryly*) No one ever doubted it. And if you refer to the goings on of the artist creature in Number Forty, I can't see how riotous living up two flights of stairs can make any——

MRS BINT (*portentous with meaning*) I was referring to events nearer home, miss.

DINAH (*having stared at her; incredulous*) Do you seriously mean that you are

giving me notice because for once I've had a night out?

MRS BINT I'm sorry, miss, but I won't countenance light living.

DINAH Light living! My God! I go to bed at eleven o'clock for three hundred and sixty-four nights in the year, and because I come home with the milk on the three hundred and sixty-fifth you give me notice. It's unbelievable.

MRS BINT It isn't just the coming in late——

DINAH (*with heavy sarcasm*) No, no, of course not; it's the immorality of it all. (*Coldly*) Very well, Mrs Bint, if you want to leave me, of course, I accept your notice.

MRS BINT I'm very sorry, miss. Of course, though I say a week, that doesn't mean that I won't stay till you're suited. I wouldn't——

DINAH I shall telephone the agencies this morning, and by the end of the week I shall no doubt have someone to take your place. Until then I hope that you can steel your conscience sufficiently to condone my purple life. Will you see if the porter has brought up the morning paper.

MRS BINT I'd just like to say, miss, that I deeply regret——

DINAH Don't say anything, Mrs Bint.

MRS BINT Very good, miss. How many shall I prepare dinner for?

DINAH (*faintly surprised*) Just for myself, as usual.

MRS BINT (*faintly surprised in turn*) Oh? Very good, miss. Shall I take some breakfast to the gentleman?

DINAH (*who has resumed her breakfast, pausing*) What? What gentleman?

MRS BINT The gentleman you brought home last night.

DINAH Have you taken leave of your senses?

MRS BINT (*with a trace of smugness*) Not me, I haven't, miss.

DINAH Do you seriously mean that—that someone stayed the night here?

MRS BINT Had you forgotten him, miss?

DINAH Forgotten? I don't even remember br——I don't believe it! Who was it?

MRS BINT A complete stranger to me, miss.

DINAH When did you see him?

MRS BINT When I took his boots off. They were spoiling Mr Hector's eiderdown, and Mr Hector's that particular.

DINAH You mean he was drunk?

MRS BINT Paralytic.

DINAH (*in a small voice*) I might as well tell you, Mrs Bint, that I have no recollection at all of coming home last night. It's most extraordinary. Complete aphasia. I think I must have been overworking.

MRS BINT (*judicially*) Well, some calls it that.

DINAH Did I seem—did I seem quite normal?

MRS BINT All but.

DINAH But what?

MRS BINT A strong smell of gin and a look in your eye.

DINAH But if he was as drunk as that how did I——? Did you? Did I——?

MRS BINT The taxi-man put him to bed. You gave him a fiver.

DINAH (*reviewing it; with conviction*) I must have been drunk.

MRS BINT It was worth it. He's no bantam, your gentleman friend.

DINAH I didn't mean the money. Great heavens, what a mess. And you mean that the man is actually in there at this moment?

[*From the distance comes the crash of broken glass.*]

MRS BINT I think that's him now. (*There is the sound of movement in the passage*) If you'll excuse me, miss——

DINAH No, don't go, Mrs Bint, don't leave me.

MRS BINT But wouldn't it be better——?

DINAH Stay where you are.

[*From the passage door there enters tentatively a tall, unshaven figure clad in an expensive dressing-gown that is much too small for him, shabby trousers, brilliant bedroom slippers of the sort that are only sole and toe, and a muffler that matches the dressing-gown. He is bearing in one hand the remains of a drinking-glass.*]

[*And since for the rest of the play he is to be known as JOB, he may as well be called JOB straight away.*]

JOB Good morning.

DINAH Good morning.

JOB I'm afraid I've broken a tumbler.

DINAH Oh, that's all right. It—they're quite inexpensive.

JOB I found the dressing-gown in the wardrobe.

DINAH Yes. Yes, it's my brother's.

JOB Thank God! (*In reply to her eyebrows*) I was afraid it was your husband's.

DINAH (*unable to take her eyes off him*) I must have been *very* drunk.

JOB I look better when I'm shaved.

DINAH (*hastily*) I didn't mean that.

[*There is an awkward pause.*]

MRS BINT (*briskly, into the silence*) Bacon and egg, ham and egg, scrambled eggs, or plain boiled.

JOB Oh, thank you. Whatever is going.

[*Exit* MRS BINT.]

DINAH Won't you sit down.

JOB Thank you.

DINAH I hope you slept well?

JOB Very well indeed, thank you. A most comfortable bed. And you?

DINAH Oh, I always sleep well.

JOB A most enviable accomplishment.

DINAH (*into a pause*) Would you like to begin on the toast while Mrs Bint is getting your eggs?

JOB Good idea. Thank you.

DINAH Did you enjoy the ball?

JOB The ball?

DINAH Last night.

JOB I don't think I was there.

DINAH Oh.

JOB Should I have been?

DINAH Well, I naturally thought——(*That it was there we met, she is going to say, but recollects herself*) Most people go.

JOB I have always been deficient in the herd instinct. One of my greatest weaknesses.

DINAH Really? What are your others?

JOB Scotch, Irish, rye, and bourbon. Fair play: what are yours?

DINAH (*seeing a chance to entrench*) I—I do the oddest things.

JOB Yes, I thought swimming was a little odd.

DINAH Swimming? (*As he crunches his toast heartily*) You did say swimming?

JOB It's just as well that I didn't listen to you, or we'd both have pneumonia this morning.

DINAH Yes, perhaps you were right. (*Remembering that if she is at a disadvantage where the early history of the evening is concerned, he at least can have no recollection of the end; brightly*) It was kind of you to see me home.

JOB Oh. Oh, that was nothing. I was delighted.

DINAH (*pleased to have him doing the groping for a change*) I'm sorry you missed your last train.

JOB Train? Oh, it didn't matter. It was charming of you to put me up.

DINAH I hope you didn't have to be at business early this morning.

JOB Not at all. If I appeared in the office more than once a week there would be a sensation.

DINAH What office is that?

JOB National Relief.

DINAH (*at a loss again*) A most interesting work.

JOB You know, it is a shocking thing to say to one's hostess, but I can't remember your name.

DINAH My name is Partridge. Dinah Partridge.

JOB Thank you. A charming bird. So modest and—and plump.

DINAH (*busy deciding that she will not confess to being unaware of his name*) Expensive though.

JOB I had not contemplated it from the point of view of possession. (*Before she can consider that*) What a very lucky thing for me that your brother was not at home!

DINAH (*unguardedly*) And for me!

JOB What?

DINAH (*retrieving*) I hate making up couch beds in the small hours of the morning. And Hector wouldn't share his bed with anyone.

JOB (*savouring it*) Hector.

DINAH Hector is my brother.

JOB I can hardly blame your brother. It is a very pretty bed. Is Hector a house decorator?

DINAH No, he is a poet.

JOB That might explain it.

DINAH Explain what?

JOB The bed. What kind of poet is he, by the way? ‘And the reluctant moon slid down the sky’? That kind? Or

‘Six sticks
And why and wherefore
Corrugated, corrugated,
Because
And the cat’s whiskers’?

DINAH Do you mean that you don’t know Hector?

JOB (*anxiously*) Did I say that I did?

DINAH Oh, no. But most people seem to. He wrote *Pink Daffodils*, you know.

JOB (*politely reverent*) No, I didn’t know.

DINAH Do you care for reading?

JOB I find it useful.

[*Enter* MRS BINT *with breakfast.*]

DINAH Ah, here is your breakfast.

JOB (*staring*) And when do you expect your brother back?

DINAH Tomorrow, I hope.

JOB Ah, that looks marvellous. What a very good cook you keep.

[MRS BINT *sniffs and goes out.*]

JOB That missed the mark, I think.

DINAH (*coldly*) Probably. It was Mrs Bint who took your boots off last night.

JOB Oh, then it wasn’t you who put me to bed?

DINAH (*indignant*) Certainly not! Why should you imagine that I would?

JOB Women are apt to become officious with a helpless male body at their disposal.

DINAH The male body is no treat to me. It's my profession.

JOB (*staring*) I can't believe it! You look so——

DINAH I'm a doctor.

JOB (*genuinely shocked*) Good God!

DINAH And what is Good God about it?

JOB It makes me feel very undressed.

DINAH Does that worry you?

JOB No woman should know as much as that about any man. It isn't in nature. You probably take one look at me and decide that I am suffering from cirrhosis of the liver, hernia, and chronic constipation.

DINAH No. You are suffering from malnutrition, alcoholic poisoning, the after-effects of pneumonia and incipient phthisis.

JOB (*after the slightest pause*) You are a very good doctor. (*Resuming his poise*) And a charming hostess. I have never enjoyed a breakfast so much. I'm afraid you are not making much headway with yours.

DINAH I am not very hungry this morning. I——It is not very often I——(*The whole enormity of the situation floods over her in a rush, and to her horror she finds tears rising*)

JOB Are you crying, by any chance?

DINAH (*indignantly*) No! (*Equally indignantly*) Yes! Yes, I'm crying, and why shouldn't I? I feel awful. I think I'm going to die.

JOB For a doctor who has just made an excellent diagnosis I think that prognostication is nothing short of disgraceful.

DINAH (*who is now crying openly into her handkerchief*) Oh, don't be so pompous!

JOB If you'll tell me where the whisky is, I'll prescribe without pomp, charge, or delay.

DINAH I don't keep whisky in the flat. The stimulant habit is a very bad one.

JOB Don't tell me you are T.T. Not after last night.

DINAH Of course not. There is plenty of wine, but only for drinking with meals.

JOB And what, may I ask, do you usually do in a situation like this?

DINAH I've never been in a situation like this before.

JOB Oh, please don't cry. I'll go directly after breakfast.

DINAH (*unmollified*) Of course you will! If that were all. Mrs Bint's given notice because of you.

JOB Because of you, you mean.

DINAH Me!

JOB I didn't bring home any strange man at three in the morning. (*As this produces a fresh burst of grief*) Oh, my sweet partridge, so modest and plump and expensive, please don't take on. If it will make you any happier I shall jump out of the window.

DINAH I should only have you in hospital.

JOB If I jumped very hard I might make it the morgue.

DINAH You couldn't.

JOB Why not?

DINAH It's only the first floor. Oh, dear, I haven't cried since I left school.

JOB You seem to be doing a lot of things for the first time in twenty-four hours.

[*The telephone rings.*]

DINAH (*mopping her eyes and going to the telephone*) And now I shall have to go round the agencies, and it's practically impossible to get anyone for housework. (*Blowing her nose and lifting the receiver*) Hullo. Who?... Oh, Doctor Simmons. Good morning.... Yes, of course I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be?... What nonsense!... What utter nonsense!... Yes, certainly I am.... I never had a hangover in my life, thank you.... What?... No, just a touch of catarrh.... Yes, certainly I shall be at hospital at my usual hour. (*Slams down the receiver*) Little whippersnapper!

JOB He sounded very considerate.

DINAH (*furious*) He said I was the sweetest case of acute alcoholism he had ever seen. (*As JOB laughs; viciously*) He wasn't very kind about you either. He said he wouldn't have guessed my condition—my condition, indeed!—if it hadn't been for the pupils of my eyes, and my taking a fancy to a frightful man at a coffee stall. He had to leave me there, he says, because I wouldn't come away. He wanted to know if I was all right.

JOB And you said you had catarrh.

DINAH So that is where I met you?

JOB At Toni's. Yes. Had you forgotten?

DINAH (*luxuriating in the truth*) I haven't the faintest recollection of ever seeing

you before in my life.

JOB You mean you don't remember *any* of last night?

DINAH (*less certainly*) Is there much to remember?

JOB Well, up to the point when I passed out myself it seemed to me a pretty full evening. I thought I knew this town fairly well, but you certainly showed me round.

DINAH *I showed you round!*

JOB And for a woman who doesn't keep whisky on tap, you gave a brave display. I give you best, lady. No one has drunk me under the table in twenty years.

DINAH Eat your eggs. They're getting cold. (*She pours away her cold coffee and pours out fresh*)

JOB So I wasn't the only one who was surprised this morning.

DINAH Were you surprised?

JOB I was practically paralysed. I don't usually waken up in bedrooms like Hector's.

DINAH What did you think?

JOB Well, after I had considered the pillows, I decided that I was being rescued.

DINAH The pillows?

JOB Yes; the other one was virgin, you see. And then, after some deep research, I remembered everything from Toni's up to the fire——

DINAH Fire?

JOB The fire at Timpson's warehouse.

DINAH Were we there?

JOB We were. And I decided that, all things considered, it couldn't be rescue. Just bed and breakfast and no strings. The awkward part of it was that you didn't have a face.

DINAH A face!

JOB I could see you arguing with the fire-engine man——

DINAH What was I arguing about?

JOB You wanted to buy his boots.

DINAH What on earth for?

JOB To grow geraniums in, you said. But you didn't have any face. You didn't seem to have any face in *anything* we did together. So all I could do was to purloin a dressing-gown and do some investigating.

DINAH (*still with the same dream-like detachment*) And did you recognise me?

JOB I don't say I would have spotted you at a football match, but as between you and Mrs Whatsername it was a cinch.

DINAH (*considering it*) It must have been overwork.

JOB What must?

DINAH My performance last night.

JOB Or the Spring, shall we say?

DINAH Nonsense. I've been through a lot of Springs.

JOB I suppose Spring to a doctor is merely a matter of purgatives. Primrose in the hedgerows and treacle and brimstone in the home. Your poor children! Never a picnic outside a given radius from a public convenience.

DINAH (*stung*) I take it that your progeny, if you have any, greet the flowering year by flitting fairy-like from bud to bud.

JOB I haven't any, but that is how they would carry on—approximately.

DINAH How charming. I hope you won't carry on too much when you have to pay.

JOB Pay what?

DINAH Bills for shoe-leather and fines for uprooting blue-bells.

JOB You have a mundane mind. It distresses me. Last night you tilted at every windmill, you threw your bonnet over and ran to catch it on the other side, you were young and gay and——

DINAH And drunk.

JOB And now you sit there insisting that two and two make four.

DINAH (*coldly*) I find it the most convenient reckoning.

JOB Convenience! Expedience! Are these the gods of your idolatry! You who were so——

DINAH Have some mustard. That bacon is very fat. And if I tell you that my middle name is Martha it may save a lot of misunderstanding in the future.

JOB The future?

DINAH (*flashing out*) For the rest of this abominable breakfast. (*In a sudden burst; glad to find a scapegoat*) Have you ever *considered* the creature?

JOB (*startled*) Who?

DINAH *Mary!* The smug, selfish, good-for-nothing! Being soulful in the parlour

while Martha sweated in the kitchen.

JOB Dinah, you shock me. What is a dish of curried mutton compared with an idea?

DINAH Nothing; if your stomach's full. Have you ever thought that Martha was struggling with supper for about twenty while Mary was sitting with her hands folded about an Idea? And don't tell me this world is built on ideas, because it isn't. It's built on Martha. If it weren't for Martha we'd still be living in caves.

JOB But Mary is older than the caves, my dear, much older. When the first mud-puppy crawled out of the primeval slime, that was Mary moved by a great idea.

DINAH Not at all. It was Martha deciding that higher up the hill was better for the children.

JOB I suppose that Socrates drank the hemlock merely to get away from his wife's tongue——

DINAH I wouldn't wonder——

JOB ——and Columbus, what did Columbus sail for? Curiosity?

DINAH Columbus sailed for ten per cent of the gross receipts, and he refused to leave harbour till the contract was water-tight.

JOB (*smiling at her*) Were you born like that, or has living with a Mary reduced you to Marthadom?

DINAH Living with one?

JOB I take it that Hector, being a poet, is a Mary.

DINAH You don't know much about poets, do you? Poets are the most practical people on earth.

JOB How nice for you. Do they scramble their own eggs when they come to supper?

DINAH Oh, we don't have poets here.

JOB Don't talk as if they were bugs.

DINAH Poets don't like each other, you know.

JOB Oh. Do doctors?

DINAH (*considering it*) Yes. We disapprove of each other, but we are quite friendly.

JOB What made you become a doctor? (*His tone says: 'You of all people'*)

DINAH I wasn't made to.

JOB Oh. Did you have a ‘call’?

DINAH No; I had a quite normal belief that I could do something a great deal better than it had been done before.

JOB But why doctoring?

DINAH That seemed the department where stupidity was most rampant.

JOB Had you forgotten Parliament?

DINAH No. But if I must deal with wind I would rather deal with it in the stomach. It’s curable there.

JOB The Goddess of Common Sense.

DINAH (*amending*) Good sense. It’s not very common. What is your profession, by the way?

JOB I’m a window-box weeder.

DINAH I merely asked.

JOB In the summer, that is. In winter I make the holes in crumpets.

DINAH I suggest that next winter you do it in Switzerland. (*Rising*) And now I must go, or Clamp will be coming to look for me.

JOB Oh, don’t go yet. Please. It won’t matter if you are late for once. I’m quite sure you have never been as much as thirty seconds late since first you went to that hospital.

DINAH (*beginning to collect the various articles she has brought in with her and thrown on the sofa; hat, coat, gloves, and bag*) No, I haven’t.

JOB Then it is high time you were. No one appreciates an automaton. I’m sorry I was fresh about my profession——

DINAH You had every right to be. What you do is no proper concern of mine.

JOB It wasn’t meant to be snubbing. One gets into the habit of flippancy.

DINAH And anyhow, I have no time to listen to the story of anyone’s life at this hour of the morning.

JOB Perhaps not. But there is no need for any mystery about me. I was an architect.

DINAH (*relaxing slightly to interest*) Why ‘was’?

JOB Because to be an architect one must build things. And it is a long time since I built anything.

DINAH Were you a good architect?

JOB Yes.

DINAH What did you build?

JOB Houses mostly. And I did a good theatre once. And then there was a competition—for a county hall. Something good for itself, and good for the fellow that did it. I put aside everything for that. I was cocksure of getting it. Well, I didn't. And on the day I heard I had lost, my wife left me for another man. I don't blame her; for months I hadn't even noticed that she was around. I drank solidly for five weeks; then I had pneumonia, as you so shrewdly observed. And now I pick up a living by drawing straight lines on paper for other men.

DINAH I see. You didn't have to tell me, you know.

JOB Yes, I had to. I'm sorry, in a way. I think you're that woman in every hundred who doesn't like a failure. You hate failure in yourself—that's why you cried with rage this morning—and——

DINAH It wasn't with rage!

JOB —you despise it in others. However, last night changed my whole life for me. I am beginning new this morning. No more coffee-stall dinners at Toni's, no more drawing straight lines for other men. You have opened new prospects to me.

DINAH What prospects?

JOB Blackmail, of course.

DINAH I should have thought of that and poisoned your breakfast.

JOB It's bad to have bodies around.

DINAH Not when you can sign the death certificate.

JOB Even dead, I would take a lot of explaining to Hector.

DINAH (*at the window*) Yes, the car is there. I must go. Clamp mustn't come in and find you here.

JOB Can't Mrs Whatsername tell your chauffeur to wait a little?

DINAH Good gracious, Clamp isn't my chauffeur. She's the head masseuse at hospital. She happens to live upstairs, and so she gives me a lift to hospital in the mornings.

JOB Gives you a lift! You mean the nurse has a car and the doctor walks? You're not much of a blackmail prospect, are you?

DINAH Oh, we have a car, but Hector has it in the country. And don't ever let Clamp hear you call her a nurse. I'll leave you to finish your breakfast. You'd better begin all over again and have it in peace. (*Catching sight of herself in a mirror*)

Heavens, what a face! (*Begins some hasty repairs*)

JOB Tell me: there's just one thing: if we ever happen to meet in the street, do we know each other?

DINAH (*without turning*) Why not? You sold me that terrier bitch I gave my cousin last year.

JOB Oh, did I? That's nice. I can stop and ask about the dog, can't I?

DINAH In moderation. You'll find cigarettes in the box. You won't stay too long, will you? Mrs Bint is very upset about last night, and—well——

JOB I shall be gone in half an hour. I'm sorry I couldn't meet Hector. Do you like Hector, by the way?

DINAH Like him? Of course I like him!

JOB Why of course?

DINAH He's my brother, isn't he?

JOB That's the oddest reason for liking anyone that I ever——

DINAH (*snatching up her gloves*) You know, Clamp is the salt of the earth, but I shudder to think what she would make of the present situation if she were to walk in and find this domestic scene——

CLAMP (*off*) Dinah!

DINAH Merciful heaven, there she is!

[*Enter JEMIMA CLAMP.*

[*CLAMP is square, solid, and uncompromising, and her formidable muscles are rapidly being smoothed over by comfortable fat. She has a level eye and wildly unbecoming clothes.*

[*She is carrying a square cardboard box, and she comes into the room as an habitu e does, without looking round; aware only that DINAH is there, and talking to her without looking at her, meanwhile depositing her parcel on the side table between the window and the door.*]

CLAMP If you don't hurry up, Dinah, you're going to create a record by being late! I've brought you some of the eggs that my farm woman——(*As she turns from the table to the room again she sees JOB*) Oh, pardon me!

DINAH Oh, Clamp dear, I'm sorry to keep you, but things are in a muddle this morning. I don't think you have met my cousin, have you?

CLAMP (*shaking hands*) Oh, are you George?

DINAH No; no, this is Job.

CLAMP (*accepting it*) I never knew you had a cousin called Job.

DINAH He's just home from Siam.

CLAMP (*to JOB*) Oh. Teak, I suppose.

JOB No, twins. Statistics, you know.

CLAMP Oh, yes. The incidence of the phenomenon.

JOB Eh? Oh, yes. Quite.

CLAMP That's very interesting. And what is the incidence, if you don't mind my asking?

JOB Point nought six per thousand.

CLAMP As low as that! Why do they call them Siamese, then?

JOB Because they began there. The climate, you know.

CLAMP (*intelligently, but with a shade of doubt*) Oh, I see.

DINAH I'm ready, Clamp.

CLAMP (*making no move*) Well, now that you're home, perhaps Dinah will step out a little more, and stop spending her evenings with Beaumont and company.

JOB Who is Beaumont?

CLAMP Aren't you a doctor?

JOB God forbid.

CLAMP But, those twins and things?

JOB Oh, that's Civil Service.

CLAMP Is it, indeed. (*That is comment, not question*) Yes, I suppose it is. Just counting things. Imagine being paid for just counting. Something you do with beads in the kindergarten. (*Hastily*) Not that I don't mean you were probably very good at it. Present company, and all that.

DINAH Clamp, my dear——

JOB You haven't told me about this Beaumont she spends her leisure with.

CLAMP What she usually spends her leisure with is Hector's socks, but——

DINAH Oh, Clamp dear, don't be ridiculous. You know Hector would never dream of wearing anything that was darned!

CLAMP I was speaking in parables. She's much too clever, really, for Beaumont

JOB But who——

CLAMP (*in patient explanation*) We——ll, if you're a doctor, and you can't decide whether your patient has malaria, D.T.s, or paralysis, you say: 'Forgive me for a moment', and you jink into the office and look up Beaumont.

JOB I see.

CLAMP Doctor's lifebelt, that's Beaumont. Other folks' too, if they only knew it. And when you've decided between the mumps and the malaria, there's the prescription all ready for you to write down when you get back to the surgery, with the proper air of: 'Now, let me see. We *might* try——' (*In the course of her tale her eye has fallen on* DINAH. *She stops abruptly, stares, and resumes in a tone of accusing ferocity. To* DINAH) *I told* you not to wear that frock!

DINAH What frock?

CLAMP Last night. Half a dozen miserable yards of tulle to cover your body on a February evening—and now look at you!

DINAH What's the matter with me?

CLAMP A nose like an electric bulb, and eyes like a dribbling spaniel. Have you gargled?

DINAH I haven't got a cold, you fool, I've only been sneezing.

CLAMP Have you gargled?

DINAH (*losing her temper*) No! I gargled yesterday, and I'll gargle tomorrow, but today I was rushed, and getting to my job on time is much more important than swilling a little permanganate round my throat.

CLAMP And so the whole of hospital has to be strewn with germs so that you can clock in at——

DINAH I can gargle in hospital, can't I? Come along.

CLAMP And meanwhile, I suppose, I get enough germs in my car to put my department out of action for a fortnight——

DINAH Come along!

CLAMP Doctor Partridge, you gargle or walk.

DINAH (*evidently recognising the tone*) Oh, blast you! (*She flings down her bag and gloves again and dashes angrily through the passage door*)

CLAMP (*in her normal voice, to* JOB) It was a pretty frock, wasn't it? (*She moves over to inspect the breakfast-table*)

JOB Lovely.

CLAMP (*helping herself to a scone and buttering it*) Me, I've never been able to wear a frill without bringing ham to people's minds, but I like to see other women look nice. Women don't have so much of a time.

JOB Don't they?

CLAMP No, they don't, take it from me. I think, bar God, no one hears so many sad tales from women as I do.

JOB But tales aren't evidence, are they?

CLAMP Oh, I'm dealing with the evidence while they're telling the tale.

JOB Ah, well, perhaps it's retribution. It's thanks to a woman we were all thrown out of the Garden.

CLAMP What authority are you quoting?

JOB The Bible, of course.

CLAMP According to the Bible, we were thrown out because a man couldn't say no to something he wanted. You hadn't finished your breakfast. Go on. Don't mind me.

JOB (*amused*) Would you like some more coffee too? (*As well as her scone, he means*)

CLAMP I shouldn't mind a spot. (*She pours the slops into DINAH'S cup, and uses the slop-basin as cup*) What was the matter with Dinah's eggs?

JOB I think she's feeling a little after-the-ball, you know.

CLAMP (*with a snort*) H'm! She should go dancing oftener, then. Take it in homeopathic doses. Now that you have stopped counting twins for a bit, perhaps — (*Struck by a horrible thought*) Don't tell me you are a devoted husband with a large family?

JOB No, I'm neither a husband nor a father. But why should Dinah need to be rescued by me? Aren't there any followers?

CLAMP Weren't you at the ball?

JOB Well, then. What's to hinder her going out every night of her life?

CLAMP Nothing. Nothing. Except the biggest obstacle of all.

JOB What is that?

CLAMP She likes staying at home. Can you imagine it? A woman who can look the way she did last night 'liking to stay at home'! If I could look like that I'd hire a float to convey me round town for a couple of hours every night, like a holy image, so that no one would miss having a good look.

JOB A woman who likes staying at home is so rare, I think that she should be encouraged.

CLAMP Encouraged! Huh! Encouraged to take a nerve tonic and get herself some vitality. (*Reaching over and dabbing some marmalade on the buttered scone she is eating*) It's all that little blood-sucker, Hector!

JOB So you don't like Hector?

CLAMP (*pausing to stare at him*) Does anyone like Hector?

JOB Dinah seems to.

CLAMP Oh, Dinah is daffy about him. 'My baby brother', and all that. Baby brother! Man-sized boa-constrictor.

JOB Tell me, have you read *Pink Daffodils*?

CLAMP I have not. Neither has anyone else.

JOB Is it not a success, then?

CLAMP Oh, yes, people buy it. But that's as far as they go. I think maybe Mrs Transom-Sills has read it.

JOB Mrs——Who is she?

CLAMP She is Hector's steady.

JOB Oh. And is there a Mr Transom-Sills?

CLAMP Not since the Grisons avalanche in '36.

JOB Rich widow?

CLAMP Very rich and quite a widow.

JOB Then why doesn't Hector marry her?

CLAMP Hector doesn't like being bothered, if you know what I mean.

JOB *Do* I know what you mean?

CLAMP I mean, Hector has been wrapped in cotton-wool so long that some real fresh air on his skin would probably kill him. If he married Mrs Transom-Sills he couldn't run home to Dinah any more, every time someone kicked him in the pants.

JOB Doesn't the widow keep a good brand of embrocation?

CLAMP If she does it's for her own skin. She's a sensible woman. That's what's wrong. Hector doesn't want a sensible woman, he wants an unselfish fool like Dinah. And they don't grow on bushes. Don't think me personal, will you, but is that Hector's dressing-gown you're wearing?

JOB It is.

CLAMP Cast-off? I mean, did he give it to you?

JOB Oh, no, I found it in his room.

CLAMP Then take a tip from a friend and don't be wearing it when he comes home tomorrow, or there'll be another row for Dinah to smoothe over. If he thought someone had worn it, he'd probably have prickly heat.

JOB Right now it's giving me leprosy.

CLAMP What's wrong with your own one?

JOB I haven't got one. Not here, I mean. I saw Dinah home last night, you see, and it was so late that she put me up.

CLAMP I suppose that meant Hector's pyjamas as well.

JOB Not—not exactly.

CLAMP And what does exactly mean?

JOB I sleep in my skin. Siam, you know.

CLAMP Why blame Siam? And while we're on the subject, I don't believe that statistics story. What did you really do in Siam?

JOB Drank.

CLAMP And what else?

JOB *And* drank.

CLAMP The statistics on that must be staggering.

JOB You have a genius for the right word.

CLAMP It seems a long way to go just to drink. Halfway to China, isn't it?

JOB If one goes that way.

CLAMP Is there another way?

JOB One could go west, I suppose.

CLAMP (*dismissing it*) Oh, well, who wants to go to China anyhow?

JOB (*murmuring*) Standard Oil, maybe.

CLAMP (*summing up the Chinese empire*) Floods, and rice, and people flying kites.

JOB I think sailing a paper boat among the clouds is an endearing pastime.

CLAMP They must fall over quite a bit.

JOB I would rather fall over because I had my eyes on the sky than because I lost my balance kicking a muddy ball.

CLAMP I expect the ground feels the same. And the tetanus.

JOB Is *your* middle name Martha?

CLAMP No, Kedge. Jemima Kedge Clamp. You don't have to mind. I stopped minding, myself, about twenty-five.

JOB What cured you?

CLAMP I found I could change it. Legally, you know. After that I stopped worrying. It's wonderful what you can put up with when you don't have to. Look at sport. If a man was condemned to have his feet tied to skids and be shoved off a snow mountain for hours every day, so that he was all black and blue, he'd yell his head off with rage. But if he does it of his own accord that's all right. That's skiing, that is. Do you ski?

JOB No, I curl.

CLAMP Curl what? Oh, yes; pushing stones about on ice. That's a sissy sort of amusement for a man your size.

JOB (*stung*) What ought I to do? Balance elephants on the tip of my tongue? What is Hector's game, by the way?

CLAMP Tag. How long is it since you saw Hector?

JOB Oh, long time.

CLAMP I shouldn't say you had much in common.

JOB No. No, we haven't. Not even an acquaintance.

CLAMP That's no great loss.

JOB Are Hector's acquaintances not what is called desirable?

CLAMP Only the way house-agents use the word. You know: This desirable residence. Lovely outside, and crawling with beetles inside.

[DINAH *comes hurrying back, to find her boon companion and her colleague happily having breakfast together.*]

DINAH *Well!* I thought you were in a hurry.

CLAMP Not me. I'm never in a hurry to get to hospital.

DINAH Oh, come along, Clamp.

CLAMP What you will never learn, Dinah, is that neither of us is in the least necessary to that place.

DINAH Stop talking nonsense and eating other people's food, and——

CLAMP The higher up you get in your job, the less you count. If we were both

struck by lightning this minute, it wouldn't cause a ripple in the day's work.

DINAH Speak for yourself.

CLAMP It's the rank and file that keep the world going, not geniuses like you and me.

DINAH You're just talking so that you can eat another scone. For Heaven's sake, will you pull yourself together and let us go. I'll get Mrs Bint to make you a whole baking to yourself if you'll only——

CLAMP When?

DINAH Tomorrow.

CLAMP I may be dead tomorrow.

DINAH This evening. Any time you like.

CLAMP (*preparing to make a move*) Well, that's a good offer. I suppose we might as well get along anyhow. We have to go sometime. (*To JOB; referring to a remnant of scone*) Do you want that half? No? In that case, I'll take it with me. Dinah can drive, and I'll eat. I suppose, not being in the profession, you've never known the glory of putting your patients on a diet that you have no intention of using yourself. Well, I'll see you soon again, I expect. Perhaps you and Dinah will come upstairs and have a drink with me after dinner tonight?

DINAH Oh, Job is not staying.

CLAMP (*to JOB*) But you're in town, aren't you?

JOB Only to see my tailor and my dentist, like a little gentleman.

CLAMP Oh, well, you'll be along to see Hector when he comes back tomorrow, I expect, so I won't say good-bye.

[DINAH and JOB turn to each other; but before either can say a word of farewell there is the sound of the outer door of the flat being closed with a bang.]

CLAMP Mrs Bint doesn't seem her sunny self this morning.

DINAH (*faintly*) I think someone's come in.

[*There are the sounds of a man's voice in converse with MRS BINT.*]

CLAMP It sounds like our future Poet Laureate.

DINAH (*in a wild wail*) But it can't be!

CLAMP (*arrested by the tone*) Why not?

DINAH He's not coming back till tomorrow.

CLAMP Perhaps there weren't enough peeresses at that place. He always gets a temperature if there aren't enough peeresses.

[Enter HECTOR.]

[When HECTOR was three people stopped his perambulator in the street to gloat over his beauty. At seventeen he looked very much as he looked in his perambulator: cherubic and charming. At twenty-six he looks merely an elderly baby; his contours blurred a little by incipient adipose tissue, his pink-and-white complexion gone a little yellow, his hair growing already thin. His manner varies from pompousness when he is not at ease to a naïve trustfulness which is the last remnant of his boyish 'charm'. Speaking generally, he is of the type that most women want to 'shield' from life, and most men want to kick into the middle of next week.]

DINAH Hector! What is it? Are you ill?

HECTOR (*staring; in a cold drawl*) No, I am not ill—yet. Would someone explain what that man is doing in my dressing-gown?

CURTAIN

ACT II

Scene and time are continuous with the previous Act.

HECTOR What is that man doing in my dressing-gown?

DINAH Oh, Hector, this is the younger of the two Butchard boys.

HECTOR And since when have you entertained the tradesmen to breakfast?

DINAH Butchard, darling; with a D.... Aunt Cicely's boys.

HECTOR Aunt Cicely's name was Bartholomew.

DINAH Only after she married the bishop. The carpet manufacturer was Butchard. This is Job, the younger of the two small boys who used to play with us at Bude, you remember.

JOB How are you, Hector? I can hardly blame you for not remembering me.

HECTOR Your hair used to be red.

DINAH No, darling, Alan was the red one.

HECTOR But I remember most distinctly——

DINAH You were only five last time you saw him, so you can't remember very much.

JOB And I have done nothing to make myself memorable, I'm afraid. I know all about you, of course.

HECTOR I hope you don't boast about me. I hate being boasted about by people I don't know.

JOB On the contrary; I keep you dark.

HECTOR You keep me dark?

JOB One looks very shabby against a brilliant relation. I can't even live up to your bath-slippers, my dear Hector. As for your bed, I have never felt so embarrassed as I did in its embrace. During our brief relationship it was one well-bred and silent protest.

DINAH (*hastily*) I refused to let Job go out again last night. He took me home from the hospital affair, and it was very late and bitterly cold.

HECTOR I can see it was very late. You are not looking your best this morning, Dinah.

CLAMP (*instantly*) You don't look too chippy yourself, Hector. Temperature, I

shouldn't wonder.

DINAH Are you ill, Hector? Is that why you cut your visit short?

HECTOR I cut it short because I was bored. Bored. Bored.

JOB Cousin Hector, you thrill me. I never met anyone who was bored with such passion that he fled from it at seven in the morning.

HECTOR (*beginning to take off his coat*) You have obviously never stayed in a house with Shatty Pixton. She came down last night, and as soon as I heard that she was coming I said to Tina: 'If that woman is to be here I shall go.' Tina thought I was merely being amusing. But she will know differently by now. Or will in about an hour, when she wakens up. It is too bad of Tina. She knows very well what I think of Shatty and all her poisonous crowd. It surprises me that she would even have them under her roof. They are not in the same world as Tina.

CLAMP (*for JOB'S benefit*) Tina is the Duchess of Frisby; spelt Featherstoneborough.

[*Enter* MRS BINT.]

MRS BINT What will Mr Hector have for breakfast?

HECTOR Coffee. Nothing but coffee.

DINAH But Hector, you must have a proper breakfast if you left Friston so early. Have you had anything at all?

HECTOR I had early-morning tea. Even that choked me.

DINAH Mrs Bint will make you some fresh scones. They won't take a moment.

HECTOR Will you stop fussing, Dinah. I'll have coffee. A great deal of coffee. And then I shall go to bed. (*To JOB*) You *have* finished with my bed?

JOB Oh, quite, quite. I am afraid the room is very untidy. I shall go and clear up.

HECTOR Mrs Bint will do that.

[*Exit* MRS BINT *to the kitchen, taking with her the remains of breakfast.*]

JOB But I'm still wearing your dressing-gown. I had better——

HECTOR You may wear it a little longer.

JOB Thank you.

HECTOR It will conduce to a cosy atmosphere while you explain yourself.

JOB Explain myself?

HECTOR You are my long-lost cousin, and you have been dancing with Dinah. That

leaves some gaps to be filled, doesn't it?

DINAH You won't forget that you have that dentist's appointment at ten, will you, Job?

JOB Oh, that is for tomorrow.

DINAH (*staggered by his refusal of her lifeline*) Then it is the tailor today.

JOB No, I have no appointment this morning.

DINAH (*dismayed*) But you said most distinctly——

HECTOR Don't be so possessive, Dinah. I know that you saw him first, but he is equally related to me. Things which are equal to one another are equal to the same thing. I forget whether that is an axiom or a theorem.

JOB It's equally embarrassing either way.

HECTOR You and Miss Clamp run along to your hospital, and leave us to look after ourselves.

CLAMP He has known me for four years, and he still calls me Miss Clamp. It's by way of protest.

HECTOR Protest against what?

CLAMP The existence of women like me.

DINAH I must speak to Mrs Bint. Clamp, be an angel and (*indicating the telephone*) tell them I shall be a little late.

[*Exit DINAH to kitchen.*]

JOB (*as CLAMP dials a number; to HECTOR, who is considering him*) Am I coming back to you?

HECTOR Your name used to be John, surely?

JOB Yes; it still is. Job is merely the way I used to say my name when I was small, and my version stuck.

CLAMP (*at telephone*) A message for the matron. Tell her that Doctor Partridge will not be——Hullo? Who are you, may I ask?... Oh. Are you hanging round that telephone board again, Doctor Simmons? (*JOB'S ears prick at the name*) Let me tell you, that girl is engaged to a detective sergeant, six foot two in his socks.

HECTOR (*who has taken a letter from the mantelpiece and is opening it*) The contrast between the private amusements of the medical profession and their more public moments has always struck me as being highly entertaining.

JOB (*with one ear on the telephone conversation*) Nothing to the Church.

CLAMP (*at the telephone*) Of course she's coming! She's just going to be a little late.

JOB I had an uncle who used to make breakfast a hell for everyone, an hour before he preached a moving sermon on patience and brotherly love.

HECTOR What uncle was that?

CLAMP (*at the telephone*) Sober? Don't be silly. Did you ever know her when she wasn't sober?

JOB Oh, a brother of my father's.

CLAMP (*at the telephone*) *What!*

JOB (*hastily; talking for the sake of talking, while he watches CLAMP'S face as she listens to SIMMONS'S story*) He had a living in Devon. Quite a character, he was. Wrote some books, I believe. Volumes of sermons, or something like that. They like to write something so that they can appear as the frontispiece. Ever noticed how like actors they look?

HECTOR Who?

JOB The clergy. Fundamentally, I suppose, it is the same thing. It's just a toss-up whether the inspiration is God or the prompt corner.

HECTOR You're not an actor, then?

JOB Good God, no. Do I look like one?

HECTOR It had crossed my mind. Which of the Dominions do you come from?

JOB If not an actor, then certainly a remittance man.

HECTOR Not at all. Only, long-lost cousins usually come from the bounds of Empire.

JOB I'm from Siam.

HECTOR You needn't be defiant about it. I have learned to accept the improbable with equanimity.

JOB I'm an architect.

HECTOR Oh. Bungalows in Bangkok.

JOB Something like that.

CLAMP (*contemplating JOB with a new eye, and slowly replacing the receiver*) Do you know a coffee-bar called Toni's—in Bangkok?

JOB Very well. That is where the woman was murdered.

CLAMP What woman?

JOB Oh, some woman who knew too much. She was put out of the way to prevent her talking.

CLAMP All women don't talk.

JOB No?

CLAMP No!

[Enter DINAH; and from the expression on her face the interview with MRS BINT would appear to have been satisfactory.]

DINAH Clamp, don't wait for me. There is no need for you to be late too. Now that Hector has brought back the car I can drive myself. (To JOB) And perhaps I can give Job a lift into town. (To CLAMP) Did you get the hospital?

CLAMP Yes. I talked to Doctor Simmons.

DINAH (*arrested*) Doctor Simmons!

CLAMP (*smoothly*) He's hanging round that switchboard girl, you know.

DINAH (*doubtfully*) Yes. Yes; did he say—did he say if there was anything urgent?

CLAMP He said a lot, but nothing of medical interest. His mind seems to be still full of last night.

DINAH (*viciously*) If his stomach is still full of last night he could hardly be talking sense.

CLAMP (*with an air of taking no sides*) It seems to have been a very wet night altogether.

HECTOR I've always understood that that was the aim of a Hospital Ball; that and charity. It must be so comforting when one is being sick in hospital to know that the utensil was paid for by the sickness of the staff.

CLAMP One of my dreams, Hector, is to have you as a patient. There's a new gadget in the south clinic that I never use without thinking of you. (*Taking her leave*) Well, I hope to know you better, Mr—Mr——

DINAH Butchard.

CLAMP Mr Butchard. You seem to be an enterprising young man. (*With the faintest flick of an eyelash in the direction of* HECTOR) It's a breed that seems to be growing scarce these days.

DINAH Wait, Clamp, I'll come along with you after all, I think.

CLAMP (*airily*) Don't let me hurry you, Dinah. Now you've got the car——

DINAH (*in a last appeal*) Job, can't we give you a lift to town?

JOB Thank you, Dinah, but now that Hector has arrived so providentially I look forward to making his acquaintance.

DINAH But Hector is going to bed——

HECTOR Will you very kindly not interfere, Dinah. If Job and I choose to have breakfast together——

DINAH But he's had his breakfast.

HECTOR Then he can smoke while I have mine——

DINAH You know you hate people smoking while you are eating.

HECTOR I wish you wouldn't be so possessive, Dinah darling.

DINAH I'm not possessive. I'm just being sensible. If you want to go to bed, what use is there in Job's staying? And if you go to bed there won't be anyone to drive him into town, and——

HECTOR There is a public service of omnibuses, I believe. And a fleet of taxi-cabs at the end of a telephone wire. Really, Dinah! Run along to your hospital, my dear girl, and leave your find with me. It's my turn now.

DINAH Oh, very well. Perhaps it is best that way, because you wouldn't have much chance of seeing each other otherwise. Job is leaving town tomorrow, to visit some other cousins. In Orkney.

HECTOR Does anyone live in Orkney? I thought it was one of those islands that are always evacuating themselves on to the mainland.

JOB (*since something seems to be expected of him*) At the last census the population was fifty-three thousand and seven.

CLAMP What was the seven for?

JOB Accuracy.

CLAMP I thought perhaps it was for luck.

HECTOR But fifty thousand people can't *all* gather gulls' eggs. What do they do?

JOB Well, my cousins burn seaweed.

HECTOR Bonfires. How nice!

JOB No; they smell. In fact, they smell so badly that I don't think I can bring myself to go at all.

DINAH Job! Think—think how you will disappoint the little one with the stammer.

JOB But I always catch a stammer if I stay with one for any length of time. No, on

second thoughts, between the smell and the stammer, I don't think I shall go after all.

CLAMP (*ironic*) I shouldn't. You might find the climate trying—after Siam.

[*Exit* CLAMP.]

DINAH Nonsense. It's bracing and——(*Noticing that CLAMP has gone*) Oh, I must go. Clamp——(*Her thought is obviously: I can't allow CLAMP to get away*) I shall be so late. Oh, Job——

JOB Yes?

HECTOR Did you get the new notepaper, Dinah?

DINAH Yes, it's coming tomorrow.

HECTOR The *pale* grey, I hope.

DINAH Yes, the pale grey.

HECTOR And what did the man say about the radiator?

DINAH He said it would be quite simple, but rather expensive.

HECTOR If it is a simple affair, how can it be expensive? The thing is a contradiction in terms. If it is not going to be any trouble to do, how——

DINAH I don't *know*, Hector darling. That is what the engineer said. I must go.

HECTOR But didn't you——

DINAH Yes, we discussed it for ages, back and fore and up and down, and that's the answer. I must go. I have a lot to say to you, Job, but I can't say it now.

JOB Save it up till you have more time.

DINAH Yes, I'll save it up.

[*Exit* DINAH.]

JOB What a charming woman.

HECTOR Who?

JOB Dinah.

HECTOR Do you think so? Most people find her a little *farouche*. She seems extremely distrait this morning. Late nights don't agree with her. Or perhaps it is you. Do you have an odd effect on people?

JOB Not when I'm sober.

HECTOR Some people are definitely allergic. I can tell when Shatty Pixton has come into a room without turning my head.

JOB What is so repellent about Miss Pixton?

HECTOR (*after a swift review of* MISS PIXTON'S *repellencies*) She gives imitations.

JOB (*visualising the imitation*) Oh! (*The tone says: 'That is surely not all?'*)

HECTOR She also reviews books.

JOB Distressing; but not necessarily damning.

HECTOR And she has the most evil tongue in London.

JOB That certainly is a distinction. But a great poet like you should be above things like that, surely? Were they so very bad?

HECTOR Was what bad?

JOB The imitation, the review, and the gossip.

HECTOR (*a little staggered, but mollified by the 'great poet'; with exquisite pomp*) There are some things no man can forgive.

JOB (*full of honey*) Quite, quite.

HECTOR (*liking the honey*) I suppose you don't know a game called Labels?

JOB No. No, that has not been one of my amusements.

HECTOR Each person writes a label—preferably in rhyme—and the rest tie it, metaphorically speaking, to the appropriate person. Well, Deenie Stystable—Lord Manning's sister, you know—told me that they were playing it one day at Wiskett—do you know Wiskett? A lovely place looking out on the Vale of Aylesbury—and Shatty's label read:

'A frightful little blister
Who lives on his sister'.

JOB And did they guess correctly?

HECTOR Of course. Everyone knows that Shatty hates me like poison. (*Since* JOB *offers no immediate comment*) I didn't think that in the least funny.

JOB (*in a voice that would make anyone but* HECTOR *stand from under*) No; I don't think it is funny either.

HECTOR It is intolerable that my devotion to Dinah should be so—so——

[*Enter* MRS BINT *with coffee and scones.*]

HECTOR (*eyeing the covered scone dish with anticipation*) What I should like, Mrs Bint, would be some toast melba. I have no appetite, but I feel the need of some sustenance.

MRS BINT I made you a few scones, sir. I thought maybe——

HECTOR Oh, no. No food.

MRS BINT Very little, dainty ones, they are. Wouldn't stick in the throat of a fly.

HECTOR Oh, very well. I don't want to bother you to make toast if you have already gone to the trouble of baking.

MRS BINT Of course, if you're really pining, as you might say, for that sawdust-tasting stuff, it won't take a minute to——

HECTOR (*hastily*) No, no. Leave the scones. I'll make do with them.

MRS BINT (*with a baleful glance at JOB*) I'll just tidy up your room, sir.

HECTOR (*to JOB*) Would you like more coffee?

JOB Yes, I should. Very much. Mrs Bint makes excellent coffee.

HECTOR Another cup for Mr Butchard, please.

[*Exit MRS BINT to the kitchen.*]

HECTOR I wish her brother wasn't a lawyer.

JOB Mrs Bint's!

HECTOR No, Shatty's. What she says in print is always vetted by her brother, and what she says in the course of a game is not actionable.

JOB No libel on a Label.

HECTOR No.

[*Enter MRS BINT. As well as the extra cup, she is carrying a string-bag, half the size of a potato sack, filled with letters. She puts the cup on the table and deposits the sack on the floor at HECTOR'S feet without remark. It is apparently a routine proceeding. She then retires into the bedroom corridor with her duster.*]

JOB (*having stared at the letter-bag*) Forgive my bluntness, my dear Hector, but do you run a tipster's business on the side?

HECTOR Oh, no. That is just the weekly mail.

JOB My congratulations. I had no idea that anyone's poetry could raise such public enthusiasm.

HECTOR Poetry? You don't imagine that they write to me because of my poems, do you?

JOB Have you a side-line?

HECTOR I have a Page. Don't you read me in the *Daily Clarion* on Wednesdays?

JOB I don't see much of the Press these days. In Siam, you see, they only took *The Times* at the Club. And the Prince got only the *Bystander*.

HECTOR The Prince?

JOB The man I was building the palace for. What do you write about in your page?

HECTOR Well, if I see a woman with a funny hat, I talk about that. And they like God, in moderation. And royalty. And fashionable parties. And people arriving at Southampton. Who was the Prince that you——

JOB (*indicating the sack*) But what is all that about? Have you appealed for something?

HECTOR Oh, no. They just write and tell me how their asparagus is coming on, and ask advice about little Jimmy's tonsils, and whether they'd better tell Ida how Basil is carrying on in the evenings when she is working. Ever since the Reformation the British have felt the lack of a confessional, and now they have one. From the Press point of view, it's the greatest discovery since the invention of printing.

JOB And do you answer them?

HECTOR My secretary does.

JOB (*with a glance round*) Your secretary?

HECTOR The *Clarion* send a girl down from the office. They intended me to work at the office originally, but I declined. A desk between the Gardening and the Fashions——! She did her nails all day, the Fashions. Milson-Bleeson at the *Telegram* has a room to himself, and a private lavatory. And Bines, at the *Revally*, has a whole floor. But of course he's daily. By the time I've had another year at it I shall have a better room than Milson-Bleeson's. Perhaps you could design it for me. I didn't know you had been doing important work in Siam.

JOB Oh, interesting, but not so important. Every house a royalty lives in is called a palace in the East. Usually it's just a villa of forty or fifty rooms. Actually the one I did for the Prince had sixty-four, but that's a bit above the average. What kind of room had you in mind?

HECTOR Well, Milson-Bleeson's looks like something out of an Embassy. I should like mine to look like something out of the White House.

JOB I see. Simple and distinguished. The ideal background.

HECTOR (*impervious to irony*) Yes. Of course, I might succeed Milson-Bleeson on the *Telegram*.

JOB Is the gentleman slipping?

HECTOR Yes. His heart is always breaking. His heart breaks at least four times a page. Even for the British public that is a little too sentimental. Dinah was dreadfully sentimental too.

JOB Dinah?

HECTOR When she did my letters. She——

JOB You mean Dinah worked for the paper once?

HECTOR No, no; not exactly. But when I first refused to work in that office of theirs the *Clarion* were very peeved, and said that I should have to find my own secretary.

JOB (*in a dangerous voice*) And couldn't you find a secretary?

HECTOR (*blissfully unaware*) Oh, Dinah loved doing it. It gave some interest to her evenings. But she was always running amok and wanting to investigate. The result of a scientific training on a naturally sentimental mind.

JOB What did she want to investigate?

HECTOR Oh, if a man wrote that he hadn't the money for a pair of boots, perhaps. She could never see that a man who hadn't the price of a pair of boots could be of no interest to the *Clarion*. We run the page for circulation purposes, not as a private charity.

JOB We?

HECTOR (*conceding*) They, then. (*With a return to pomp at the hint of criticism*) Though I hope that as long as I am on the paper I am loyal to it. (*With a return to earth*) Even if I go to the *Telegram*, of course, I should insist on having that room of Milson-Bleeson's redecorated. You are not going back to Siam, are you?

JOB Oh, no. I came home to do a country house for a rich old woman who died before I got here. Leaving me with the plans of the most beautiful house I ever did, and no one to build it.

HECTOR Perhaps I could get Deenie Stystable to build one. Is it large?

JOB Oh, no. Only eleven rooms.

HECTOR Five per cent of eleven rooms isn't much.

JOB Five per cent?

HECTOR My commission. But, still. You could line it with priceless woods, couldn't you?

JOB Actually I think I shall build it for myself. It is much too beautiful to waste on any client.

HECTOR Where are you living just now? At a hotel?

JOB No. At rooms I had in my student days. Squalid, but full of sentiment, and good enough till I find a house I like.

HECTOR A flat, you mean.

JOB Oh, no. A house. There is no cachet in a flat. An architect—in fact, any man who works in the arts—needs a setting. A background, a designed proportion, vistas, detail, a beauty made to measure. Not just a—just a cell in a piece of honeycomb. Forgive me; I left my cigarettes in my coat pocket.

[Exit JOB to the bedroom corridor.]

[HECTOR looks dubiously round the flat.

[At the door JOB PASSES MRS BINT, carrying sheets and duster under one arm, and in the other hand his boots.

[HECTOR puts out his hand and absent-mindedly takes a letter from the sack, but his thoughts are obviously still with this new idea of himself as the inhabitant of a piece of honeycomb.]

MRS BINT (pausing) Your bed's ready, Mr Hector. Will you be requiring lunch, sir?

HECTOR I should like some kidneys about two o'clock, I think.

MRS BINT It's an awkward day for kidneys. You wouldn't like a nice ripe steak, maybe?

HECTOR No, I should like kidneys. Grilled. If our regular butcher cannot supply them, go on telephoning till you find someone who can.

MRS BINT Very good, sir. And how many will there be for lunch?

HECTOR Oh, I don't think——(His eye comes to rest on JOB'S boots: cracked, shapeless, and indescribably muddy. Unbelieving, he straightens himself to have a better view) Where, in heaven's name, did you get these?

MRS BINT They belong to the gentleman, sir.

HECTOR Am I to understand that these are the gentleman's dancing-pumps?

MRS BINT Oh, he didn't have evening things, sir.

HECTOR You mean he went to the ball in those?

MRS BINT I couldn't say, sir. That's what he came home in.

HECTOR (*taking the boots distastefully into a nearer view*) Great heavens, they're patched!

MRS BINT (*grimly*) Not enough.

HECTOR (*recollecting himself*) Thank you, Mrs Bint. (*As she is going to the door*) What time did Mr Butchard arrive yesterday?

MRS BINT Well—well, I couldn't exactly say, sir.

HECTOR (*coldly*) Why couldn't you?

MRS BINT (*anxious for the well-loved black sheep*) I don't usually wait up for Miss Dinah.

HECTOR Wait up?

MRS BINT When she's out late.

HECTOR Do you mean that it wasn't until this morning that you——(*Pulling himself up once more*) Oh, very well, Mrs Bint. Thank you.

[*Exit MRS BINT, and JOB comes back with his cigarettes.*]

HECTOR (*regarding JOB with a new eye, suspicion seething in him; conversationally*) I could have given you cigarettes.

JOB Thank you, but it's so long since I smoked a good cigarette that I should probably be sick.

HECTOR Don't they keep good tobacco?

JOB They?

HECTOR In Siam.

JOB Oh, in my part of the country men didn't smoke. It's considered womanish. So I used to get secret supplies from an old planter in the village who smoked nothing but the ten-a-penny brands.

HECTOR What did he plant?

JOB (*hastily rejecting both rubber and tea, just in case*) French beans.

HECTOR In Siam!

JOB (*firmly*) Yes. They make a kind of chutney out of them. You can get it at Fortnum's, I believe.

HECTOR (*threatening*) I must ask for it.

JOB (*happily*) Yes, do.

HECTOR Did you enjoy the ball?

JOB What ball?

HECTOR Last night.

JOB Oh, the hospital affair. I didn't go to it.

HECTOR But you took my sister home from it!

JOB (*aware of the change of atmosphere, but not of its cause*) Yes. That was all.

HECTOR Do you mind telling me how you met Dinah in the first place?

JOB I just discovered her. In a reference book. It was my first evening in London, you see, and I wanted some company, but there were so many Partridges in the telephone book, and I couldn't ring them all up because I had only tuppence——

HECTOR Why had you only tuppence?

JOB The rest of my money was French. I got off the boat at Marseilles, and walked home across France. And the banks were shut, and my landlady thought French notes much too pretty to be real money. And then I remembered that at least one of you was a public character. (*Watching with delight* HECTOR'S *reaction*) So I looked up Dinah in a public library.

HECTOR Dinah!

JOB Yes, of course. You can always find a doctor. It told me all about her qualifications——quite a clever girl, Dinah, isn't she?——but not her private address. So I rang up the hospital where she was said to work, and got my money's worth.

HECTOR Your money's worth?

JOB Value for my last tuppence. They said Doctor Partridge was there at that moment, and they were having a dance, and wouldn't I come along. So along I went, frayed trousers, cracked boots, empty pockets, and all. But I needn't have worried. They're used to down-and-outs in hospital. There's a little sister there with chestnut hair that made me long to have typhoid.

HECTOR Why typhoid?

JOB I've always understood that that required the most constant nursing. And when Dinah had finished being the belle of the ball——

HECTOR Dinah!

JOB Certainly. Don't you take her to dances? (*Meaning: 'Don't you know that she is always the belle of a ball?'*)

HECTOR (*stiffly*) I don't dance, and Dinah does not care to. She goes to hospital balls only because people would consider her impolite if she didn't.

JOB (*heartily*) People certainly considered her beautiful when she did.

HECTOR (*having decided that anyone who invites suspicion so freely and refutes it so impudently must be genuine, however odd his story; testily*) My dear Job! Dinah is a good creature, and I am very fond of her, but she has never had more than the family share of good-looks. (*He turns to his letter*)

JOB Ah, but when a woman is happy—Have you never seen a bride with a face like a turnip looking like Helen of Troy?

HECTOR (*without heat*) I think brides are revolting. (*Indicating the sack of letters*) Have you?

JOB (*picking a letter automatically*) She was happy last night. (*Remembering it for the first time*) She put her empty cup down on the counter and smiled at me.

HECTOR What counter?

JOB Oh, they had a sort of canteen—cafeteria——(*Reading*) ‘Darling Hector’——Oh, I beg your pardon. (*Offering him the letter*)

HECTOR (*not taking it*) Why?

JOB It seems to be a personal letter.

HECTOR Oh, no. Just someone who wants my photograph, probably.

JOB (*staring*) What for? I mean, what do they do with it?

HECTOR (*suggesting, indifferently*) Frame it, keep it under their pillows——(*With a shrug which says: ‘How should I know?’*) Read it.

JOB (*reading*) ‘I want you to know that I have put your photograph on a little altar I have made.’ (*That was one you didn’t think of,* HECTOR) ‘Whenever I want to be alone I go there and look at it and feel better.’ There are eight pages. Do you think God likes this understudying of yours, Hector?

HECTOR The *Clarion* likes it; that is all that concerns me. (*As JOB’S silence might imply disapproval*) Can I help it if women are silly about me?

JOB (*thoughtfully; dropping the letter back and taking another*) No; I suppose if it wasn’t you it would be some Pekingese or other. (*Referring to HECTOR’S letter*) What have you got?

HECTOR (*dropping his letter back and taking another*) A free meal. I must try the place sometime.

JOB A meal for a mention?

HECTOR Yes.

JOB (*having looked at his letter*) Could you mention Mouldem corsets, do you

think?

HECTOR What do they offer?

JOB Their Mr Francis would like to show you over their model factory in the country. Ten acres of gardens and the prettiest girls in five counties.

HECTOR Do they think I have nothing to do with my time but inspect factories?

JOB I suppose poetry is a full-time job. (*He drops the letter and takes another*)

HECTOR Being a successful poet is. One has obligations. To one's publisher, if not to anyone else. No one buys the work of poets who sit at home. By the way, is your Prince Whatshisname any relation of the King of Siam?

JOB The son of a first cousin.

HECTOR (*charmed*) Indeed. Educated in England?

JOB No.

HECTOR How unfortunate.

JOB In Japan.

HECTOR *How* unfortunate. Does he come to this country at all?

JOB No, he doesn't think it is safe.

HECTOR Safe! England! Japanese propaganda.

JOB No, it's his own idea. He saw the place on a map, and thinks it is much too small. It might be swept into the sea at any moment. (*Referring to the letter in his hand*) Someone is coming to the office on Friday morning to knock your block off.

HECTOR Why?

JOB (*studying the letter*) You have been putting ideas into his wife's head.

HECTOR What! What ideas?

JOB Making the best of herself. Apparently you have revealed the existence of the *belle laide*. (*Reading*) 'My wife was born plain, and I married her plain, and washing her hair and gaping'—no, 'gawping'—'in a mirror isn't going to do her nor me no good.'

HECTOR Medieval. Quite medieval. You know, the average Briton would have purdah tomorrow if he could.

JOB The average Briton has a very hard fist.

HECTOR Oh, I don't go to the office on Fridays. Besides, our doorman is the ex-heavyweight champion of the Coldstream Guards.

JOB What a come-down.

HECTOR Being a doorman?

JOB No. Being nursemaid to a set of scribblers.

HECTOR (*with dignity*) Most scribblers tip very generously. By the way, (*feeling for his wallet*) I can change those French notes for you if you give them to me.

JOB (*happily*) Oh, Pierre changed them, thank you.

HECTOR Who is Pierre?

JOB The barman at the Nutmeg Tree.

HECTOR And what is the Nutmeg Tree?

JOB Oh, one of the low dives that Dinah and I stopped off at on our way home last night.

HECTOR (*jealous again*) Not much wonder she is looking tired this morning. You really should be more considerate, Job. Dinah is a working woman, not a person of leisure like you, and her evening's amusement must be governed by the fact that she has duty waiting for her in the morning. At an early hour in the morning.

JOB Reprehensible of me. But there were no rags to warn me.

HECTOR Rags?

JOB Rags after twelve. How was I to know she was Cinderella? You should have seen how lovely she looked by three o'clock.

HECTOR (*tartly*) She looks anything but lovely this morning. And I expect her patients will find her anything but intelligent. (*Referring to the letter in his hand*) Why, do you imagine, do people think that I can buy them grand pianos?

JOB I don't know. Perhaps because your face is both kind and musical. I suppose (*offering his cigarette-case*) I need not offer you one of my cigarettes?

HECTOR (*discarding his letter*) Thank you, I have my cigarettes made for me. (*Catching sight of something inside the lid of JOB'S case*) What is that?

JOB What?

HECTOR The photograph.

JOB Oh, that? That is my house. The one I was going to build for the old millionairess.

HECTOR But it is built!

JOB No. That is just a model. Making that model has been my sole amusement of late. (*There is a note of sincerity in this last*)

HECTOR (*taking the case and looking at the photograph*) But it is beautiful!

JOB Your surprise is hardly tactful, Hector.

HECTOR One of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. You are a genius, Job.

JOB As near as makes no difference.

HECTOR (*gloating*) Beautiful!

JOB (*watching him*) I'm glad you like it. When it is finished I shall ask you to come and stay. Which room will you have?

HECTOR But you seriously mean to build this beautiful thing for yourself? You can't!

JOB Why can't I? Wouldn't you like to have a cousin who had a famous house? A famous house that everyone envied, that the glossier magazines took photographs of, that people fought to come and stay in?

HECTOR (*having looked a little longer*) Clare would like this.

JOB Who is Clare?

HECTOR A great friend of mine.

JOB I thought you were going to wish it on to Deenie Some-one-or-other?

HECTOR Oh, Deenie Stystable. Oh, I thought then that it was just another house. I didn't know then that you could build. Do you realise that a genius for domestic architecture is one of the rarest of human qualities? Why, there hasn't been a first-rate man for two hundred years! And here you turn up in my flat without warning, and turn out to be my cousin. With a piece of sheer beauty stuck in the lid of your cigarette-case. Why did you photograph it, by the way?

JOB I had to pa——(*He was about to say 'paw'n'*) to part with the model. When I left Siam. I had a lot of bulky luggage. So I photographed it before it went. (*Hastily*) Before I went, I mean.

HECTOR Do you mind if I show this to Clare?

JOB (*with an effort appearing suitably bored*) I still don't know who Clare is.

HECTOR Clare Transom-Sills. A charming woman. Perhaps you remember her husband. He wrote books on mountaineering.

JOB Oh, a widow.

HECTOR What's wrong with that?

JOB I'm in favour of suttee.

HECTOR Don't be tiresome, Job. Clare has all the money in the world. She would give her right arm to possess a house like this. At the moment she rents a manor, all beams and inglenooks. She is at the olde-worlde stage of her development. But any

day now she is due to graduate to the eighteenth century—and this was made for her.

JOB (*mildly*) No, it was made for me.

HECTOR I thought you said it was commissioned by an old woman?

JOB Yes. But she died providentially. I should probably have stained my honour by palming something else off on her. That is my house; the best thing I shall ever do, very likely; and it is going to stay in the family.

HECTOR I wish I had the money to buy it.

JOB Never mind. I shall ask you to stay. Often. But why haven't you the money? The *Clarion* is no pauper; nor, if all reports are true, no piker.

HECTOR Oh, no, they pay well enough, I suppose. But that is all I have. Poetry is not a livelihood. I share the cost of this flat with Dinah, of course. (*Realising from JOB'S glance round that that is obviously not much; testily*) And I have heavy social expenses that Dinah hasn't.

JOB (*smoothly*) Quite, quite. (*Taking back the cigarette-case, laughing*) Well, I should marry your Mrs Whatsername and make her give it to you as a wedding-present.

HECTOR Wait a minute. Do you mean that you would be willing to build it for me?

JOB (*looking very sober and surprised*) My dear man, I was only joking.

HECTOR Yes, I know. But supposing that I had the money, would you be willing to let me build it?

JOB (*still serious and surprised*) But you don't seriously want a house like that, do you? I thought you were very contented here.

HECTOR Oh, I stay here for Dinah's sake. But there is a great deal in what you said about the setting for an artist. I feel that I haven't taken enough care in—in presenting myself, as it were. It is time that I returned hospitality; (*hastily*) elsewhere than at restaurants, I mean. And now that my last poem is a best seller, the public will have to be considered. They will have visualised a——

JOB But a house like that could only be built out of town. Would that be convenient for Dinah?

HECTOR Oh, Dinah would stay on here, of course. She has her work.

JOB Wouldn't she be lonely?

HECTOR Oh, at first, perhaps. But she would get over it. Make friends of her own.

JOB (*the dangerous undercurrent in his voice again*) Hasn't she any of her

own?

HECTOR Well, not intimates. (*In extenuation*) We have always been very devoted to each other, you see. We find each other sufficient. Our respective friends didn't mix very well; and so we don't have them here.

JOB I see. Well, I'm flattered that you like my work so much, Hector, but I still want it more than you do. After all, you've only just had the notion, and I have lived with it.

HECTOR (*explaining what JOB has known for some time*) But once I want a thing, I have no happiness until I get it. I've been like that ever since I was a baby. They had to give me a bear once, I cried so hard for it. Five days I cried.

JOB (*shaking his head*) I even know where I'm going to build the thing. I know just the hillock, with the sheltering wood behind, a slope to the stream, and a fifty-mile view. I'm not going to put any second-best building in that spot!

HECTOR Of course not! Put it there for me! Look, Job——

JOB What! Give up my chosen spot——

HECTOR Look, Job; let us go round and show Clare the photograph. That doesn't commit you to anything.

JOB (*with a great air of reluctance*) But that would be very odd. She'll think I'm trying to sell her a house.

HECTOR No, she won't. Just leave it to me. We'll show it to her casually. Offer her your cigarettes. By the way, I must give you some of mine. You can't offer her those. She might think you were a pauper.

JOB Would that make a difference?

HECTOR Well, she's a darling, but she is apt to gauge an artist by his fees. You go and have a shave——

JOB But what about my clothes? After tramping across France they don't look plutocratic. (*With an air of dissuading a child from a dangerous toy*) Look here, Hector, you don't really want that house, it's just a whim——

HECTOR You can explain about France. It's the kind of thing she expects artists to do. And I *never* have whims. (*The suggestion has put the finishing touch to his desire for the house*) What I want, I want.

JOB All right, but you'll have to lend me a clean handkerchief. And remember this: I never at any time said I would build that house for you.

HECTOR No, no. We won't think about that just now. I just want Clare to see——

[*Enter* DINAH, *leaning on the arm of* MRS BINT, *one foot stockingless and bandaged.*]

HECTOR Dinah!

DINAH I sprained my foot on the hospital steps.

JOB (*going forward to help her to a couch*) My poor Dinah!

HECTOR (*in the same breath, not moving*) Dinah, how careless of you.

[DINAH *shows by her glance at* HECTOR *that she is aware of the difference of their greeting.*]

MRS BINT I always said that troubles never come singly. Easy does it, easy does it.

HECTOR (*coldly*) What other troubles have you, Mrs Bint?

MRS BINT You'd be surprised! (*Settling* DINAH) There now.

DINAH Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. I'm sorry to be so silly.

MRS BINT I'll get you a nice cup of tea. There's nothing like tea, be it broken bone or broken heart, I always say.

DINAH No, no tea, thank you, Mrs Bint. I'm all right.

HECTOR Of course she's all right!

MRS BINT You're sure you wouldn't like just a——

DINAH No, nothing, thank you, nothing.

MRS BINT Well, if you happen to think of anything, there's always the bell.

[*Exit* MRS BINT.]

DINAH Perhaps Hector would get me my smelling-salts.

HECTOR Smelling salts! Since when have you owned smelling-salts?

DINAH Every woman owns smelling-salts.

HECTOR Not since 1900.

DINAH You'll find them in the left-hand little drawer of my table.

HECTOR (*going*) It's extraordinary the things one doesn't know about those nearest and dearest to one.

[*Exit* HECTOR *to bedroom corridor.*]

JOB Miss Clamp made a very neat bandage.

DINAH (*coldly*) Naturally. Now will you please tell me why you stayed when I made it easy for you to go?

JOB I told you. I wanted to meet Hector. Miss Clamp had painted such an arresting picture of him.

DINAH That is nonsense.

JOB On the contrary, it is the most literal truth.

DINAH Then it is only because Hector is a celebrity. You wanted to make his acquaintance so that you could make capital out of it.

JOB No one could make capital out of Hector.

DINAH Do you know what I think? I think you are just an adventurer.

JOB (*considering it*) Adventurer. Odd how that gay and courageous word has become an epithet of scorn. A group name for confidence men, three-card tricksters

DINAH Will you stop chattering and stick to the point!

JOB (*reproachful*) Chattering! Oh, Dinah!

DINAH To be quite frank and vulgar, will you tell me what your little game is?

JOB I'm playing Perseus.

DINAH What?

JOB The only difference between Perseus and me is that he had material reward for his time and trouble, but I, like a genuine artist, will be repaid only by pride in my work.

DINAH Will you stop talking in riddles, and tell me what you are doing here!

JOB (*with an air of patiently explaining the obvious*) Getting acquainted with the Gorgon.

[*Enter* HECTOR.]

HECTOR I can't find any smelling-salts.

DINAH Oh! I'm sorry, Hector; perhaps I put them in the other drawer.

HECTOR I've looked in the other drawer.

DINAH If they are not in the left-hand drawer, they are certainly in the right. A little green bottle.

HECTOR There is no little green bottle. I don't believe you have any smelling-salts at all.

DINAH Perhaps Job can find them.

HECTOR Oh, very well, I'll have another look.

DINAH Am I to understand that you are trying to break up my home?

JOB Oh, no. Just (*he finds a word*) fumigate it.

DINAH Your impudence leaves me breathless. But, why? What good is it going to do you to make trouble between Hector and me?

JOB Good heavens, I am not going to make trouble! I am just going to marry him off.

DINAH Marry! (*Recovering a little from the shock*) Hector will never marry. Have you picked a bride for him too?

JOB Yes.

DINAH A princess of Tartary, I suppose.

JOB No. Mrs Transom-Sills.

DINAH (*with a monosyllable of mockery*) Ha! Clare has been trying to marry Hector for the last five years.

JOB She never had the right sort of wedding-present before.

DINAH What sort has she now?

JOB A frame for Hector.

DINAH A frame? I don't know what you are talking about, and I still don't see what you are going to get out of all this.

JOB I told you. Artistic satisfaction.

DINAH Artistic blackmail, more likely. Well, you might blackmail Hector, if you can get anything on him, but you can't blackmail me. *Or* Clare Transom-Sills.

JOB (*agreeing*) No. I've always understood that men were the greater moral cowards. But I'm not in the blackmail business. My reward will be complete when I see the Gorgon turning some other house to stone.

DINAH But why, why? What business is it of yours? How dare you come, a stranger, and presume to interfere with our lives?

JOB If you saw a spider on someone's back, you would pick it off, wouldn't you?

DINAH Hector isn't a spider. He's a nice harmless—limpet. (*With a trace of smugness*) And if you think you are rescuing me from Hector by marrying him to Clare, you don't know any of us. As long as I am available, Clare will come second with Hector.

JOB (*contemplatively*) I hadn't thought of that.

[*Enter* HECTOR.]

HECTOR The only green bottle in all your possessions, Dinah, contains, if I am to believe the label, disinfectant. Would you care for that?

DINAH Don't bother any more, Hector. Thank you for looking. I'll get it myself in a moment.

JOB Let me look for it for you.

DINAH No, of course not.

JOB Please; I should like to. I may as well get used to doing things for you.

HECTOR Get used to it? Do you anticipate making a habit of it?

JOB Well, more or less. You see——Well, I'd better break it to you, Hector, that Dinah and I are thinking of getting married.

DINAH }

} WHAT!

HECTOR }

CURTAIN

ACT III

Scene and time are continuous with the previous Act.

JOB —Dinah and I are thinking of getting married.

DINAH }

} WHAT!

HECTOR }

JOB (*sweetly*) You don't mind, do you, Dinah? I know we said we would keep it secret for a little. But after all, Hector is your brother. He would have to know sooner or later.

DINAH (*almost speechless*) You—*monster!*

HECTOR (*in a wild wail*) But you can't marry Dinah!

JOB Why can't I?

HECTOR (*incoherent with shock*) You don't know her. She doesn't know you. She has never considered getting married. She isn't the marrying kind.

DINAH You can save your breath, Hector, because——

JOB But we love each other! I think she is beautiful, and she thinks me a model of all the manly virtues, and we can't imagine a life spent apart from each other, so the obvious thing is to get married.

DINAH I am *not*——

HECTOR But you don't know anything about each other!

DINAH I tell you, I am not going to——

JOB If you mean about my snoring and Dinah putting cold cream on her face and things like that, then of course we don't. But as to her fitness to be my wife, I have no doubt: she dresses well, has a charming voice, good teeth, and a pleasant expression—when she is not looking like a shrew. And as for my fitness, (*apparently struck by a thought*) I hope, Hector, you don't think I am unable to keep your sister in the style to which she has been accustomed?

HECTOR No, no. You have a fortune at your finger-tips. But you must see——

DINAH A fortune! Since when has he had a fortune!

HECTOR —the whole idea is ridiculous.

DINAH If he talks about a fortune, don't believe him. He hasn't a penny in his pocket. Not a penny!

JOB (*amiably*) Well, you would have that last drink. Darling, I have given Hector ample evidence of my power to provide for you. Not chinchilla, of course. But anything up to the mink level can be considered standard equipment.

HECTOR If Dinah wants mink coats, I can give them to her. She does not have to get married for that.

JOB (*as one shocked*) Of course not. Such a thought would never cross my mind. Have you a mink coat, Dinah?

DINAH No. (*Hastily*) I never wanted one. I can buy my own furs. Yes, and jewels, and perfume, and silly thin stockings, and everything else that a woman is supposed to want. I have never needed a man to *provide* for me.

JOB But you *would* like to find a little package by your plate in the morning, every now and then.

HECTOR (*bewildered, furious, and jealous*) Dinah is always very grumpy in the mornings. (*As an afterthought*) She doesn't care for packages.

DINAH (*stung by the 'grumpy'*) How do you know?

HECTOR And I consider it an underhand business to invade a man's house under the guise of friendliness and to bribe his sister to marry——

DINAH Bribe! *Bribe!* For Heaven's sake, Hector. The man couldn't give me a Woolworth's thimble.

HECTOR Then why do you want to marry him?

DINAH I don't want to! I'm not going to! If you would listen for half a moment I could tell you. I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man in the world.

JOB (*reproachful*) Oh, Dinah, *what* a cliché!

DINAH I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man in the world and I was the world's prize nymphomaniac.

JOB That's better. Oh, come, Dinah! Just because I let the cat out of the bag when we had arranged to keep it a secret, you needn't——

HECTOR And *why* was it to be kept secret?

DINAH Listen, Hector. Just listen quietly and get this into your head. There isn't any 'it'. There isn't any secret. There isn't anything between us at all!

HECTOR My dear Dinah, a man doesn't just invent a story like that, without foundation.

DINAH I tell you, the word marriage was never even mentioned!

JOB (*surprised*) Was that necessary?

DINAH (*staggered by his impudence*) What!

JOB (*vox humana*) Dinah, did last night mean nothing to you?

HECTOR Dinah, I insist on knowing what all this is about.

DINAH Are you going to take this man's word instead of mine?

HECTOR Job is our cousin, and a gentleman, and a first-rate artist, and I hardly think that he——

DINAH How do you know that he is a first-rate artist?

HECTOR I have seen his work, and as an artist I can appreciate it.

DINAH You have seen his work? (*To JOB*) I thought you said you were an architect.

JOB I am. I am going to build Hector's new house for him.

DINAH (*largo rallentando*) Hector's new house!

HECTOR (*hastily*) No, no. That is only a suggestion so far. Job has designed one of the most beautiful houses imaginable, and I—I naturally admired it.

DINAH I didn't know that you wanted to build a house, Hector.

HECTOR That is all in the air at the moment, and quite irrelevant. What we are discussing——

DINAH But where would you get the money?

JOB If Mrs Transom-Sills likes it enough when I show her the photograph——

DINAH *Clare!*

JOB Oh, I beg your pardon. Perhaps, strictly speaking, that is not my business.

DINAH Hector, you can't do that!

HECTOR Do what?

DINAH Take a present like that from Clare.

JOB Oh, of course not. It would only be a loan.

DINAH (*looking doubtfully at HECTOR*) A loan?

HECTOR (*full of virtue*) Naturally.

DINAH But you could never——(*'Pay it back', she is going to say*)

JOB (*neatly timing his next blow*) You would *like* Hector to have a house in the country, wouldn't you?

DINAH In the country!

JOB He could have you for week-ends. You're not one of those doctors that are called out on Sundays, are you? The country is lovely for week-ends.

DINAH You seem to have arranged a lot of my life this morning, Hector.

HECTOR Darling, all that is entirely in the air.

DINAH In Clare's pocket, you mean.

HECTOR It was tactless of Job to mention it.

DINAH Very.

HECTOR (*growing heated as she grows cool*) And I don't like your attitude, Dinah. All that I am proposing is to build a house. A normal and quite praiseworthy proceeding which hardly calls for comment from a woman who has entangled herself overnight. I am still waiting for an explanation of this extraordinary scene.

DINAH (*surveying him*) You sound just like a schoolmaster. The kind they burlesque in music-halls. But I'm not your pupil, you know, Hector. *Nor* your stooge. I am Dinah Partridge; free, white, and twenty-one; with a profession, a bank book, and a telephone number. If I entangled myself every night of my life, and had a different scene with a different lover every morning, why should I explain to anyone?

HECTOR You would have to explain sooner or later.

DINAH To whom?

HECTOR The Medical Council, I presume. In the meantime, I, as your brother, seek an explanation, not because I am interested in your moral welfare, but because I am anxious about your mental health.

DINAH That's a pretty roundabout way of saying you think I've taken leave of my senses. Have you inquired about Job's mental health? How do you know Siam wasn't an asylum? Ask him what evidence he has that he has ever been in Siam?

HECTOR He has ample evidence in his pocket that he has a sane and constructive mind.

DINAH Nonsense. The maddest lunatic I ever knew was a mathematical genius. You never saw Job till this morning, you know nothing about him, and yet you take his word in preference to your own sister's! Why?

HECTOR Because you know him better than I do, and you found no signs of lunacy in him until he had blurted out your secret.

JOB (*before she can recover; very sweet and apologetic*) I am terribly sorry I said anything, Dinah. You must forgive me. I was so pleased, so happy, I didn't stop to think.

DINAH (*yelling at him*) Will you hold your tongue, you mischief-making devil!

HECTOR (*shocked*) Dinah! I think you really *have* taken leave of your senses.

DINAH (*controlled again*) I shall in about two minutes. (*Regarding them both with disfavour*) What a pair for a good decent woman to be landed with!

JOB I think perhaps it would make things better if I were to go.

DINAH You mean you'll go away?

JOB Until you send for me.

DINAH (*doubtful that she understands*) Go out of this flat, I mean?

JOB Certainly.

DINAH (*relief giving way to suspicion*) And *now* what have you in your mind?

JOB Oh, Dinah, darling. You must know that the dearest wish of my heart is for your happiness.

DINAH I don't think you have a heart.

JOB (*all sweet reason*) If you have decided that last night was just an evening's amusement, then I am the last man to force you to an interest that seems to you unacceptable in the sober light of morning.

DINAH You are rapidly forcing me to an interest in murder.

JOB I'm glad you thought of that first, and not suicide.

DINAH Why?

JOB It completes my picture of you. When you find lions in the path you don't run away, you beat them over the head. You really would be a lovely woman to marry.

DINAH (*coldly*) Would you like Mrs Bint to help you pack.

JOB Thank you, but I always tie my own ties. (*Pausing at the corridor entrance*) Perhaps after all, it was a mistake to try to stand in your shoes, Hector.

HECTOR Why, may I ask?

JOB They are four sizes too small.

[*Exit JOB.*]

HECTOR (*looking after him, contemplatively*) I don't think I altogether like that remark. I wish the fellow wasn't a genius.

DINAH (*with detached interest*) Have you ever knocked anyone down, Hector?

HECTOR Certainly not. Physical force proves nothing.

DINAH It improves the occasion, now and then.

HECTOR I find you altogether beyond my understanding this morning, Dinah. I only hope that you are not sickening for something.

DINAH That would be an inconvenience, wouldn't it? Tell me, Hector, are you serious about building a house in the country?

HECTOR (*made brave by her apparent mildness*) If I can raise a loan.

DINAH I don't know Clare Transom-Sills very well, but I am quite sure she wouldn't give you a sum like that without—security. What security are you going to offer her?

HECTOR The house itself will be that.

DINAH (*with no apparent emotion*) You're not thinking of marrying Clare, are you?

HECTOR No, certainly not; certainly not. (*It is obvious that that is exactly what he is thinking of doing*)

DINAH (*after a pause; reverting to the matter of the house*) Then if you fail to pay and she claims the house as security, what would you do?

HECTOR Oh, I shall always keep this place as a *piéd à terre*. Somewhere to change for the theatre, and so forth. (*He is beginning to feel happier*) The country is all very well—green grass and God's clean air and all that—but getting into tails at half-past five for dinner in town at seven-thirty is quite unthinkable. Besides, there is you, Dinah darling. You may have been a little foolish last night—Job is undoubtedly attractive, and it is probably some time since you met someone who didn't smell of iodine—but I am devoted to you, you know that. I can't remember a time when you weren't the foundation of my existence.

DINAH No, I suppose you can't. You have singularly little faith in the foundation.

HECTOR Faith?

DINAH I am terrified of what Mrs Benson will say.

HECTOR And who is Mrs Benson?

DINAH The woman on the fourth floor who lost her jewellery. If she happens to say that I took it, you'll no doubt ask me to hand it back.

HECTOR That is being entirely un-adult, and you know it. What possible reason would Mrs Benson have for suspecting you of stealing her jewellery!

DINAH Just as much reason as Job had for saying that I was going to marry him.

HECTOR Oh, come, Dinah. I don't want to be hard on you, but you must certainly have—have led him on.

DINAH (*springing up to protest, but controlling herself*) For a poet, your vocabulary can be singularly vulgar.

HECTOR It would be in the worst of taste to deal poetically with a vulgar matter. I am not blaming you at all, Dinah. I know you work hard and see few people outside the medical profession, which has neither wit nor manners. And Job is, as I said, a personable creature with no little charm. I find it quite forgivable that you should lose your head a little——

DINAH Are you going to condone my lapse, Hector?

HECTOR Flippancy does not suit you, my dear.

DINAH With practice it will.

HECTOR (*ignoring her*) Now that you have made it clear to Job that the whole thing was a misunderstanding, nothing more need be said by anyone. (*His relief is almost comic*)

DINAH (*absent-mindedly picking a letter from the string-bag*) Did we upset you much, Hector?

HECTOR (*missing the quality of her solicitude*) I admit you upset me very gravely. I have always trusted and admired you, Dinah. Extravagantly. The pinnacle I keep you on may be too high——

DINAH I didn't know you kept me anywhere.

HECTOR ——but your mind has always seemed the perfect complement to mine.

DINAH Hector! You won't let emotion run away with you? This is the first time you have ever mentioned my mind.

HECTOR And I hope you will not let its grace and sobriety be infected by a cheap flippancy. A detestable quality in women.

DINAH What quality in women do you find most desirable, Hector? Apart from an appreciation of your poetry, I mean.

HECTOR (*losing his poise again*) You are impossible this morning, Dinah. I hardly recognise you.

DINAH That isn't surprising.

HECTOR Here am I, doing my best to smooth over a disgraceful scene—the kind of scene I never imagined I should see acted in my own home. A scene, moreover, if not instigated by you, then directly traceable to your conduct last night. And you treat my magnanimity with a levity I consider deplorable.

DINAH Can you spare one of your neckties, do you think?

HECTOR (*coming to earth at once*) Any man who can beg for a necktie is dead to shame.

DINAH It isn't a man; it's a girl. She wants to sleep on it.

HECTOR What!

DINAH To put it under her pillow, you know. Like bride's cake. (*Dropping her letter back*) I think a slipper would do more good. Applied in the right place.

HECTOR (*who rather likes having his neckties slept on*) As a doctor you should know that physical punishment does nothing but harm.

DINAH (*with a fleeting glance at him*) I am beginning to wonder. (*Having a thought*) And you know, it occurs to me for the first time that we are for ever preaching the evils of frustration, we declare and believe that frustration is the source of all mental and most bodily ills, and yet we do nothing about the greatest frustration of all: the person who is prevented from applying the slipper where it seems to be needed. Think of it, Hector. The thwartings, the ingrowing resentment, the vain longings, the inflamed imagination busy with beautiful massacres——

HECTOR You had better write a book about it.

DINAH I think I shall. That will make us both authors.

HECTOR Why do you say it like that?

DINAH Like what?

HECTOR There is a——a resentment in your attitude this morning, Dinah, that is new and disconcerting to someone who loves you. I am not aware of having done anything to merit resentment.

DINAH (*lightly*) It's what you haven't done, Hector, what you haven't done.

HECTOR (*quickly*) So you do resent something!

DINAH Not resent; deplore, shall we say?

HECTOR (*stiffly*) And what do you deplore?

DINAH Never in twenty years have you picked a spider off my back.

HECTOR You didn't drink anything *odd* last night, did you, Dinah? At those 'low dives' that Job said you visited. You know, in America during Prohibition people went mad, and blind even, through drinking bad——

DINAH (*dryly*) Don't worry, Hector. I'm seeing very clearly this morning. And once Job is out of the house there will be no fear of my sanity.

HECTOR I think you are treating him rather badly, you know, Dinah.

DINAH (*smoothly*) You think I should marry him?

HECTOR (*as if pricked by a pin*) Certainly not! (*Recovering*) That is all settled. But since the misunderstanding must have been largely your fault, it is—unbecoming to treat the victim of it as if he were a criminal.

DINAH I know Job a great deal better than you do——

HECTOR I am sure you do.

DINAH (*with a glance for his tone*)—and I think that boiling oil would be much too good for him.

HECTOR I repeat, you had nothing against Job until he gave away the fact that you had a—flirtation with him last night. You are being vindictive and childish, and quite unlike the Dinah I know.

DINAH What Dinah do you know?

HECTOR Job is an artist, with all an artist's sensitivity; a genius, perhaps; and——

DINAH Talking of genius, if he builds houses, how could you have seen his work?

HECTOR He has a photograph; the photograph of a model.

DINAH How do you know it isn't the model of a police-station in Alberta?

HECTOR Really, Dinah. It is one of the most original and satisfying conceptions imaginable.

DINAH Perhaps it is something left over from the World's Fair.

HECTOR When you see it you may change your attitude. I hope you will. After all, the man is our guest——

DINAH (*putting it bluntly into words*) In fact, Job has something you want, and therefore I must be nice to him.

[JOB *appears in the doorway, wearing a shabby suit, but still with the bath slippers on his feet.*]

JOB Was I wearing boots, last night, Dinah?

DINAH Will you ring for Mrs Bint, Hector, please?

JOB Oh, no. Please don't bother to do that. I shall fetch them myself.

DINAH Mrs Bint doesn't like people in her kitchen.

JOB She has never yet experienced the Butchard charm. I get it from my mother. Do you remember your Aunt Cicely, Hector?

HECTOR (*anxious to be pleasant*) Vaguely, vaguely. A very beautiful woman. I have seen photographs of her.

DINAH (*with heavy meaning*) Photographs are mostly fakes.

JOB (*smiling seraphically on her*) By the way, you have no objection to your servants being tipped, have you?

DINAH None whatever.

JOB Thank you.

DINAH What are you going to tip her with?

JOB Of course. I squandered all my worldly wealth on you, didn't I? Lend me ten shillings, will you, Hector?

HECTOR Delighted.

JOB (*as* HECTOR *is producing the note*) It will be nice to see a British note again.

DINAH I'm sure it will.

[JOB *takes the note, smiles at her, and goes out to the kitchen.*]

HECTOR Why do you insist that he has no money? He could hardly squander much in Siam. And the Prince must have paid him well.

DINAH The Prince?

HECTOR The man he built the palace for.

DINAH Oh. Yes.

HECTOR Then what makes you think that he——

DINAH He lost it all. He told me.

HECTOR Lost it? How?

DINAH Oh, some teak forest, or something. It burned down. And he spent a lot, too. He used to have Saturday-night nautches.

HECTOR Saturday night what?

DINAH Nautches. You know, dancing girls and—and—(*she cannot think of anything more at the moment*) orgies.

HECTOR If you were not the most truthful person in the world, Dinah, I should suspect you of making that up to discredit the man.

DINAH Oh, I could tell you much worse than that about him.

HECTOR Then don't. (*Kindly*) I think you have been listening to travellers' tales, my dear. Very few men can resist telling them.

DINAH (*stung by the patronage*) And I, of course, am just a poor little innocent.

HECTOR I think you are very unworldly sometimes. To anyone who knows the world, Job is obviously both prosperous and respectable.

DINAH *As well as a genius? Don't you think that is a little weeny bit too much?*

HECTOR (*ignoring her*) Your down-and-out has that indefinable air of apology. Unmistakable. And talking of apologies, there was a quite unwarrantable remark of yours——

[*There is the sound of MRS BINT'S voice and JOB'S in gay conversation in the hall beyond. Enter JOB carrying a tray on which is a half-bottle of champagne and two glasses. He is wearing his boots, and is carrying the bedroom slippers under the tray arm so as to leave a hand for door-opening.*]

DINAH Well, I'm——(*Words fail her*)

JOB (*putting the tray down on the table matter-of-factly*) Mrs Bint has great charm, I think. (*Taking the slippers from under his arm*) And so have your bath slippers, Hector. Exquisite. Spanish, are they?

HECTOR No, Mexican.

JOB Have you been to Mexico?

HECTOR No. No. (*Feeling that he must defend his comparative provincialism*) Travel has been overdone lately, I think.

JOB You must try Siam one day. So colourful, and such scope for the imagination. (*Making for the bedroom*)

DINAH Will you tell me what the champagne is for?

JOB Oh, Mrs Bint thought that you should have that. What-with-your-ankle-and-all.

DINAH Mrs Bint thought!

JOB Well, it may have been a case of thought transference.

DINAH I don't want any champagne.

JOB And you'll need it anyhow to celebrate.

DINAH Celebrate what?

JOB Getting rid of an incubus.

HECTOR My dear Job, you mustn't think of yourself as an incubus.

JOB (*airy and reassuring*) Oh, I don't.

[*Exit JOB to bedroom.*]

HECTOR (*slightly at a loss, but deciding that he must mean that only* DINAH

considers him an incubus) Well, he seems very light-hearted about your bad manners. It seems to me that he is carrying off the situation very well, and you are doing nothing to help him. (*As DINAH is still staring at the door through which JOB has disappeared, and is apparently not listening*) What are you thinking?

DINAH (*still staring at the door*) I'm wishing I had learned to play chess. Tell me, Hector, do you like me very much?

HECTOR What an odd question.

DINAH You really do care for me, don't you?

HECTOR I'm devoted to you.

DINAH Then let's both go away before he comes back.

HECTOR Dinah! Great heavens, what a——

DINAH The car is still at the door, isn't it? Then help me as far as the lift. I must get out of this room.

HECTOR But, Dinah, that's ridiculous!

DINAH Please, Hector! He's very unconventional himself. He won't mind. If we're not here when he comes back he'll go away quietly and everything will be——

HECTOR I never heard a crazier——

DINAH (*losing control; her quick, conspiratorial tones giving way to rage*) Can't you feel anything at all, you insensitive stick of a creature! Can't you feel the air in the room bulging, bulging——

HECTOR Dinah!

DINAH —like something that is going to burst at any moment!

HECTOR (*light dawning*) Oh, darling, what a brute I've been. What a blind brute! But I understand now. It's all clear.

DINAH What is clear?

HECTOR All your oddities, your wild talk, your bad temper. Of course, it's your foot!

DINAH (*relaxing into despair; drawling*) Yes, Hector, it's my foot.

HECTOR It's when you said the room was bulging that it dawned on me. That is just how I felt when I had that gumboil. You had better have the foot X-rayed, hadn't you?

DINAH Yes, I shall have it X-rayed.

HECTOR I'll drive you in to hospital when——(*As JOB comes in carrying hat and*

overcoat) Oh, there you are. How are you going to get into town? Shall we give you a lift as far as the hospital? Dinah is going to have her foot seen to.

JOB Oh, no, thank you, I'll get a bus. If you will advance me the fourpence, or whatever it is.

HECTOR Shall I give you a fiver?

JOB No, bus conductors don't like them. Give me half a crown.

HECTOR But——

JOB Just half a crown. Well, Dinah darling, it was fun while it lasted.

HECTOR Will you have lunch with me at my club tomorrow? The Addison. Two-fifteen?

JOB I'm afraid not.

HECTOR The day after, then?

JOB No, I'm afraid not.

HECTOR Then when can we go and see Clare? You set a time.

JOB I think in the circumstances, Hector, it would be better if we called that arrangement off.

HECTOR You mean, because of the misunderstanding with Dinah you want to back out of building the house? Oh, but Job, you can't do that. I know Dinah behaved badly, but she is not herself this morning. She——

JOB It is not because of anything Dinah said. (*To DINAH*) I have had a bad attack of conscience, Dinah.

DINAH So you ought.

JOB I like your brother so well that I can't find it in my heart to deceive him any longer.

DINAH (*protesting wildly*) Oh, no, Job!

HECTOR Deceive me?

JOB This is going to hurt you, Hector, much more than it will hurt me. I have always wanted a poet in the family. And you are so obviously destined for the Abbey.

DINAH Job, please!

JOB Hector, you have to know it. I am not the little boy you used to play with at Bude.

HECTOR You're not my cousin? Who are you, then?

JOB A waif. (*As HECTOR stares at this exceedingly solid waif*) You see, I was very drunk last night, and Dinah picked me up and brought me to your beautiful home.

HECTOR Dinah! Why should she do a thing like that?

JOB She was very drunk too.

HECTOR *Dinah* was! I don't believe it.

JOB (*in a tolerant, you-know-best manner*) Does she bring strange men home when she is sober?

HECTOR Dinah, is this true?

DINAH (*in level tones*) Quite true.

HECTOR You were *intoxicated*?

DINAH I was drunk.

HECTOR And you brought a stranger home to spend the night here?

DINAH No, to sleep off the night.

HECTOR Don't quibble. You brought this man home and gave him my bed.

DINAH I needed my own.

HECTOR And you had the impudence to—to——

DINAH And I introduced him to you as our cousin. I'm not going to quarrel with you, Hector. That is just what he wants.

HECTOR Quarrel! You cannot quarrel unless there are two sides to a question.

DINAH I see. Just a lecture. Well, you can save the lecture too. If I overwork, and get drunk, and waken up with a headache and a hanger-on, that is no one's business but my own.

HECTOR It is my business if you use my home for entertaining your vagrants. If you want male society so badly that you have to go to the gutter for it, it would be——

DINAH (*flaring*) Hector! How dare you!

HECTOR How dare *you* palm off a good-for-nothing nobody as a genius!

DINAH It was you who decided that he was a genius.

JOB (*happily*) But I am a genius.

HECTOR (*turning to him*) Were you ever in Siam at all?

JOB Never.

HECTOR Or built a palace for a Prince?

JOB Alas, no.

HECTOR No, of course you didn't. You have probably never done an honest day's work in your life. (*To DINAH*) And because I come home unexpectedly and interrupt your disgraceful amour——

DINAH Oh, don't be ridiculous!

HECTOR —You lie like a shoplifter. You——

DINAH Hector, I am sufficiently ashamed of my backslidings. There is no need for you to get excited about them.

HECTOR No need! No need! (*His voice running up and cracking at the enormity of it*) Why, I almost introduced him to Clare! You not only lie yourself out of a predicament, but you lie other people into one.

DINAH (*seeing it for the first time*) If you had been a more understanding sort of person, I wouldn't have had to lie at all. But if you must talk about it, I suggest that we postpone this discussion until——

HECTOR Understanding! Am I supposed to find it funny that my sister gets intoxicated——

DINAH Drunk.

HECTOR —and brings a complete stranger home to occupy my bed.

DINAH No; not funny, but——

HECTOR You take part in a horrible escapade (*this is almost too much for JOB*), you lie with a facility that indicates either a depraved natural capacity or a great deal of practice, and then you have the impudence to suggest that if I were more sympathetic——

DINAH (*shouting at him*) Oh, don't be so smug! (*Into the sudden silence, in a quieter voice*) My God, Hector, you must be the smuggest thing in human form since Nero. I can't think why I bother to keep you around.

HECTOR (*not sure that he can believe his ears*) Keep me around!

DINAH For twenty years I've wiped your nose, and pulled your socks up, and parted your hair for you, and——(*She catches JOB'S eye, and her flood of oratory dries up abruptly. Conciliatory*) All right, Hector. Forget I said that. I'm upset this morning.

HECTOR Forget you said it! What do you think I am made of? Putty?

DINAH (*flaring again*) Yes. No! You're nothing as solid and kind as putty. I like putty. It—it responds. You're just an empty skin filled with hot air.

HECTOR A balloon, in fact.

DINAH Yes. The kind that has a silly face painted on it. A woman can't live with a balloon for twenty years and go on liking it. I don't know why I haven't put a cigarette-end to you long ago.

HECTOR You seem to be doing it now. But let me remind you that once you have used the cigarette-end, there is no getting back the balloon.

DINAH Who wants it back? What good is it? What can you do with a balloon but keep on patting it? I'm tired of patting you, Hector. I want someone to pat me for a change.

HECTOR Dinah, this is outrageous nonsense, and you know it. Have I ever said an unkind word, or done an unkind thing to you?

DINAH You cut off my doll's head.

HECTOR What!

DINAH You said she was Ann Boleyn. I tied her head on again, but her eyes wouldn't work any more. And ever since, it's been like that. If you wanted something of mine to be Ann Boleyn it had to be Ann Boleyn, or life in the same house as you wasn't worth living.

HECTOR Really, Dinah, that is a——

DINAH Because you write a lot of highfalutin' capers that no one can understand

HECTOR *Dinah!*

DINAH —you patronise your poor low-brow sister, who does nothing more intellectual than save lives, but when there is proof-reading to be done——

HECTOR Never in my life have I asked you to read proofs!

DINAH Oh, no, you never ask me. They just lie around in mute appeal. And you always have neuralgia at proof-reading time, or an invitation to Cornwall, or an inspiration for a new poem that would be ruined by the drudgery of proof-reading. So the poor fool Dinah does it.

HECTOR If you didn't want to correct my proofs there was not the slightest reason why you should.

DINAH Of course not. Except that I'm a fool. But the fact that I'm a poor fool doesn't make you any the less of a poor specimen.

HECTOR If you think that by reviling me you can obscure your own misdemeanours, you are mistaken, my dear sister. You merely add to your iniquities. First you behave like a street-woman, and now you prove to be a shrew, and, if I

may say so, a monster of ingratitude.

DINAH Ingratitude? What am I supposed to be grateful for?

HECTOR All those years I have stayed by you, lived with——

DINAH Stayed by me? What do you think this is? A sinking ship?

HECTOR —lived with you in this small flat because I was all you had.

DINAH Because the rent was sure, you mean.

HECTOR Dinah! Are you accusing me of mercenariness?

DINAH And because no one else would put up with your selfishness. I used to be sorry for you when they didn't like you; you looked so like a child someone has taken a sweet from; but I'll never be sorry for you any more, Hector.

HECTOR You won't have to. Be assured of that. I am going to someone who does not find me either an object of pity or a monument of selfishness. If I had known the thoughts you were harbouring in your mind, Dinah, I would have gone long ago.

DINAH I wasn't harbouring anything. They just came out in a rash.

HECTOR It will no doubt be a relief to you to have the flat free for your own uses without the necessity of lying about it (*this with a stare at JOB*), so I shall leave now.

DINAH (*stung to fury again by his reference to her purple life*) Well, go, you silly little old maid, and don't talk so much about it.

[HECTOR *is lingering with a subconscious hope of capitulation on her part.*]

DINAH And you can tell Clare that she has my sympathy. I hope she puts you across her knee and spansks you.

HECTOR Will you please have my things sent to Clinton Terrace—all of them. I shall take the car, and Clare's chauffeur will bring it back to you.

DINAH (*sweetly*) Perhaps he'll bring back your share of the last two quarters' rent as well.

HECTOR Certainly.

DINAH If Clare happens to have the cash.

[HECTOR *goes out, banging the door behind him.*]

DINAH Oh, Hector! Come back. (*To JOB*) Call him back.

JOB (*moving between her and the door*) What, already! Oh, Dinah!

DINAH He's gone without his coat. (*Rising*) He'll catch his death of cold. (*Making for the door*) Hector! (*Her ankle gives way, and she stumbles into JOB'S*

arms) Oh, damn!

JOB (*holding her; surprised*) Have you really sprained your ankle?

DINAH Of course I've sprained my ankle, you fool!

JOB (*full of compunction*) Dinah, my dear. (*He picks her up and deposits her on the couch*) Yes, I should have known that you wouldn't do that. (*Fake an injury and miss a morning's work, he means*)

DINAH (*a little bewildered by her sudden passage through the air; to herself more than to him*) I thought that only happened in films.

JOB What did? (*He is opening the champagne*)

DINAH Men carrying women about.

JOB You've been living too long with Hector.

DINAH (*not listening; still busy with her own thoughts*) It's my private belief that all this is just a nightmare. Presently I'll wake up and have breakfast and go to hospital just as usual. Things like this could never happen to me.

JOB That's what they all say.

DINAH Who?

JOB People things happen to.

DINAH (*still detached*) Have you said it?

JOB Often.

DINAH (*taking the glass of champagne he offers her*) But I could never have got drunk—I don't drink, you know—and taken home someone I didn't know at all, and got rid of Hector at last, and——

JOB So you wanted to get rid of him?

DINAH Oh, no. Only in a dream. When I'm awake I'm devoted to Hector. I'm very proud of him. (*She takes a sip or two of her champagne*) Poor Clare. (*This with a small chuckle*) But she's very fond of him. (*Between sips*) And she's clever, you know. She'll ride him on the snaffle. It will do him good to fetch and carry for a change. It is all my fault, you know. I spoiled him. He was very sweet when he was young. Have you got a sister? (*Before he can answer*) But of course I needn't ask.

JOB Why? Is the number branded on my——

DINAH Nothing you say might be the truth. It's a great bar to any kind of social intercourse. (*Beginning to be aware of him again*) How could I have quarrelled with my brother over an impudent good-for-nothing like you?

JOB I gather that your doll's head had a lot to do with it.

DINAH (*not listening*) I can't think why Clamp likes you.

JOB Does she?

DINAH She doesn't like many men.

JOB So I deduced. I am touched by her approval. Did you tell her the whole sad story?

DINAH I had to. Simmons had told her first. I expect Simmons has told the whole hospital by this time. There's one comfort: they won't believe it any more than I do. They'll think it's just one of Simmons' stories.

JOB But Miss Clamp? Doesn't she talk?

DINAH (*simply*) Clamp hates Simmons.

JOB I see. What a power for good hate can be. It's a difficult world for reformers.

DINAH Simmons was right when he called you 'a frightful man'. I had no idea so much frightfulness could be compressed into one morning.

JOB But not blackmail?

DINAH Not so far.

[*The telephone rings.*]

JOB (*as DINAH struggles to rise*) Shall I? (*At the telephone*) Hullo?... No, it's Job.... (*Without bothering to cover the mouthpiece*) Miss Clamp wants to know what has happened?

DINAH Tell her that my brother has left me, and I am on the point of being blackmailed by the Other Man. (*She is mellowing rapidly*)

JOB (*at the telephone*) She says to tell you that her brother has left her and she is on the point of being blackmailed by the Other Man.... (*Having listened with a growing smile*) She says: 'Congratulations, and (*replacing the receiver*) could I blackmail you into asking me to lunch?'

DINAH No, you couldn't. As soon as you finish that drink you are leaving this house, and I hope that I never see you again. Perhaps Hector will come back. Do you think so?

JOB Not to you. You shouldn't have called him an old maid. But he'll come back to me, I think.

DINAH To *you!*

JOB Yes. He wants that house.

DINAH But—is it a real house?

JOB Real? That house has been my hobby for the last two years.

DINAH Oh. I thought it was probably something cut out of a magazine. Or picked out of someone's pocket, for all I knew.

JOB All my crimes have been unskilled ones.

DINAH And would you build it for Hector?

JOB If I managed to stay sober long enough.

DINAH (*a little dismayed*) Oh, dear. I hope I haven't put Hector off you. I painted a dreadful picture of your life in Siam. (*Beginning to laugh to herself*) I said you had Saturday-night nautches.

JOB Oh, well, he knows now that I was never in Siam, so that needn't—(*What she has said penetrates his consciousness*) I had WHAT!

DINAH (*her laughter growing*) Saturday-night nautches.

[He joins in her laughter with a roar. They laugh together hysterically. As she sobers up, she moves her feet half-consciously to make room on the couch for him to sit, and he, automatically and still laughing, takes the proffered seat.]

DINAH (*just before the curtain comes down*) What is your name, Job?

CURTAIN

Reckoning

CHARACTERS

NELL
AN URCHIN
MR HIBBERT
MR BIDDLE
MISS GEM
MAN WITH A MUFFLER
YOUTH WITH A MAUVE TIE
A YOUTH WITH PAPERS
FLUFF WILLIAMS
MR MOSTYN
MAN WITH A RAINCOAT
TED HANNA
MAN IN PLUS-FOURS
BURT

ACT I

The Scene is the interior of a small tobacconist-newsagent-sweetseller's shop in a side-street somewhere in the Camden Town district. In the back wall is the door (left as one looks at the stage) and the window. The window is long and rather low, with panes a foot square, and it exhibits the usual mixed stock of tobacco, books, and sweets. The counter runs from the middle of the window parallel to the right wall, and is covered with newspapers and magazines. It ends on the down-side in a glass case containing boxes of cigars and pipes. Against the right wall are (next the window) shelves of glass bottles containing sweets, then a desk, open and much used, then shelves bearing packets of cigarettes. In the remaining space is the door into the living-room. The whole of the left wall is occupied by shelves of books in cheap editions. Down stage is a table on which is spread a collection of fashion papers, books on knitting, and similar publications.

It is an evening in early Spring. The shop lights are lit, and the pale-blue atmosphere outside is gradually growing deeper. Now and then someone passes in the street, and the faint rumble of traffic in the main street comes and goes. The shop at the moment is empty except for NELL, and she is present only in body. She is leaning on her forearms over the counter, absorbed in the book which she is reading. NELL is to a large extent the reason why Biddle's is such a prosperous concern. Customers like to exchange greetings with her, not because she is pretty (which she certainly is), nor because she is arch with them (which she certainly isn't), but because she has a quiet air of goodfellowship for all the world, and a ready wit. She takes a kind of mocking interest in life and finds it good.

A small URCHIN enters and advances to the counter.

NELL (*without looking up*) Yes?

URCHIN A tuppenny bottle of ink and fourpence change.

NELL (*looking up, her face softening*) Hullo, Bill. Got it all off pat, haven't you! No use trying to do you, eh?

URCHIN (*coldly*) No. And me nime ain't Bill.

NELL Oh? What is it, then?

URCHIN Algernon Leonard Parker.

NELL All that? (*Smiles at him as she gives him the ink*) Do you like sweets, Algernon Leonard?

URCHIN And how!

NELL (*taking a bottle of bull's-eyes from the shelf and scrabbling in it with her hand to detach one or two from the mass*) What did you say?

URCHIN I said, And how!

NELL Tut tut, Algernon. You bin going too often to the movies, haven't you? You're one of the degenerate youth of England, you are. Given over wholly to transatlantic whatsisnames. What you should say is 'Yes, thank you'. See?

[*Enter a MIDDLE-AGED MAN of the small-shopkeeping class; unnoticed by NELL, who is leaning over the counter to the boy. He pauses and watches the scene with an indulgent amusement.*]

NELL (*putting down three bull's-eyes on the counter*) Now, what d'you say?

URCHIN (*grabbing the sweets*) Thank you.

NELL It doesn't sound so enthusiastic as these low expressions, I admit. But you be a little English gentleman and don't show your feelings, see? (*Seeing the man*) Good evening, Mr Hibbert.

HIBBERT Good evening, Miss Nell. What's all this? Robbing your employer? I'm surprised at you!

NELL Oh, what's a couple of bull's-eyes?

HIBBERT At the present rate of exchange about a penny, I should say. And I thought I saw three, eh? That's a penny halfpenny you owe the till.

NELL You're a ready reckoner, aren't you? To say nothing of the quickness of your eye. You should be going round after one of those pea-and-nut shows. You'd put them out of business. (*To the boy, who is still waiting*) What is it, Bill?

URCHIN Fourpence change.

NELL (*giving him the change*) You're all right, Bill. You don't need any movies to educate you.

URCHIN Me nime ain't Bill.

[*Exit URCHIN.*]

HIBBERT (*putting his money on the counter*) The usual, please. You know, your

good heart will get you into trouble one of these days, Miss Nell.

NELL (*weighing tobacco in the scales to her right*) That's a polite way of telling me that I'm soft, I suppose. Well, you're wrong. A couple of sweets to a kid is one thing, but you try robbing the till, and you'll see how soft I am!

HIBBERT What would you do if I did?

NELL I'd stun you with the scales and yell for the police.

HIBBERT (*laughing at the picture*) Not you!

NELL Indeed I would. What d'you think I'd do? Sit in a corner and dither?

HIBBERT No. You'd say 'Are you hard up? Poor man. There's two pound notes at the back that you've missed.'

[*Enter MR BIDDLE from the living-room. He is a little, elderly man, clean-shaven, with an aquiline face and white hair. He has a dry manner, a little pedantic, but kindly withal. More interested in -ologies and -isms than in Navy Cut.*]

BIDDLE Good evening, Mr Hibbert.

HIBBERT Good evening, Mr Biddle. A fine evening.

BIDDLE Yes, very fine, very fine.

NELL Mr Hibbert's just been telling me that I'm too good to live.

BIDDLE As long as she isn't too good to be assistant to a shabby old man, I shan't complain, Mr Hibbert.

HIBBERT A valuable assistant, yes. She threatened to bash me over the head with the scales because I talked of robbing the till.

BIDDLE (*not listening*) I sometimes think if she had really been my niece she couldn't stick to the business better.

HIBBERT If she was really——? Why, I always thought—I mean——

NELL Thought he was really my uncle?

HIBBERT Yes.

NELL Well, now, isn't that flattering for you, uncle! No, Mr Biddle took me in here when I was thirteen, and he didn't know any more about me than that I had never tasted a beefsteak. Eh, uncle?

HIBBERT Well, well! Fancy that. She does credit to your good heart, Mr Biddle. Or perhaps you've bin lucky. Not everyone's so well rewarded for bein'——

NELL Soft.

HIBBERT Philanthropic, I *was* going to say.

BIDDLE Yes, I've been recompensed beyond my desserts, Yes, beyond my desserts. The evening papers haven't come yet, I see.

NELL No, they'll be in any minute.

HIBBERT Arsenal got it in the neck this afternoon, I hear.

BIDDLE Yes? Did they? Yes.

HIBBERT You don't take much interest in football, Mr Biddle.

BIDDLE No. No, I'm afraid I don't. Cricket interests me so much, you see, that I haven't got over thinking about it before the next season begins. It would spoil it to take an interest in anything so—so different as football.

HIBBERT Like eating between meals.

BIDDLE Well—something like that. Cricket, my dear sir, is an art.

HIBBERT And what is football, may I ask?

BIDDLE Er—artfulness, I think.

HIBBERT You're a bit hard on football, aren't you, Mr Biddle? You come with me some Saturday afternoon and see Spurs play the Arsenal. See if you don't change your mind. There isn't anything in cricket—and, mind you, I'm speaking with knowledge, because I like cricket myself, I go quite a lot in the summer—there isn't anything in cricket that'll come up to a real good attack by a first-rate forward line against a good lot of backs. Mr Biddle, it's just suffocating. And it's *always* happening. That's the beauty of it. You don't have to wait for an hour because someone's got their bat in front of a wicket and won't take it away till he's taken away on a stretcher.

BIDDLE He may be taken away on a stretcher, but he isn't ordered off.

HIBBERT Oh, but that doesn't happen very often. The papers talk far too much about it when it happens, and then people shake their heads and say football's rotten. You come with me and see a real good side play another real good side. There isn't anything like it, Mr Biddle. There really isn't. Take last week, just before half-time. (*Demonstrating with boxes of cigarettes*) There was Jones and Evans and MacLean, see? As this might be the goal. That's the three Everton forwards, see? Outside right and inside left and centre. And here's the two backs and the goalkeeper, see? Jones had the ball here, see, well inside the circle. This back coming to tackle, and this one marking MacLean. Everyone thought Jones'd shoot before the back could tackle, but not him! 'E tipped the ball to Evans. That stopped the back for a tick, see? Evans tips it back, and Jones shoots 'fore the back's got off

his heels, and catches the goalkeeper napping. Beautiful! Perhaps that wasn't a very clear idea of it for you, and of course it doesn't sound very much, just said like that, but believe me, Mr Biddle, it just stopped your breath to see. You come with me some Saturday afternoon and see if you don't enjoy it. What d'you say, now?

[Enter MISS GEM. *She is lean and middle-aged, and her clothes are a pathetic travesty of last year's fashions. But her gloves are carefully mended, and she prides herself on the fact that she has a ladylike appearance unusual in her occupation, which is a 'cleaner'.*

[*Without taking notice of the others she comes down to the side table, props herself on her elbows, and begins to turn over the pages of a fashion book.*]

BIDDLE Do I make my will first?

HIBBERT No, and you'll not have to wait in a queue for tea, either. You can come home and have it at your own fireside with Miss Nell.

BIDDLE That certainly is an inducement, Mr Hibbert. I'll have to think it over.

HIBBERT (*taking his departure*) I'll hold you to it. I like cricket myself. None better. But to live for cricket and nothing else—well, it's a bit——

NELL Soft.

HIBBERT (*grinning*) Good night, Miss Nell.

[*Exit HIBBERT, touching his hat.*]

NELL Good evening, Miss Gem.

MISS G. (*without looking up*) Good evening, dearie.

[*MR BIDDLE goes to the desk, climbs on to the stool, adjusts his glasses, and becomes absorbed in calculation.*]

NELL What's the good news?

MISS G. Ain't none. (*Turns pages*)

NELL No?

MISS G. Not since last Christmas. What d'you think of that new line to the 'ips? Unbecoming, I say. Difficult, if you know what I mean. All right on the right woman, but 'oo's the right woman? One in a thousand! (*Goes on turning pages*)

NELL There's an awfully nice frock in that red book at the end that you might like to see.

MISS G. (*suspiciously*) Has it panels?

NELL No, it's gored, with a bit of a spring to it.

MISS G. (*hunting in the red book*) I never was one for panels.

[A MAN WITH A MUFFLER *appears in the doorway.*]

MAN 'Standard'?

NELL Sorry. Not in yet.

[*Exit* MAN.]

MR BIDDLE These papers are very late, aren't they?

NELL Don't worry, uncle. They'll be in any minute. (*To* MISS GEM) Found it?

MISS G. Yes. I expect this is it. Bit on the youthful side for me, I'm afraid.

NELL Oh, I don't know. You're not just falling to pieces yet, you know.

MISS G. No? Well, it's a blooming miracle if I'm not. Life's a business, ain't it?

NELL Things been going wrong?

MISS G. You might say so! There was me goin' to the Honourable Mary's wedding this morning, and then they 'ad to send a boy round from the office to say they wanted an extra job of work done. 'Avin' a Board meetin' unexpected like. As if the kind of men who sit on Boards ever notice what a floor's like! Why, they can't see over themselves to begin with. It's a long time since some of them saw a floor near enough to criticise. So there's me puttin' on my old togs and toddlin' off round there instead of goin' to the wedding. I'd got a new 'at for it, too. And I know a fine bit on the railin's, just at the corner, where you can see lovely and it don't matter 'ow they shove they can't move yer. I was there at the Sills-Aberdon wedding, and it was as good as 'avin' an invite. 'Member that one? It was the one where they carried candles. Electric lights, they were, of course, but made to look like candles. Very chick and original.

NELL They're getting divorced now, that couple, aren't they?

MISS G. Yes. (*Judicially*) His fault, I should think. I thought he looked a bit prim, at the time.

[A YOUTH WITH A MAUVE TIE *appears in the doorway.*]

YOUTH 'News'?

NELL Sorry. Not come yet. We're just waiting for them.

YOUTH Know what won the Spring Cup?

NELL Dark Marine.

[*The YOUTH clicks his tongue with a backward jerk of his head, and having thus expressed his views on the result and life in general in unmistakable fashion, disappears.*]

BIDDLE What can be keeping those papers?

NELL Don't worry, uncle. They'll come. As sure as Judgement.

MISS G. She's a sweet girl, that Honourable Mary, ain't she?

NELL Yes, awfully pretty. And I like the way she dresses. Tailormades.

MISS G. You know the way she does her hair? With that little lick down on the forehead? That's what makes her so fetching. Seen he gave her a chinchilla coat? I thought chinchilla was out, but it seems to be coming in again.

[*A motor stops in the street outside; a BOY staggers in with a pile of papers and slaps them on the counter.*]

BIDDLE What is the matter tonight? We thought you were never coming. We'll be losing our customers if you can't deliver up to time.

BOY (*amiably*) Aw, put a sock in it, gov. You'll be ruining your own trade if you keep on wanting the papers earlier and earlier. Morning and evening papers'll meet, and then where'll you be?

[*Exit BOY, and the motor drives away. NELL opens the top paper idly.*]

MISS G. (*without coming away from the far more fascinating fashion papers*) Anything new?

NELL No. (*Reading*) Beaverbrook begins Crusade.

MISS G. That ain't new. D'you think a coat looks better three-quarters or full length?

NELL (*reading*) Don't know. 'Pends.

MISS G. Ain't there anything about the wedding?

NELL I expect there must be. (*Finds it*) Yes, here it is. 'Mm. 'The bride looked lovely in pink.'

MISS G. Well, I may be old-fashioned, but I always think nothing beats white for a bride. Virginal, you know. Not but what white would be a kind of a joke on some of them Society girls. It's a long time since some of them was virgins. But that Honourable Mary, she's a nice girl. She'd have looked all right in white. I think it

was a pity to 'ave the pink. What did the bridesmaids 'ave?

NELL Sunset yellow, it says.

MISS G. Yellow! With a pink bride! They must 'ave looked like a vanilla-and-strawberry ice. That's 'er mother's taste, bet you anything. She was a Tarranter, you know. Nobodies. Tarranter's Dress Fasteners. She wouldn't dare wear them now. Only hooks and eyes'd stand the strain.

NELL The crowd broke the railings, it says.

MISS G. (*indignant*) What! Not *my* bit of railin', I hope!

NELL It says 'at the south corner'.

MISS G. (*mollified*) Oh, no. I know where that is. Down where the bobby stands. I expect 'e leaned against it 'imself. (*Flipping the pages disconsolately*) I don't see one 'ere that I just fancy.

NELL (*putting down the paper*) Is it a coat you're thinking of, Miss Gem?

MISS G. That's what. Something that'll do for everything. Meetings, and weddings, and christenings, and going to Brighton on Bank 'Oliday, and everyday, and goin' to the office in—eventual, that is.

NELL (*sympathetically*) It's difficult when it's got to do for a lot of things, isn't it?

MISS G. Not arf! If I ever wanted anything in my life it was to 'ave separate clothes for everything. But I never 'ad even the prospect of it. And I never will. Not this side of shopliftin'. That's life, that is! Well, I'll leave it for today, any'ow. There isn't anything I'm just in love with, as you might say. Nothing else in the papers? Well, I'll be off. You know that girl that lives two doors down from me? Well, she's got one of the coats with the new line. You 'ave a look at it next time you meet 'er, and tell me what you think of it. A bit long in the waist, I think, but see what you think. Good night, Mr Biddle. Toodle-oo, dearie.

[*Exit* MISS G. NELL *folds up the paper neatly, and in the silence* MR BIDDLE *peers over his glasses after* MISS GEM *in a puzzled way.*]

BIDDLE Is the good lady *continually* engaged in the construction of garments?

NELL Her? Why she practically never makes anything.

BIDDLE But she is continually here consulting the fashion papers.

NELL Yes, but that's just a kind of amusement for her, poor old dear. She likes to make-believe she's going to have something new. You wouldn't grudge her that.

BIDDLE Oh, I don't. Certainly not. (*He considers* NELL *kindly over his glasses*) I

never see you hanging over that table, Nell. And yet you're young, and I suppose ought to be interested in clothes.

NELL But I am interested. Don't say I look as if I wasn't!

BIDDLE I never notice how you look, except that you look washed. It just occurred to me that it might be more natural if it was you that looked at fashions, and not Miss—Miss——

NELL Gem.

BIDDLE —Miss Gem, because you're young.

NELL But that's just why I don't. There are so many other things for me, see? But there isn't for Miss Gem, poor old rag-and-bones.

[Enter a MAN. He is young and slight, quietly dressed and quiet of manner; clean-shaven, with a fair, small-boned, well-modelled face. He smiles at NELL and lifts his hat.]

NELL (*welcoming*) 'Evening, Mr Williams.

WILLIAMS 'Evening, Miss Biddle. 'Evening, Mr Biddle. Going to be a fine weekend.

BIDDLE (*rather frigidly*) Yes. (*He turns back to his desk and continues to work.* NELL *hands* WILLIAMS *a paper*)

WILLIAMS And a packet of State Express, please. How are you tonight, Miss Nell?

NELL All right, thanks.

WILLIAMS I thought this was your day off.

NELL It is usually, but I had it yesterday so that I could go to the special matinee they had at the Palladium.

WILLIAMS Oh, yes. Variety, wasn't it? Was it good?

NELL Yes, the Queen was there, you know.

WILLIAMS (*smiling*) Well, that's a guarantee.

NELL Yes. I saw you, opposite Liberty's, but you were too much up in the clouds to look at me, and I was late, so I couldn't stay to point myself out.

WILLIAMS Oh, I'm sorry. I was late for my show, too. I suppose that's why I was star-gazing.

NELL Better than looking round for birds. Where were you bound for? A movie?

WILLIAMS No, I was going to Queen's Hall.

NELL Oh, yes. Ragatzy.

WILLIAMS (*surprised*) You fond of music, then?

NELL I like a fiddle playing alone, but I'm not very keen on orchestras and choirs. It's just a mess of sound, to my mind. But Uncle and I sometimes go to Queen's Hall. Did you like Ragatzy?

WILLIAMS Well—I nearly burned my fiddle when I went home.

NELL Oh, I forgot you played the fiddle. Do you play by ear?

WILLIAMS Yes. I never had any lessons.

NELL I like a fiddle, but my favourite instrument's a drum. Don't laugh, will you? It makes me all curled up and tight inside so that I want to get up to the top of a hill and yell. I expect that sounds mad to you.

WILLIAMS No, it doesn't. I don't feel like that, but I think I know what you mean. Do you put up with the orchestras for the sake of the drums, then?

NELL Yes. I often wish they would all die all of a sudden, and leave the drums playing alone.

WILLIAMS Bloodthirsty, aren't you! That's what a drum does. I'd never have said you had savage tastes, Miss Nell. You look like—well, I nearly said 'carpet slippers of an evening', but perhaps you wouldn't think that complimentary. Well, I must be getting on. What was the Variety like? You had Betel Nut, I see.

NELL Yes, but she did the same old things. Not that I minded very much, but it made me sorry for her.

WILLIAMS Yes. They say she lost a lot of money in that Macaulay swindle. Tough luck having to go on if she doesn't want to, isn't it? Well——(*To MR BIDDLE, who has come down from his stool and is evidently searching for something*) This a quiet evening for you, Mr Biddle. All your clients out of town for the week-end, 'm?

BIDDLE (*not smiling*) Yes, we are not very busy tonight.

[WILLIAMS *says good night and goes.*]

NELL (*after a pause*) You weren't very chatty to Mr Williams.

BIDDLE (*back at the desk, and not greatly interested*) No.

NELL Don't you like him?

BIDDLE I don't know him. I don't like his associates, that's all.

NELL How d'you mean?

BIDDLE Well, he's a friend of Ted Hanna's.

NELL (*surprised*) And what's wrong with Ted Hanna?

BIDDLE Hanna is a crook, and I expect Williams is too.

NELL Hanna! The Ted Hanna that comes in here? How, a crook?

BIDDLE Just the ordinary sort. I think it was burglary he was in for.

NELL In for? Where?

BIDDLE In prison, of course.

NELL (*after a short pause*) Has Ted Hanna been in prison?

BIDDLE Yes. At least once to my knowledge. Probably oftener. That is why he honours this district with his presence. I think Brixton was his previous home. Or it may have been Camberwell. That is the fashion with these people, I believe. They change their place of residence after each sojourn—er—abroad. That is one comfort. We shall soon be rid of them. That kind never stay out of prison for long at a time. Then when they come out they'll go somewhere else.

NELL How do you know all that? How do you know that it's true?

BIDDLE My dear child, it's common knowledge in the district. You have only to ask Sergeant Withers next time he is in. He'll tell you all about them. It is most unfortunately true! And we used to be such a respectable district.

NELL But they're not a bit like that! Why, they're just as respectable-looking as you or me.

BIDDLE You don't expect the modern craftsman—I think he calls himself—to go about in a muffler, do you? You read so many books, my dear, that I thought your knowledge of the world would have been more extensive.

NELL (*roughly*) My knowledge of the world's all right. I could pass an exam in it before I was ten. And not book-learning, either. But I never met anyone like—like these before. Are you sure it's true, uncle?

BIDDLE (*arrested by the urgency in her voice*) Why do you want it not to be true?

NELL (*controlling herself*) Me? I don't, not particularly. (*Leading him instinctively away from the thing that matters*) But it seems a pity that a nice quiet boy like Williams shouldn't be all right. Fluff, they call him, you know. I think it's because of his hair—so light and fair. And he's always so pleasant and nice to talk to. You couldn't imagine him doing anything really bad—like beating a woman, or something like that. That's what I call bad. It seems an awful pity that he should be off the straight any other way.

BIDDLE Oh, yes, he's pleasant enough. But pleasantness is cheap, my dear. You wouldn't expect him to go about growling with a knife between his teeth by day just because he breaks into houses at night.

NELL But Williams gave old Rogers the money to pay for his room one week when he was broke. Rogers told me himself.

BIDDLE My dear, I never accused him of meanness.

NELL Well, I think meanness is a lot worse than burglary. So there!

BIDDLE Yes? Well, that may be true. An excessive love for one's own property may be as degrading as an excessive love for the property of others. But that doesn't make burglary a desirable proceeding, or burglars admirable people. I hope you won't become too interested in Mr Williams, my dear. (*He smiles a little at her*)

NELL In Fluff Williams? Keep your hair on. Not me!

BIDDLE I *have* heard that women find the modern criminal extremely—extremely——Have you seen my red-ink pen anywhere?

NELL (*coming over to look for it*) It's probably in the little drawer. There you are.

BIDDLE Oh, thank you. Is this account of Markinson's correct, do you know?

NELL Yes, I think so. They haven't put in the new lot of shilling copies we got, but perhaps that's going on to the next quarter.

[*Enter MR MOSTYN. He is a plump little man with a pointed beard, a curious mixture of a naval petty officer and an East London Jew. He has a buoyant, teasing manner, which covers a shrewd understanding.*]

MOSTYN Now then, now then! Poring over figures and print when life is short and the Sun keeps good beer! Shocking! Shocking! Miss Nell, you shouldn't allow it. On a Saturday evening, too, when the awful abyss of the Sabbath is already yawning. Shocking! Shocking!

NELL Go along with you, Mr Mostyn. You're a riotous-liver, you are. And that's what you'll have tomorrow morning, too, and serve you right.

MOSTYN Ah, Miss Nell, if I could only have your good wit as well as your uncle's company at the Sun what happy evenings they would be.

NELL If Uncle weren't unspoilable you'd have made him as flighty as yourself long ago.

MOSTYN Flighty! Delicious word. God keep us all flighty in this most weighty of worlds. Eh, Mr Biddle? My dear Miss Nell, you'll find if you don't bounce the world up and down lightly that it falls on your chest with an enormous thud. And stays there! (*Leaning forward and stabbing the counter with his forefinger at each word*) And stays there!

NELL (*considering him*) You wouldn't think that watching people popping their spare pants all day long would give a person that nice frivolous feeling.

MOSTYN Ah, that's just what does it. That's just why!

NELL Oh, well. I suppose it's human nature to feel superior about other people's worries.

MOSTYN (*horrified*) Miss Nell! You misunderstand me completely! Completely!

NELL Well, what? You don't want me to believe that you feel all nice and noble because you lend someone sixpence on a waistcoat worth five bob, do you?

MOSTYN No, my dear young lady, you misunderstand me completely. I don't imagine myself a Providence at all. I only wish I could be. It is because I am continually dealing with people who haven't a sixpence that I must look at the bright side of things. If I didn't I should be in an asylum. Nothing bears looking at too closely in this world, my dear Miss Nell. That way madness lies, eh, Mr Biddle? Look at things lightly, and look away again. Take things lightly, and go lightly on. That's the only way to be happy in this mistake of a world. Bounce it! Chuck it up in the air and laugh at it. Otherwise you'll have it on your chest. Eh, Mr Biddle?

BIDDLE I think your method is more like cowardice than philosophy.

MOSTYN Ah, Mr Biddle, it's only fools and saints that can see things straight in this world and be philosophical about it. Now you put away the ledgers and let's resume our argument about protection.

BIDDLE (*without conviction*) I'm really very busy tonight, you know. I had thought I would stay in tonight and finish these accounts.

NELL Oh, go along, Uncle. You haven't been out of the shop today. And since Mr Mostyn can't do you any harm it's quite on the cards that you may reform him a little. You'll be putting your evening to good use then, see?

BIDDLE Sophistry! Sophistry!

NELL I don't know what that is, but you go and get your hat, and I'll look after things for a while. Go along now. I'm a very good manager, though it's me that's saying it.

BIDDLE I know it, my dear, I know it. But I really should stay and straighten out

these——

[Exit BIDDLE *through the living-room door.*]

MOSTYN And how is life with you, Miss Nell?

NELL I don't know, but judging by the feel it's on my chest.

MOSTYN Bounce it, my dear, bounce it!

NELL (*curiously*) What do you do when it doesn't bounce?

MOSTYN (*after a pause of consideration*) I go down to the Sun, I think.

NELL That seems to be easy. Not much good for me, though.

MOSTYN No. Well, if I were you I should go in for something. Take up something. That is to say, if the feeling is chronic, so to speak. Take up theosophy, or cross-country running, or something like that. Something new and interesting.

NELL I don't think running through puddles in drawers and a vest would make life look any nicer.

MOSTYN Well, get a crush on a movie-star. I know you have heaps of boy-friends, so I don't suggest that. But girls nowadays seem to get more emotion out of watching a chap kiss someone else.

NELL *That's* a fool's game, isn't it? Besides, you don't imagine that makes them happy, do you? Bless you! You know Miller the baker's youngest girl—the one with the green beret? Well, she drank a bottle of disinfectant when she discovered that John Gilbert had got married.

MOSTYN No! Dear goodness me! What for? What happened? Was she very ill?

NELL No, it was cough-mixture in the bottle. But she didn't know that. She did her damndest. I expect she was quite glad afterwards about the cough-mixture, though.

MOSTYN Goodness gracious me! I must take back what I said about a movie crush. It doesn't seem to provide a bright outlook on life.

NELL No, it's only for people who haven't enough worries of their own.

MOSTYN What's worrying you, Miss Nell? Too many admirers? I should choose one and settle down, if I were you.

NELL (*moving abruptly*) That's a nice prescription for a happy life!

MOSTYN Do I hear a trace of cynicism in that remark? Surely not!

[Enter MR BIDDLE *with his hat and coat on.*]

BIDDLE Well, my dear, I suppose you'll be all right without me for just an hour?

NELL Don't you worry. I'll be all right for even one of *your* hours.

BIDDLE If you have time you might just look at the Brinkley account. I've very nearly finished it, but you might just see what they mean about six quires of Postal Bond credited, will you? That is, if you aren't too worried by customers.

NELL All right, I'll look at it. It's those faded ones we refused, I expect. Have a good time. And remember, only one pint!

MOSTYN Oh, come, Miss Nell! Beer makes the heart young.

NELL Yes? And the arteries old.

MOSTYN (*shaking his head*) I never get the better of you. I wish you were coming to the Sun with us.

[*He lifts his hat as he goes out with* MR BIDDLE.]

[*NELL stands quite still staring after them, her thoughts free to race about without the need for dissembling. She puts out her hand and straightens the papers, lets her hand fall and stands gazing unseeingly. Then the spell breaks. She seems to be possessed of restlessness and suspense. She moves round the shop without purpose, going here and there to stare at things for a moment in a distracted fashion. While she is down by the table of fashion books a* MAN WITH A RAINCOAT *comes in.*]

MAN 'Standard', please.

NELL (*jerking her head at the counter and not turning round*) Take it.

MAN (*taking the paper and looking at her curiously*) What's biting happy Nell tonight? Backed the wrong horse?

NELL You know quite well I don't bet.

MAN Oh, there's more horses than those with four legs. You just looked like you'd backed a loser. Anything wrong?

NELL Yes. Indigestion.

MAN (*going out*) Well, that's almost worse than backing the fourth, blamed if it isn't. 'Night!

[*NELL moves back behind the counter. She tries to hum a little tune, out of bravado, but gives it up because her voice breaks in spite of herself. She turns with an abrupt gesture away from the counter. A moment later she hears footsteps in the quiet street outside. She turns back to*

the shop and stands waiting.

[A MAN swings in at the doorway, and comes to a halt halfway to the counter, smiling at her. He is of middle height, dark, of a slightly stocky build, and his most notable features are his abnormally watchful, bright dark eyes. He wears his clothes with an air, and carries himself well.]

HANNA Hullo. All alone?

NELL (*staring at him*) Yes.

HANNA Where's the old boy? Down at the Sun?

NELL Yes.

HANNA (*coming over to her and putting his hat on the counter*) Chatty little person, aren't you?

[*She does not answer, but continues to stare at him.*]

HANNA What's the matter? Have I got a smut anywhere? (*Runs his hand over his excellently shaven chin*) Or are you choosing the spot where you'll kiss me?

NELL (*almost to herself*) I shan't do that any more. Funny, isn't it?

HANNA (*amused*) Who says so?

NELL I do.

HANNA Ah, but there's two sides to the kissing game. And I'm the other one.

[*He leans over and putting an arm round her neck draws her swiftly to him and kisses her. She is roused in a moment from her quietness to a blind fury. She pushes him away from her with a blow across the face, which staggers HANNA, who has been unprepared for any such demonstration.*]

HANNA (*gripping his face and staring*) What the hell? Nell! What's the matter?

NELL I said I'm through with kissing. And what I say goes, see?

HANNA But what on earth's the matter with you? Flying out at a chap without any warning like that. You seem to have changed your mind very sudden. You liked my kisses last time I saw you, all right. What's eating you now?

NELL (*quietly*) Why didn't you tell me you had been in prison?

[HANNA looks slightly taken aback, but recovers himself.]

HANNA (*drawing slightly*) Oh, that's it, is it?

NELL Why didn't you tell me?

HANNA Apropos of what, I'd like to know! Just as a nice little tit-bit to keep the conversation going, eh? 'I was in Rome last month, and the weather was simply unbearable.' 'I was in Wandsworth last year, and the food was absolutely vile. Quite a scandal!' Don't be silly. Anyway, there's no secret about it.

NELL So it's true.

HANNA (*hugging his face*) Strewth, you don't seem to've been in any doubt about it.

NELL (*considering*) No. Just at first I didn't believe it, but the minute I got a bit used to it I knew it was true.

HANNA Who's been doing the Dear Teacher business? Sergeant Withers?

NELL No, Uncle told me.

HANNA Oh! Keep away from that bad young man, or be cut off with a shilling!

NELL No, nothing like that. Uncle thought I had enough sense to know what you were. I wasn't brought up in a glass case. It didn't occur to him that I'd fall for a crook.

HANNA Well, you fell for me when you didn't know I was one. What's the difference? I'm still me, aren't I?

NELL Yes. But I'm still me. You changed into a crook, but I'm not changed into anything. I'm still me. That's why it's all off. That's why I'm biting myself that it was ever on. When I think of all I thought of you! And all you are is a jail-bird!

HANNA (*roused*) Stop that! You don't have to be insulting, do you, just because you happen to have made a mistake?

NELL (*quiet again*) Why is it insulting to call a jail-bird a jail-bird? What do you call yourself? A hero?

HANNA No, but I'm no worse than most of the men who go to church every Sunday. And a darn sight better than lots of them. I get found out now and again. That's all.

NELL Do you think that saying you're no worse than other rotters makes you any better?

HANNA Oh, see here, Nell. Why all the righteous indignation? Everyone's a rotter some ways. And breaking into houses is as decent a way of being rotten as I know.

NELL You don't seem to have any shame about you.

HANNA (*genuinely surprised*) Why should I be ashamed? We've just got different ideas about things, that's all, see? If I was an M.P. you'd probably throw your arms round my neck. Wouldn't you? Well, I wouldn't shake hands with an M.P. You see!

NELL You're just talking. And all the talking in the world won't make what's wrong into what's right. (*She pauses and leans forward, pleading*) I say, Ted, won't you give it up and go straight?

HANNA (*watching her earnest face in amusement*) You're lovely when you look all stained-glass like that. (*With a change in his voice, and a slight movement forward*) Only your mouth isn't stained-glass, is it?

NELL (*disappointed*) Ted!

HANNA You don't know what you're talking about, kid. No one'd give me a job to begin with. And even if they did I don't see myself being the perfect little nine-till-six hero five days a week for the princely sum of three quid. Forget it!

NELL But Ted, where will it all end? What are you heading for? Are you going on doing this all your life? You can't be! What is there in it?

HANNA What is there in it? Money! And fun! What more do you want?

NELL But there's more. There's prison.

HANNA Only when you're unlucky. Better get it in the neck after a good time than a poor one.

NELL Oh, give it up, Ted! It's a mug's game.

HANNA That's what the people who aren't in it say. I think it's a mug's game to work for another man from nine till six for three pound a week, see?

NELL (*pleading again*) Wouldn't *anything* make you give it up?

HANNA D'you know, Nell, you've got Garbo beaten the length of the straight.

[NELL *draws back in disappointment just as a MAN IN PLUS-FOURS comes in.*]

MAN Navy cut, please. Nice evening.

NELL (*in her cheerful business voice*) Yes, lovely. Going to be a fine week-end?

MAN Looks as if it might be for once. Hardly seems possible, does it? Thank you. Good-night.

[*Exit MAN.*]

HANNA Go on trying to reform me. You don't know how fetching you look when

you're on the repentance stunt. It's a mercy you never joined the Salvation Army, or the C.I.D. 'd be out of work.

NELL Doesn't it matter a bit to you, Ted, that it's all over?

HANNA What is?

NELL You and me.

HANNA (*in mock dismay*) What! Am I getting the push, then?

NELL Yes. Unless you give up this sort of thing and go straight. I'm not having anything to do with a crook.

HANNA Well, Fluff Williams will be out of the running too. That's one comfort. Poor Fluff thinks quite a lot of you. It was a race which of us got to you first. If I'm disqualified so is Fluff. That's a comfort.

NELL (*marvelling*) It's difficult to believe that Fluff isn't on the level.

HANNA Mother's blue-eyed baby boy! Fluff's a long sight better at the business than I am. Fluff's a toff at breaking into houses.

NELL Listen, Ted. This is your last chance. Mine too. Change your mind and give it a trial. Just a trial. You don't know how easy it would be if you just gave it a trial.

HANNA I know too much about trials. You're wasting your sweet breath, lovely.

NELL All right then. You'd better go now. I was a fool, that's all. I'm not blaming you. It was my own fault. I wasn't brought up in a bandbox, and I should have known. Get out now, and don't come back.

HANNA (*taking his hat*) Meet me outside the Empire at nine, and let's go on arguing.

NELL I'll never meet you anywhere again.

HANNA No? Well, I'll be in tomorrow afternoon. You can think up some more arguments and try them out on me. I'm going to get you used to arguing with crooks.

NELL You won't come back here tomorrow afternoon, or ever again if you're wise. I'm going to tell Uncle whenever he comes in what a fool I've been. There's not going to be any going back in this business, Ted Hanna. This is the finish.

HANNA (*arrested*) Nell! (*Coming back*) Don't be silly, Nell. You're only feeling sore just now. Things'll look quite different in the morning. Don't do anything foolish that you'll be sorry for afterwards.

NELL No, I won't do that.

HANNA Nell. Nell, I say, don't be so hard on a chap. Who are you to sit on the bench and condemn?

NELL I'm not condemning you. I'm only deciding what's right for myself.

HANNA Yes, but you are! I can't do without you, Nell. You don't imagine I can do without you now, do you?

NELL If you cared for me like that you'd go straight.

HANNA But the two things aren't connected. You don't understand. I couldn't go straight if I tried. But I'm crazy about you, Nell. Just crazy. I'd do anything for you but that. Don't turn a chap down just because his ways aren't your ways. (*Puts a hand on hers, and she does not withdraw it*) Don't you think I can be just as good to you as a chap that adds two and two all day for a living? I'd be awfully good to you, Nell.

NELL (*withdrawing her hand with an effort*) It's no use, Ted, it's no use. You're only prolonging it.

HANNA Listen, kid. Just listen. You want me, and I want you, and what does anything else matter?

NELL Lots of other things matter. Even if I could love a crook, there's Uncle. It would break Uncle's heart if I had anything to do with you, and I wouldn't hurt him for the world.

HANNA He needn't know anything about it.

NELL How d'you mean—needn't know?

HANNA Let him think you've reformed me. He won't believe that anyone wouldn't be reformed by you, Nell. If I wasn't such a hopeless case you'd have actually done it. So why let him worry. Don't turn me down, Nell. Think of not seeing each other any more. Think of living close to each other every day and not seeing each other. You can't think of that and turn me down deliberately. Can you? Nell!

[He puts his hand on her arm, and seeing the sudden indecision in her eyes seizes his chance. He leans nearer and puts one hand against her cheek, running it up so that it brushes her hair from her ear. As she does not shrink from his touch, he leans forward and buries his face in the hair he has disarranged, bringing his other arm up to embrace her. Her face quivers like that of a child who has failed in something it has tried greatly to achieve.]

NELL (*in a despairing cry*) Oh, Ted, I love you! Isn't it awful? I love you!

CURTAIN

ACT II

The living-room of a small flat fifteen months later. In the left wall is the door to the tiny hall, and down from it the door to the kitchen, at the back a tall window, and in the right wall the fireplace and down from it the door to the bedroom. The furniture is of the kind that is delivered in a plain van, but there are evidences of NELL'S taste in the details. The shade of the electric lamp on the side table above the fireplace matches the curtains and the cover of the divan below the window. In the corner between the window and the hall door is a combined bookcase and desk, and between the hall door and the kitchen door a sideboard. There are three easy-chairs covered in synthetic leather. The table, which occupies the middle of the floor, is circular and gate-legged. At the moment a supper-party is in progress. NELL is sitting to the left with her back to the kitchen door, to her left is MR MOSTYN, to her right MR BIDDLE and FLUFF WILLIAMS, and opposite her HANNA.

There is a burst of laughter as the curtain rises, and a thumping of hands on the table.

WILLIAMS (*as the laughter dies down*) That's a good one, Mr Mostyn.

MOSTYN You like that one? I made that one up myself. The jokes you make up yourself are much better than the ones you read.

HANNA Maybe, but you've got to have the gift. You'd have made a fortune on the halls, Mr Mostyn. Why didn't you try it?

MOSTYN For two reasons, my boy: (a) I don't like Sunday travelling, (b) I inherited the family business. They say a family business is a millstone, but I found it a cushion—and a very comfortable one at that. Your turn to tell a good one now, Mr Biddle.

BIDDLE I'm afraid that's not much in my line. (*His tone is very dry, and his remark is succeeded by a little silence. It is obvious that MR BIDDLE is not being the shining light of the party*)

WILLIAMS (*breaking into the awkwardness*) Do you know the one about——

[*The electric bell shrills. There is an instant silence, and on the part of WILLIAMS and HANNA a sudden immobility. After a swift glance at each other they avoid each other's eyes.*]

HANNA (*seeing NELL about to go*) Don't you go, Nell, I'll see who it is.

[*Exit HANNA.*]

MOSTYN Someone else for your party?

NELL More likely it's the wrong number. I'm not expecting anyone, but we're always having wrong numbers. Tell us the story, Fluff.

WILLIAMS I forget what it was now. Oh, yes, I know.

[*He tells his story, and as the laughter dies HANNA comes back leading in MISS GEM. MISS GEM is in her very best, and is bearing with great care a bunch of yellow tulips.*]

HANNA Look who's here. (*He casts a comical glance at FLUFF as the others turn to MISS GEM*)

MISS GEM Oh, dearie, I didn't know you 'ad a party, or I wouldn't 'ave butted in. I just came to wish you all the best and many happy returns.

NELL Oh, isn't that lovely of you! Fancy you remembering the day. And the flowers! Oh, Miss Gem, you shouldn't have. Such lovely flowers. (*On a sudden impulse she kisses MISS GEM, who looks considerably startled*) You know everyone here, don't you. Oh, no, perhaps you don't know Fluff. Mr Williams, Miss Gem. Take off your coat and sit down. You're just in time.

MISS GEM Oh, but I didn't come to eat. No, no. I just looked in to wish you all the best. I couldn't be at your wedding, but I can be at your anniversary, dearie.

HANNA (*taking off MISS GEM'S coat*) Come on, Miss Gem, sit down and taste Nell's ice-cream.

NELL She's going to have some of the turkey first. She can have the ice-cream afterwards. You just wait. It's still hot.

[*MISS GEM makes noises of protest, but NELL disappears into the kitchen with the flowers and MISS GEM is given a seat beside MR MOSTYN.*]

MR BIDDLE This is very nice of you, Miss Gem. Very nice indeed of you.

MISS GEM It's not a case of being nice at all, Mr Biddle. I miss that girl so you wouldn't believe it. She was always that pleasant and cheery it was a treat just to see 'er now and again. I'm not saying anything against that boy you got, but in comparison 'e gives me a pain in the neck. (*To HANNA*) I 'ope you realise your luck, young man.

HANNA You bet I do!

MISS GEM Well, you'd no business to run away with 'er and prevent 'er friends from bein' at 'er wedding. I bin at more weddings than I can count. Weddings of people I didn't care tuppence about. And then when it comes to someone I'm real fond of you do me out of it. To say nothing of Mr Biddle there. Inconsiderate, I call it!

HANNA Quite right, Miss Gem. It was a mistake. But we'll not do it again.

MISS GEM Oh, it's all very well to joke.

[*Enter NELL, bearing in one hand the tulips in a bowl and in the other a generously supplied plate of turkey. She sets the plate in front of MISS GEM.*]

MISS GEM What! Am I supposed to eat all this?

NELL Every bit of it.

MISS GEM (*looking round at the other plates*) Oh, but dearie, I couldn't, and everyone else at the pudding!

MOSTYN Don't mind us, Miss Gem, we're still busy.

HANNA And we'll leave lots of pudding for you, so don't be afraid.

MISS GEM Cheeky!

NELL Lovely flowers! It was lovely of you to think about it. Lovely! (*She is strangely rapturous over the incident. She puts the tulips on the table in place of the roses which have been there*)

MISS GEM Oh, but dearie, the roses!

NELL The roses are only Ted's. I can have them any day.

MOSTYN That's you put in your place, Hanna.

HANNA Would you like some bread, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM I would now you mention it.

[*HANNA fetches bread from the sideboard and FLUFF pushes the salt over to her.*]

MISS GEM Bread on the sideboard, and everything! You *are* getting toney.

NELL And how's everything with you, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM Oh, just the same as ever. Life's a business, ain't it! Biddle's used to be the bright spot in the street for me, and now it's as dull as all the rest. With all respect to Mr Biddle there.

BIDDLE Oh, I agree with you, Miss Gem. I most heartily agree with you.

MISS GEM It isn't that there's anything wrong with the shop, you know. It's just that there isn't anyone to chat about things to any more. That boy—well, 'e's just as much good as a slot-machine. My, this is fine turkey, ain't it?

MOSTYN You come along and have a chat with me now and again, Miss Gem, and we'll comfort each other.

MISS GEM I ain't got to that state yet, thanks all the same.

MOSTYN Don't be cruel. Do you think I don't think of anything but business? Nell there thinks I don't think enough of it.

MISS GEM Oh, no. But what would the neighbours say if they saw me in and out of yours? I don't look like one that would be looking for curios, do I! No, nobody'd give me the benefit of the doubt if you and me was to get thick, Mr Mostyn. They'd say inside a week that I 'adn't a stick left in the 'ouse, and they'd all be coming round with excuses to 'ave a peep in. Don't I know them! You're a fine cook, dearie. Ain't she, Mr Hanna?

HANNA (*smiling at NELL*) Not bad!

BIDDLE No one could cook a steak and onions like Nell.

NELL Listen to Uncle getting sentimental over his stomach! You know, these two call themselves philosophers, but if anyone cut off their beer for one night they'd be bally Bolsheviks.

MISS GEM Well, if I 'ad a little money I'd be a Bolshie myself.

NELL Money! What for?

MISS GEM To pay me fines and tip the police.

MOSTYN You'd find tipping the police about as dangerous as being a Bolshevik. The only time I tried to tip a bobby he threatened to charge me.

WILLIAMS I suppose it wouldn't be tactful to ask what you were tipping him for?

MOSTYN No, it wouldn't, young man. But he gave me to understand that if I ever tried it again I'd be for it. My five bob threatened the British Constitution, it seemed.

HANNA Oh, well, you saved your five bob.

MOSTYN Saved! Oh, dear, no. He had pocketed the five bob before he gave me the lecture.

NELL Well, I expect you got off lightly, if everything was known. Have some more greens, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM No, dearie, I'm doing fine. I never thought when I came out tonight I

was going to get a Ritz dinner like this. Matter of fact, I was sort of afraid to come in case you might be out. I thought to meself, young couples nowadays don't stay in and 'old 'ands on their anniversaries. I made sure you'd be out at a show, or something, and I nearly turned back once or twice. You could 'ave knocked me over with a feather when I found you were 'aving a family party. Girls don't think of their families nowadays. But it's just like you, dearie. I might 'ave known it, but I didn't give you the credit, more shame to me.

NELL Oh, well, you see, we went to a show last night, Ted and me. We went to The Purple Parasol, everyone said it was so good.

MISS GEM Good! Well, I should say so. I walked round there last night just to 'ave a look at the queues. All down the street and round the corner, they were. It's a wonder you got in. Could you see?

HANNA Oh, yes.

MISS GEM Well, there may be a seat in that pit that 'asn't got a pillar in front of it, but I've never been lucky enough to sit in it. 'Ow long did you queue for? Or perhaps you go to the upper circle, nowadays!

HANNA Yes, we booked this time.

MISS GEM Well, the upper circle ain't much better. I been there too. If you don't keep your toes tucked in you can't see the stage for them.

WILLIAMS That's right. Gives you the jim-jams.

NELL See anyone interesting in the queue, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM No, but I went round to see the nobs go in. Falling over themselves, they were. 'Ave you noticed that 'air's getting longer again? Most of them 'ad it curly at the back like the year before last. Guess 'oo went in, though.

NELL Don't know. Duchess of York?

MISS GEM No, not quite as good as that, but very nearly. Give it up? Lady Gollanfield! Ursula Boore, that was. And 'im with 'er!

NELL No! But guess who sat next us! Gladys Cooper!

MISS GEM (*gaping*) In the upper circle!

NELL (*after a dismayed pause*) No. You see, we were in the stalls for once.

MISS GEM Stalls!

HANNA Yes, it was a celebration, you know, Miss Gem. You only have a first anniversary once, so we thought we'd do things in style.

MISS GEM Well! You're *some* commercial traveller, to be able to take your wife

to stalls.

HANNA (*improvising*) It was either that or a day at Brighton, and I couldn't get away to Brighton, so we went to stalls instead.

MISS GEM Well, well! You are getting on in the world, dearies.

[*There is an awkward pause, and WILLIAMS breaks it by rising.*]

WILLIAMS I don't want to break up the happy party, but I'm afraid I've got to go, Mrs Hanna. I got a date.

NELL Oh, must you go, Fluff? It's early yet.

WILLIAMS Yes, I know. But I've got to go, worse luck. Don't anyone move. I'll slip out by myself, and nobody need be upset. I've enjoyed my evening awfully, Mrs Hanna. Don't you bother to come out with me. I'll find my own way. Good-night, everybody.

NELL Good-night, Fluff. It's been nice to see you. And thanks again for my lovely brooch.

WILLIAMS Oh, that's nothing.

HANNA I'll just see that he doesn't take the umbrellas.

[*He takes WILLIAMS by the elbow, and they go out together. There is a pause as the door shuts behind them.*]

BIDDLE I thought you didn't see Williams nowadays?

NELL Neither we do. But he's an old friend of Ted's, and he came to wish us luck just the way Miss Gem did. He didn't know anything about a party.

BIDDLE Then Hanna is still friendly with him?

NELL Yes, of course. You don't change your friends because you change your job, do you?

BIDDLE It depends on the friend and the job, doesn't it?

MISS GEM Oh, come on, Mr Biddle, don't you nag at 'er. She couldn't 'elp the man bein' 'ere if she didn't ask 'im, could she? Any more than she could 'elp me bein' 'ere. And 'e may be a bad lot, but I must say 'e looks as a nice young man as ever I see. Real polite, with 'is Mrs Hanna, and all.

NELL (*reflectively*) Yes, he always calls me that.

MISS GEM Shy, is 'e?

NELL (*abruptly*) A bit, perhaps. Have some more turkey now, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM Not me, dearie. Thank you all the same.

NELL Just a little bit?

MISS GEM No, dearie, that was a helping, that was.

NELL Come, just an atom.

MISS GEM Not an electron!

NELL Well, I'll get you some ice-cream. You won't mind if Uncle and Mr Mostyn smoke, will you?

MISS GEM Not me! I'm sorry, I'm sure. I didn't notice they weren't smoking. I bin kippered long ago, you see.

[Exit NELL.]

MOSTYN Do you smoke yourself, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM No. I thought of starting when it got fashionable, you know. But I decided it was silly to get to like something I'd never miss if I didn't 'ave it. Throwing money away. I'd rather 'ave a 'at I could wear than a lot of smoke to blow through my nose for no earthly reason.

MOSTYN I wish I could get back to the point of making my choice again!

BIDDLE Do you flatter yourself that you would be an abstainer?

MOSTYN I do—and don't dash me; please not dash me. I like to think I'd do everything differently if I had a second chance. And since no one can put it to the proof, no one can contradict me. That's very comforting.

BIDDLE How can it be comforting when you know it's nonsense?

MOSTYN But I don't know it's nonsense. At this moment I am quite sure that if I could choose again I'd go on the halls, make a fortune and a name for myself. Get married and have a family of four, two boys and two girls, and a wife who'd stay at home and bring them up to be a credit to me while I went round the world on farewell tours.

MISS GEM Sheek!

BIDDLE But you are necessarily presupposing that the knowledge——

[Enter HANNA.]

MISS GEM 'Ere, Mr Hanna, come and save me. They've started physiology or something. Make them stop.

HANNA Arguing, are they? Well, let them. It's their idea of enjoyment. I'd have thought you'd like a good argument yourself.

MISS GEM Oh, none better. But you don't know what them two are like when they're well away, or you wouldn't be encouraging them. They're so learned, it makes me sweat to listen to them.

MOSTYN I thought it was you who mentioned electrons a minute ago?

MISS GEM You don't call that learned, do you?

MOSTYN You can't know about electrons without reading, anyhow.

MISS GEM Read! Not me! I got a crystal set.

[Enter NELL.]

NELL Still going strong, is it? (*She sets down a plate of ice-cream before Miss Gem*)

MISS GEM I should say so. I just love to 'ear——Oh, dearie, what a lovely ice! —I just love to 'ear——Such a colour! Peach, is it? I just love to 'ear Big Ben. You know, I lived all my life in London, and I never 'eard Big Ben till I got a wireless. Nice friendly sound it's got.

HANNA But you don't pay ten shillings a year just to hear Big Ben?

MISS GEM Don't imagine it! But that's the thing I like best. It's always the same, and it doesn't try to be funny.

NELL Don't you like the Variety, then? I'd have thought you'd like that best. It's awfully good some nights.

MISS GEM Oh, I like Variety all right. It isn't that kind of funniness I mean. It's the gent 'oo tries to put a laugh into telling you 'ow tadpoles legs come out, or why the kettle gets black. It's coves like that that get my goat. Lettin' you down gentle. That's what they think they're doin'. And only making fools of themselves.

NELL But they're only trying to make dry subjects interesting.

MISS GEM Why 'ave dry subjects?

MOSTYN But some people like dry subjects.

MISS GEM Then they're not dry! Ah, ha! That's just what I was sayin'. If you *want* to find out why the kettle gets black you listens and 'ears about it, and you don't want to be patted on the back for listenin', either. You don't expect the gas man to be funny about the meter.

MR BIDDLE I think you are rather ungrateful, Miss Gem. There are so few jokes in the world that we should be grateful for anything that adds to the gaiety of nations.

MISS GEM I don't like bein' patted on the back. A good old laugh's a different

thing. I like Variety all right. But Big Ben's the pick of the bunch. Big Ben and the Specials.

NELL Specials?

MISS GEM Yes. Would Mr So-and-so go to such and such a place, and gale warnings, and people wanted by the police. That's life, that is. (*Becomes aware of a self-consciousness in the atmosphere*) Perhaps I shouldn't 'ave said that. There's two sides to everything, I suppose.

HANNA It's all right, Miss Gem. I'm not wanted by the police any more.

BIDDLE But you *are* still friendly with Fluff Williams.

HANNA Yes, of course.

BIDDLE It hardly seems consistent, does it?

HANNA Consistent? How?

BIDDLE Has Fluff Williams given up his old method of living?

HANNA I don't know anything about that. It isn't my business.

BIDDLE But if you are still friendly with him, you must know how he makes his living.

HANNA I don't, but even if I did what difference would it make?

BIDDLE I should expect it to make a lot of difference if you are determined to give up those ways yourself.

NELL I say, Uncle, don't let's——

HANNA Look here, Mr Biddle, Fluff's been my pal for six years, and we've had some pretty thin times and pretty hot times in those six years, and Fluff's never let me down once. You don't expect that I'm going to stop being chummy with him just because I've turned respectable?

MOSTYN That's understandable, Mr Biddle. Hanna couldn't very well ignore his friend, you know.

BIDDLE No, but he needn't see so much of him, when he knows how that friend makes his living.

HANNA I tell you I don't know anything about it. What Fluff does is none of my business.

BIDDLE But it should be your business. It should be your business to keep out of the company of practising crooks. You know perfectly well that Williams is wanted by the police, but they haven't enough evidence to arrest him.

HANNA Oh, indeed? What do they want him for?

BIDDLE For the Hill Street affair.

HANNA Oh? You seem to know a lot! A lot more than Fluff, I'll be bound.

BIDDLE I make it my business to follow his career, you see. Since Nell married you he's almost a connection, isn't he?

MOSTYN Oh, come, Mr Biddle, I think you're being too hard on Hanna.

BIDDLE I didn't expect to meet Fluff Williams when I came here tonight, and I am dismayed, to say the least of it.

MISS GEM Well, I don't see what you're making such a fuss about, Mr Biddle, really I don't. Mr Williams may rob a bank now and then, but he looks a nice young man for all that. So what's the odds! I should worry!

BIDDLE I come to supper, meet a notorious crook here on friendly terms, find that he has given my niece a valuable brooch, and you expect me to be pleased about it!

NELL Oh, Uncle! I told you, Fluff only came here because it was our anniversary. He never comes here.

BIDDLE But he brought you a diamond brooch, and you took it.

NELL What was I to do with it if I didn't? Refuse it in front of everybody? Who am I to hurt his feelings? You must feel awfully sure of yourself, Uncle, to be so superior. Fluff's a good sort, whatever else he is—Miss Gem's right about that—and I wouldn't hurt him for the world. It isn't like you to want to hurt people. Being good seems to be going to your head. Didn't you ever do anything you shouldn't have? Didn't you ever steal jam when you were a kid?

BIDDLE That seems to be beside the point. What shocks me is not Williams' crimes but his friendly standing here.

HANNA I thought I explained that. Fluff is my friend.

NELL And I've told you that he never comes here, though he's my friend too.

BIDDLE What I'm trying to do is to convince you that it is disgraceful—disgraceful and dangerous—to have him here as a friend.

HANNA And all you are doing is spoiling Nell's party.

BIDDLE (*recollecting himself*) Am I doing that? I'm sorry, Nell. I didn't mean to do that.

MISS GEM (*in a sudden burst*) Well, you are a one! What did you think you was doin'? Just making things amusing? You oughter be ashamed of yourself, so you ought, bullying your niece and you full of her turkey and ice-cream. I'm surprised at you.

BIDDLE Miss Gem!

MISS GEM Don't Miss Gem me, old high-and-mighty! You oughter be ashamed of yourself. You don't deserve to 'ave a niece like Nell to find fault with just because she's nice to a crook! An 'ard 'eart is a deal worse than——

MOSTYN (*laughing*) Wo, Miss Gem, wo! Don't be so hard on him. It's only his anxiety for Nell that makes him so fault-finding, you know. Even Mr Hanna'll acknowledge that it was a bit upsetting for the good uncle to come to see the heroine and find the villain in possession. Eh, Mr Hanna?

HANNA Oh, granted.

BIDDLE (*watching NELL'S face*) I'm sorry, Nell. Williams being here did upset me, but I shouldn't have let it worry me like that. I should have trusted you more, I suppose.

MISS GEM (*tartly*) Of course you should!

MOSTYN And now that you've worried everyone into fits with your fussing you're going to do penance by coming out to Streatham with me to see old Joe.

BIDDLE Oh, not tonight, Mr Mostyn, not tonight!

MOSTYN Yes, tonight, and that's letting you off easy. If I was dragging you all the way from Camden Town that would be what I call a penance. But it's only ten minutes from here. And it'll be a godsend to Joe. Not many penances are as much good to other people as this one'll be. (*To HANNA*) D'you know old Joe Miggs? Used to be a crack across a country.

HANNA That the man who won the Sefton with his saddle under the horse?

MOSTYN That's the man. They used to say the fences used to melt when he came to them. His language, I suppose. Then he met one that didn't melt, and he'd got so used to the melting that he met it about the bottom. He's been on his back ever since. His hobby now is Theosophy, though you mightn't credit it. It's Theosophy that we're going to talk tonight. Come along, Mr Biddle.

BIDDLE If I've been bullying you, my dear, my punishment is going to be very appropriate.

MOSTYN I suppose we can get a bus somewhere?

HANNA Yes, the bus route's the second turning on the left. I'll go down to the bus-stop with you, though, if you're really going. But won't you stop and have a game of cards or something?

BIDDLE I don't think it would be any good saying I would. I seem to be going to

talk Theosophy to old Joe. But anyhow, it will be late enough before we are back in Camden Town. Good-night, Miss Gem.

MISS GEM Good-night, Mr Biddle. No 'ard feelin', I 'ope?

BIDDLE No, no, certainly not. (*A little wistfully*) We are both a little mad on Nell, aren't we?

HANNA It's a way folk have. (*He goes out and comes back with overcoats*)

BIDDLE And you'll come over and see us a little offener, Nell? And then we shan't be so anxious about you.

NELL I'll be over very soon. Perhaps the beginning of the week.

[*She takes her uncle's coat from HANNA and helps him to put it on, while HANNA assists MOSTYN, and MISS GEM continues to lick her ice-cream slowly and luxuriously from the spoon.*]

NELL Then I'll have another look at that boy that gets Miss Gem's goat and see if he's as bad as she makes out. (*Kissing him*) Good-night, Uncle. Take care of yourself. Good-night, Mr Mostyn.

MOSTYN Good-night, my dear. You're a wonderful cook. Thank you for my good dinner.

NELL And thank you for my lovely bag.

MOSTYN Good-night, Miss Gem. Look in and have a chat sometime.

MISS GEM (*waving her spoon airily*) I may, Mr Mostyn, I may.

HANNA When I come back I'll take Miss Gem to the Tube.

NELL But Miss Gem's not going for ages yet.

HANNA Isn't she?

MISS GEM No, she's going to stay and help wash up.

HANNA And what about her beauty-sleep?

MISS GEM Go on with you!

HANNA You be ready when I come back! Washing up is my job.

MOSTYN Let the husband wash up if he wants to, Miss Gem. Washing-up husbands are scarce.

[*HANNA goes out with MOSTYN and BIDDLE.*]

MISS GEM Would you be very offended, dearie, if I licked my plate?

NELL Don't you go licking any plates! There's heaps more in the freezer.

MISS GEM Yes, but any more in me might 'ave an awful effect.

NELL (*taking her plate and going into the kitchen*) Risk it.

MISS GEM It's a long time since I was so greedy and took such a pride in it, so to speak.

NELL (*in the kitchen*) Well, you have my blessing.

MISS GEM I always knew you could cook, dearie, but where did you learn all these frills?

NELL (*coming back*) Oh, love, I suppose.

MISS GEM Don't you believe it. Love's an accident, but cooking's a gift. Oh, my, you do want me to be sick! Let me see your presents, dearie, won't you. Where's the brooch that Mr Williams gave you?

[NELL *takes a little box from the sideboard, opens it and shows it to* MISS GEM.]

MISS GEM Oh, my! My! Ain't that stunning. Simple, but awful good, eh? (*She twists it to look at the back and moves it so as to catch the light*) Between you and me, dearie, where d'you think 'e got it?

NELL He bought it, of course.

MISS GEM Think so?

NELL Certainly. You don't think he'd give me anything that he hadn't come by honestly?

MISS GEM (*after consideration*) Well, no. I shouldn't think so. 'E 'as a nice face. A lot nicer than your good 'usband's, if you'll excuse me sayin' so. But I suppose beauty's only skin-deep—a snare and a collusion. It's a pity, but there it is. And any'ow, that's the only consolation us plain people 'ave in this world. (*Indicating the brooch*) Ain't your 'usband jealous?

NELL (*a little sadly*) No. He knows only too well he hasn't any need to be.

MISS GEM Don't you spoil 'im, dearie. You start the way you mean to go on. I never 'ad a 'usband, but I 'ad a father. And 'e was all the education in men that a woman could want. A university course, that man was. And my mother spoiled 'im, of course. That was the days when a woman 'ad to be married to be anything. And she was so thankful to 'ave 'im that she treated 'im like God Almighty for the first year or two, and then spent the rest of 'er life complaining that 'e thought 'e was. Don't you spoil 'im, dearie. You bring 'im up the way 'e should go now while 'e's soft. (*Wistfully*) 'E's awfully keen on you, isn't 'e?

NELL Yes, I suppose he is.

MISS GEM I should say so! I bin watching 'im. You know, these last years I got so as I was glad to 'ave a room of me own to go back to, and the wireless, and not even a cat to bother me 'ead about. But tonight, seein' the way your 'usband looked at you, I began to wish again I 'adn't been born plain. It's not so bad to be plain when you're oldish, but it's awful to be born that way.

NELL Don't, Miss Gem. What do looks matter!

MISS GEM I know what you're goin' to say. 'It isn't the superficial beauty that matters, it's the beauty of the soul.' That's what all the women writers in the papers say in the articles they write between their beauty treatments! Believe me, the beauty of your soul don't matter a damn if you 'ave a face like a penny toy off a street barrow.

NELL But you haven't! And you have a nice figure. And a figure's awfully important.

MISS GEM (*slightly comforted*) Oh, my figure's not so bad. Perhaps it's just that I 'adn't IT. We didn't talk about IT when I was your age, and, as I said, I'd got to be glad that I 'adn't. But seeing you and your 'usband tonight—well, it made me wish I'd 'ad a bit of the movie stuff when I was young.

NELL You won't believe it, I know, Miss Gem, but you're the lucky one. To be free of all that. Just to be happy your own way and not be torn about inside with having to consider someone else. That's being really happy! I'd give anything to be like that. You don't know your luck. Being in love's not worth all the—all the—oh, I can't explain. There's no peace in it. It isn't being happy at all. Being happy is what I was when Uncle first took me to live with him and I was a kid of fifteen, and there wasn't anything in life but food and clothes and pictures twice a week and the shop and Uncle. That was being happy. Being in love's not being happy. They used to torture people by tying them to horses and making the horses pull different ways at the same time. That's what being in love's like.

MISS GEM You got it bad, dearie, 'aven't you?

NELL Yes—I've got it bad.

MISS GEM Well, don't you spoil 'im. It may be difficult not to when you're like that about 'im and 'e's like that about you, but you'll be layin' up trouble for yourself if you fetch and carry for 'im now. Let's see the rest of your presents before 'e comes back.

NELL (*going to the sideboard*) There aren't very many. Uncle gave me a

cheque.

MISS GEM A cheque, indeed! I 'ope it's as good as it sounds.

NELL Oh, yes, Uncle was always generous. Poor Uncle! I didn't treat him very well after all he did for me. *That's* what love does. Makes you a skunk. That's Mr Mostyn's bag. (*Hands a bag to MISS GEM, who opens it and examines it thoroughly inside and out*) He's a dear, Mr Mostyn.

MISS GEM That's a bit of all right, ain't it? That never came out of Mostyn's!

NELL (*smiling*) You don't think he would lift something just as he was coming away and bring it along, do you?

MISS GEM Oh, well, you never know. Some are mean, and some are forgetful, but there's not many aren't one or the other. What did your 'usband give you?

NELL He took me to the theatre yesterday, you know.

MISS GEM (*dryly*) Took 'imself, too, I suppose!

NELL (*smiling*) Don't begin thinking Ted's mean, because that would be almost funny. The difficulty with Ted is to make him save anything for tomorrow morning.

MISS GEM Yes, but what about tomorrow morning when 'e's got just twopence? Does 'e give you a fair 'alf?

NELL He gives me the whole of it, and says it's got to go as far as sixpence. It's difficult to believe you haven't been married, Miss Gem!

MISS GEM I told you, I 'ad a father. But didn't you get anything from your 'usband, really?

NELL Not yet. He's taking me up town tomorrow to choose what I want.

MISS GEM (*settling down to it*) And what are you goin' to 'ave?

NELL (*in sudden weariness*) I don't think I'm having anything.

MISS GEM Are you sickening for something, dearie?

NELL There isn't anything I want. Nothing like that, I mean.

MISS GEM What do you want, then, I'd like to know?

NELL I'd like to be a drop of dew and be sucked up by the sun till I was just vapour. Light, and cool, and not caring.

MISS GEM (*setting down her spoon and looking at her in dismay*) You got some queer ideas, dearie. You're not——Are you——Is there anything the matter with you?

[NELL, *her thoughts far away, stares at her uncomprehending.*]

MISS GEM Women do 'ave funny ideas, you know, sometimes. Nothing to worry about, but just——

NELL (*light breaking on her*) Are you imagining I'm having a baby? Don't worry yourself. There's nothing like that, thank God!

MISS GEM Why, thank God? It's a bit early as things go nowadays, but quite natural.

NELL Yes, a lot too natural. There'll never be anything like that.

MISS GEM Oh, dearie, don't say that. I just thought to meself as I was coming up the stairs that the next time might be to a christening. You've got to pass on these good looks; you know. And with a 'usband doing so well it would be a shame——

NELL Stop it. Stop it!

MISS GEM (*surprised and offended*) Oh, well, dearie, I beg your pardon, I'm sure. It isn't my business, I know, but I didn't mean any offence.

NELL Don't mind me, Miss Gem. Don't mind me. Uncle got me upset, about Fluff, and I lost my rag, that's all. Don't mind me. (*She brushes away a tear with the flat of her palm*)

MISS GEM (*rising and patting her shoulders*) There, there, dearie. I ain't offended. I know. It must make things a bit thick to 'ave a pack of men squabbling over you like a lot of hyenas. I'd sooner be a football referee. Thank God I ain't got no relations. There is something to be said for a room of your own and a crystal set. But don't take on about it. What does it matter as long as you and your 'usband's 'appy?

NELL Yes, but if someone's happy, someone else isn't. You can't be happy all at the same time, ever.

MISS GEM Life's a business, ain't it! But don't you spoil them eyes over it. Let's wash up before 'e comes back, shall we? (*Begins to collect the dishes on the table*) You get a tray.

NELL Oh, but you mustn't! You're a guest of honour, and it wouldn't do to——

MISS GEM Go on, dearie, buzz off and get the tray.

NELL No, but, Miss Gem, listen. I——

MISS GEM If you don't buzz off and get that tray I'll stay and do the floors, ten o'clock or no ten o'clock.

[*Exit NELL to the kitchen. MISS GEM continues to pile plates together, pouring the dregs of beer into one glass and drinking it at a gulp.*]

There are sounds of HANNA'S return. The brooch is still lying exposed on the table. She shuts the case, after a last admiring glance, and replaces it on the sideboard. She is back at the table when HANNA comes in.]

HANNA Steady on! That's my job.

MISS GEM Looks like you're going to lose it.

HANNA Am I? Who says so?

MISS GEM I do.

HANNA What makes you think that?

MISS GEM Possession is nine points of the law. That's what.

HANNA You put on your coat right now, and I'll see you down to the station.

MISS GEM You're very anxious to see my back, aren't you? What makes you so keen to dry a few dishes?

HANNA Little hobby of mine.

MISS GEM Hobby? Well, it's the passion of my life.

HANNA (*lowering his voice*) See here, Miss Gem, joking apart, this is the first time I've been alone with Nell today.

MISS GEM Oh? Oh, that's it, is it? Well, why couldn't you say so before? What did you do with my coat? (*Calling*) Dearie, Mr Hanna's going to take me down to the Toob.

NELL (*at the door*) That's sensible, now. But thank you for wanting to clear up.

[TED *comes back with coat and scarf.*]

NELL It won't take more than a few minutes, you know. Ted's a nib at it. Aren't you, Ted?

HANNA We'll get her over some day just to watch me. No account really does me justice.

MISS GEM (*wistfully*) I'd like to come back someday, dearie, but it's a long way, and you mightn't be in, and——

NELL Yes, I wouldn't like you to come all that way for nothing. Suppose I write to you and make a date. That would be the best way, wouldn't it?

MISS GEM It's very kind of you, dearie. I 'ave enjoyed seein' you again—like a breath of Spring, it is. And my evening and the supper and everything. I'm sorry I butted in like that, but I 'ave enjoyed meself.

NELL Well, d'you know what the nicest part of my evening was? The flowers you brought. So there!

MISS GEM Well, well. It's very kind of you to say so, dearie.

[They move into the lobby.]

HANNA I'll be back in five minutes, Nell. As soon as I've seen Miss Gem into her train.

NELL Righto. I'll have the water boiling.

MISS GEM As if the likes of me needed to be seen into trains! Why, I could run the 'ole service. Good-night, dearie, and many 'appy returns!

NELL *(from the sitting-room door)* Good-night.

[She comes back to the table, but before she has reached it the outer door opens again and HANNA is heard saying 'Just a moment, Miss Gem. I think I left them on the table.']

HANNA *(in a hurried undertone, as he takes his gloves from the table)* Three o'clock, probably. Don't wait up, beauty.

NELL All right. But be careful, Ted. Promise!

HANNA Don't you worry! *(Gives her a long kiss without embracing her, and goes out. NELL begins listlessly to put the dishes on the tray)*

[The curtain is lowered to denote the passing of three hours.]

[The curtain goes up on the sitting-room in darkness except for the glow of the dying fire. A key is heard fumbling in the outer door, and the door opens and shuts quickly. There is a pause, and the living-room door opens very slowly and HANNA comes in. He shuts the door and stands there for a moment. Almost as an afterthought he switches on the light. He stands there staring a little, like one slightly drunk. He is still wearing his overcoat, and is still carrying his hat. His clothes are slightly but not noticeably dishevelled.]

[NELL comes in from the bedroom in a dressing-gown, a comb in her hand.]

NELL You're very early? Is anything wrong? *(As she looks at him)* What's the matter, Ted? What is it?

HANNA *(indistinctly)* ... made a mess of it.

NELL (*crossing to him*) What is it? What's happened? Tell me, Ted. For mercy's sake, tell me.

HANNA I never meant to do it. I swear I didn't.

NELL Do what? What is it?

HANNA ... just an accident.

NELL Oh, God! don't stand there like a talking doll! Tell me what's wrong.

HANNA Everything's wrong. Made a hash of it.

NELL Did you run into the police? Do they know it was you? What is it?

HANNA No, they don't know yet.

NELL What is it, then? Did you leave your kit behind?

HANNA Not my kit, but I——

NELL What then? You did leave something, then?

HANNA Yes, I left the revolver. I dropped it somewhere.

NELL But Ted! I never knew you carried a revolver.

HANNA I only bought it the other day.

NELL Is that all you left?

HANNA Yes. Quite enough. Quite enough.

[*After a moment's pause NELL turns away and pours him out a drink at the sideboard.*]

NELL (*giving him the glass*) Here! You're a lovely crook, losing your nerve for a thing like that!

[*HANNA tosses down the drink greedily. She takes his coat from him and his hat and goes out to hang them in the hall. He stands rubbing the backs of his hands slowly, as if cold, and as she comes back he moves over to the fire and stretches out his hands to it.*]

HANNA It's cold.

[*She sits down in the chair by the hearth and pokes the fire into a blaze.*]

NELL There you are! Now tell me about it. Let's hear the worst.

HANNA (*sinking down suddenly on the pouffe at her feet*) Oh, Nell, be nice to me. I'm scared to death. Be nice to me. Don't go back on me now, Nell!

NELL (*amazed*) But who's talking about going back on you? What's the matter

with you, Ted?

HANNA I'm afraid, I tell you, I'm afraid. I've made an awful mess of it. I'm afraid.

[He buries his head in her lap. Her face softens, and her hand plays with his hair.]

NELL Poor, little frightened crook! What went wrong, Ted?

HANNA Well, I didn't know he was there till I turned round.

NELL Didn't know who was there? A flatty?

HANNA The owner.

NELL You mean the man who owned the house?

HANNA Yes. I thought he had a gun, you see. There wasn't time to think. I never meant to do it. The thing just went off. I thought it must have wakened everyone in the street it made such a row. And then——

NELL *(seizing him by the shoulder and pushing him up so that she can see his face)* What are you talking about! What are you talking about!

HANNA I tell you I didn't mean to do it! I thought he had a gun. I hadn't time to think. I didn't know I'd done it till he fell. Don't look at me like that, Nell. *Don't look at me like that!*

[He throws out his arms and hides his face in her lap again. She does not move to repulse him, but draws the upper part of her body away from him, her elbows supported on either arm of the chair. He is sobbing now. She watches him for a moment without moving.]

NELL *(in a slow whisper)* So that's what you've done!

HANNA *(looking up)* I didn't mean to do it. I swear I didn't, Nell. You've got to believe me.

NELL *(not listening)* God!

HANNA Nell! You believe me, don't you? *(Shaking her a little to force her attention)*

NELL Believe what?

HANNA That I didn't mean it.

NELL What's that got to do with it? You've killed someone, haven't you?

HANNA Yes, but I never meant to. He shouldn't have threatened me. I wasn't out for any rough stuff. The bloody fool was asking for it. How was I to know he was behind me! I just turned round, and there he was. No warning or anything. What did

he expect? I didn't know I'd shot him till I'd done it. I'd never have done it if he'd given me time to think.

NELL Are you blaming him for getting in the way of your gun?

HANNA Nell, don't! I didn't have time to think, I tell you.

NELL You shot him because you had the wind up?

HANNA Nell, don't go back on me! Don't go back on me just because I've made a fool of myself.

NELL Is that what you call it?... What's going to happen now?

HANNA Listen, Nell, if you say I was here all the time they can't do anything to me. They can't touch me. You've only got to swear that and I'm safe.

NELL But you said you left the revolver there.

HANNA Yes, I know. But I don't think they can trace it to me.

NELL Who will they trace it to, then?

HANNA I don't mean that. I mean it might be anybody's. It hasn't any marks on it.

NELL Then why did you mind that you'd left it?

HANNA Oh, I was all rattled. I couldn't think straight. Even if they suspected it was mine they couldn't get past your testimony, see? See? The chap I bought it from wouldn't say anything. I'll be all right if you say I wasn't out of here all night.

NELL But what if other people saw you? Saw you go or come, I mean?

HANNA There wasn't anyone, and it's foggy. They'd not be able to swear to me. But you could, see? See? You'll do it, won't you?

NELL But supposing ...

HANNA Supposing what! Oh, Nell, don't go on swithering. You couldn't not do it, could you?

NELL It isn't much good swearing to something they can prove a lie, is it? And what about the man you bought it from? How do we know he'll be all right about it? What's to hinder him splitting?

HANNA Because he won't want to have anything to do with the police. I know him. He hadn't a licence for it himself. That bit's safe.

NELL But is it all safe? It sounds too simple, Ted. There must be a snag somewhere.

HANNA (*on his feet*) I don't believe you want to save me. I believe you're just making excuses. What is it? Are you tired of me? Do you want to go to Williams? Is

that it?

NELL Ted! Ted, are you crazy?

HANNA (*beside himself*) That's it, isn't it?

NELL You know quite well that your little finger is more to me than the whole of Fluff Williams. You know it far too well, Ted. What are you making all this fuss about?

HANNA If that's true, why are you going back on me? Why won't you promise to swear I was here all night? What are you swithering and torturing me for?

NELL I'm only trying to make sure that if we're going to tell lies we won't be telling them for nothing. *Someone's* got to do the thinking in this business.

HANNA But what's wrong? It's all plain sailing if you swear I was here.

NELL You're sure you haven't left anything but the gun behind? You're sure of that, Ted? Stop and think.

HANNA I don't need to think. I know.

NELL And there's no name or anything on the gun?

HANNA No, nothing. I swear.

NELL And you're sure the man who sold it to you won't split?

HANNA Absolutely certain.

[*There are sounds outside of footsteps coming up the stairs. They both pause, listening, with their eyes on the door.*]

NELL (*whispering*) It's the top floor. He often comes in late.

HANNA Shut up, damn you! Listen!

[*The footsteps mount to their floor, pause, and go on, dying away as they ascend.*]

NELL There, I told you.

[*HANNA sinks trembling to the pouffe again and buries his face in his hands.*]

HANNA Give me another drink. That one was no use.

[*NELL mixes another drink and brings it to him. She watches while he drinks it and, taking the glass from him, replaces it on the mantelpiece. She sits down slowly in the chair she has previously occupied.*]

NELL All right, Ted. I'll say you were here all the time.

HANNA Oh, bless you! Bless you! You promise, do you? No matter what happens you'll say I was here. No matter what happens?

NELL No matter what happens.

HANNA Swear it, then. Swear it before God.

NELL I don't believe in God. I'll give you my word. You'll have to take it or leave it.

HANNA All right, Nell, I'll take it. Between us we'll fool them yet, won't we? They can't do anything to me now that you've given your word. Oh, Nell! (*He leans nearer as if to embrace her, but she shrinks*)

NELL No, don't.

HANNA You don't hate me, do you?

NELL Does it look as if I hated you!

HANNA No. You're being a sport. I realise that. But we're safe, you know, quite safe. I promise you that. You stick to your story, and nothing can touch us.

NELL You mean the law can't. But the thing's happened to us. Nothing can alter that.... That man—was he married?

HANNA I don't know.

NELL It's awful, Ted. Awful.

HANNA Nell! Don't keep reminding me! Don't you think he's in front of my eyes enough without that?

NELL Is he?... Poor Ted!

[*He puts out his hand tentatively and lays it on her knee, and she covers it with her own.*]

HANNA I never thought things would turn out like this.

NELL No, it wasn't part of the programme, was it?

HANNA But it's going to be all right, you'll see. And once this business is over I'll give it all up and go straight. (*She says nothing*) Aren't you glad?

NELL I probably shall be when the time comes.

HANNA Nell, don't be so hard.

NELL What do you expect me to be? Sympathetic?

HANNA You do hate me!

NELL No, I love you, worse luck.

HANNA Nell! (*After a moment's glance into her face he puts his forehead down on the hand that is covering his own*) There's only you between me and —You do think it's going to be all right, don't you? If it isn't, it'll be the rope for me.

NELL And a matter of—ten years, is it?—for me.

[He lifts his head as if that had occurred to him for the first time. He drops it again.]

HANNA Yes, but it's going to be all right. It'll be all right as long as we stick together. You'll see!

NELL Life's a business, isn't it! Do you know who says that? Miss Gem. And this evening she was envying me! She was envying me!

[She begins to laugh to herself under her breath, bitterly, as THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN.]

ACT III

SCENE I

The scene is the same as in the second act. It is about three o'clock in the afternoon, two days later. It is a bright day and the window is open from the bottom so that the sparrows can be heard twittering. Distant chimneys are shining in the sun. NELL is ironing garments of lace and crêpe-de-chine on the gate-legged table which she has folded and removed to between the window and the fireplace. The electric iron is plugged in place of the reading-lamp. She irons without enthusiasm, testing the heat of the iron as though she were testing theories instead of fact.

As she irons footsteps are heard faintly, mounting the stairs. She pauses and listens intently until they have passed her door and gone upwards. She leans on the table for a moment as if the relief were overwhelming, and then resumes her work.

Presently, without warning, the outer door bangs and HANNA comes into the room quickly, shutting the door behind him and leaning against it.

NELL swings round startled, but is reassured by the sight of him.

NELL Oh, it's only you! What a fright you gave me, Ted. I didn't hear you come up. How were you so quiet? (*Sees the fury on his face and falters*) What's the matter, Ted?

HANNA (*advancing slowly on her*) You damned slut! You've told them.

NELL Told them? What d'you mean.

HANNA I mean what I say. You've been talking. That's what. You're no better than the rest of the women. Loose-tongued little devil! D'you know where I've been? D'you know where I've come from? The station!

NELL What station?

HANNA Don't be a damned fool. The police-station. 'Inspector Wilkins presents his compliments and would Ted Hanna have a chat with him at the station for a few minutes!' Yes! That's a nice thing to have sprung on a man in the middle of the High Street, isn't it? Now, what did you tell them? What did you say to them?

NELL Say to who? What are you talking about, Ted?

HANNA A little less of the innocence! To the police when they were here.

NELL There haven't been any police here. There's been no one here this morning

but the milkman.

HANNA Don't tell me! They know I was out on Thursday night. Do you hear me? They know I was out. If you didn't tell them, who did?

NELL (*as one considering a specimen*) The trouble with you, Ted, is that you've been running too long with people who tell lies on oath just as a hobby. I've told you I would say you were here, and I can't do more. You must take it or leave it.

HANNA (*holding her by the arm*) Mean to say you didn't tell them? Then who did?

NELL Oh, take a pull on yourself, Ted! It's a mystery to me how you ever had the nerve to take a penny from a kid's bank. About a hundred strangers saw you on Thursday night, didn't they? What's to prevent someone who knew you taking a look at you too?

HANNA But it was foggy. No one could have recognised me in that fog.

NELL Well, it was probably only a guess. Or perhaps the police are just fishing. You seem to have risen, all right.

HANNA Risen! Not me. They didn't get any change out of me.

NELL You waited to take it out of me instead?

HANNA Well, you'll admit it was a bit of a facer. Everything depends on your word, see? Will you swear there was no one here today?

NELL No, I won't. I told you before I didn't believe in swearing. And anyhow, what's the good of swearing to you? You'd go back on an oath if it suited your book. How are you to believe other people wouldn't?

HANNA I'd believe it if *you* swore it.

NELL And yet the first time there's a little snag you fly off the handle and come and curse me.

HANNA Well, I tell you, it was a facer for me. They're not just fishing. I know their little ways well enough to know that. They've got some kind of information. That's a facer. Where did they get it?

NELL You're sure you didn't leave anything else behind that night?

HANNA Oh, no, it isn't that. If it was that they'd have kept me on suspicion. They hadn't enough on me to keep me. That's a consolation.

NELL Not enough on you? But you said last night that they had no evidence against that man they've got, and yet they've detained him.

HANNA Oh, he's all right. They haven't got a thing on him. They've got to do something to keep their reputation up. If they hadn't got him handy they'd have kept me, just to keep the public quiet. Forget it!

NELL But are you sure that——

HANNA Oh, stop arguing! Having to deal with Wilkins' jaw is quite enough for one day without having to——Did you darn the blue socks?

NELL Yes.

HANNA Where are they?

NELL In your sock drawer.

[He goes into the bedroom and she turns slowly and resumes her ironing. There is the sound of drawers being opened and shut angrily in the bedroom, and the thud of boots dropping.]

HANNA *(in the bedroom)* I can't find any handkerchiefs.

NELL The fresh ones are on the top of the chest of drawers.

[After a pause HANNA comes in more slowly, shutting the door behind him. He moves over to NELL and puts a tentative hand on her shoulder. She takes no notice.]

HANNA I'm sorry, Nell. I shouldn't have said that to you. Wilkins had me all frazzled.

[She does not answer.]

HANNA Don't be sore with me. I didn't mean any of it, you know. If I'd stopped and thought——But I came straight here from Wilkins and Wilkins had me all——

NELL Oh, it doesn't matter. Have you had something to eat?

HANNA Yes, I ate before I got Wilkins' message. Well, I shan't be long. *(Pausing on the way to the door)* You know, Nell, that fog was a great bit of luck. They haven't a thing on us as long as you keep your head.

NELL *(turning to look at him with the iron in her hand)* You're awfully funny, Ted, if you only knew it.

HANNA Funny, am I? Well, it's better than being the other way. So long. Back in a jiff.

[He goes out, but as he reaches the outer door he is heard in animated conversation. NELL puts down the iron in a frightened way and turns

to meet whatever may be coming. The living-room door opens, and HANNA ushers in MISS GEM.]

HANNA It's Miss Gem.

NELL (*relief adding to her welcome*) Why, Miss Gem! Well, I never. I am glad to see you.

MISS GEM I know it ain't the done thing, dearie, to plant meself on you so soon again. Specially after coming to a party I wasn't asked to, and all. But I thought you might be feelin' blue with no one of your own to talk to about——

HANNA Shan't be long, Miss Gem. See you when I come back.

[*Exit HANNA.*]

NELL Oh, but you needn't make excuses. You know quite well I'm glad to see you any time. Take off your things.

MISS GEM No, dearie, no, I ain't come to stay. I'll just loosen my wrap. (*Loosens the large scarf which is draped round her*) 'Ot, isn't it? You're looking very cheerful, I must say.

NELL (*lightly*) Oh, yes, why not?

MISS GEM Well, I don't know. I always thought you were one of the soft-hearted kind that took other people's troubles on their shoulders when they needn't. But I'm glad to see you so bright, anyway. Havin' an ironing? My, that's a pretty camisole. Hand-made, too. Make it yourself?

NELL No, Ted gave it to me. I saw it in a window in Brook Street, and he went in and bought it.

MISS GEM (*examining it minutely*) I thought it was West End! I like that line of drawn-thread work. You always 'ad good taste, dearie. 'Member that brown frock with the pique collar you used to wear in the shop? I always thought that the height of taste. Plain but not severe, and with a cachett, as they call it. You could 'ave been a duchess, dearie, if you 'adn't gone and married that Hanna man.

NELL Now don't you be rude about Ted. And anyway, there isn't a Duke available nowadays.

MISS GEM Not in England, there isn't. Not till the next divorce, that is. Did you 'ear that the Standenshires don't live together any more? Bet you anything you like they'll be the next. But there's 'eaps of the foreign kind. The kind you see in silk trousers and not much else in pictures of the Lydo. Not that I could *see* you with that kind of 'usband, you know, but there wasn't anything to 'inder you 'avin' that kind

if you wanted. Nowadays anyone marries anyone. You don't even 'ave to *look* a lady any more. There's that boy of Besselden's—the heir, mind you—been and married the girl that 'ad the bathin'-machines at Brightling. And 'er so fat she couldn't get into one of 'er own machines. Me own idea is that she took away 'is trousers and forced 'is 'and. You 'ad only to play your cards right, dearie, and you might 'ave bin living in a palace in Venice or somewhere instead of living in a flat you couldn't swing a cat in.

NELL I never want to swing a cat, and I've always heard that palaces in Venice didn't have any baths.

MISS GEM Or W.C.s. You *could* do without a wash at a pinch. But it would be rather nice to 'ave people say 'Your Grace' and gondolas to go about in, and all that.

NELL And how was all this to come to me, selling papers in Friar Street?

MISS GEM Things don't *come*. You go out and get them. That's what I'm saying. If you'd liked you could 'ave bin anything.

NELL And now I'm nothing?

MISS GEM Oh, now, dearie, don't make me out worse than I am. I may be plain-speaking, but I'm not downright rude. Anyway you're 'appy, and that's the main thing. I just wish you'd fallen in love with someone more—more thrilling than Mr Hanna.

NELL Ted's quite thrilling enough for me!

MISS GEM Oh, I know. That's what love does. There was a woman in the bus with three kids. All sprawling and all sticky, they were, and she not able to find 'er purse, or sit quiet or 'old 'er 'ead up. And I just said, 'There but for the grace of God!' Don't know 'oo said it first—someone in history—but I'm well acquainted with the feelin'.

NELL You'll get it in the neck on Judgement Day for being a Pharisee, see if you don't!

MISS GEM Pharisee? People 'oo can't appreciate pictures and what not?

NELL No, people who think themselves better than other people.

MISS GEM I never said better. I said luckier. An electric iron is a treat, ain't it? That's one thing I don't 'ave in my room. Mine's the kind that would go through the floor if I let it fall. I thought once of savin' up for one of them methylated-spirit ones, but I spent the money on something else. Just as well, perhaps. If I'd bought methylated, regular, Friar Street would say I was drinkin' meself to death. There isn't

anything Friar Street wouldn't say. They put two and two together and make twenty-five. And an 'alf. I expect they'll be gloatin' now over poor Mr Williams and sayin', 'I told you so'.

NELL Mr Williams? D'you mean Fluff?

MISS GEM Yes, of course.

NELL Why, what's wrong with Fluff?

MISS GEM Wrong with 'im! (*She pauses in dismay and continues in a small voice*) 'Aven't you seen a paper today?

NELL Only the early-morning one. What is it?

MISS GEM They've arrested 'im for that murder.

[*There is a long pause while NELL stares at her.*]

MISS GEM (*pointing to the iron which NELL is holding motionless on the garment*) Mind, dearie, you're burning it.

[*NELL puts the iron on its stand.*]

NELL Fluff! What's he got to do with it?

MISS GEM It said that the revolver they found was 'is.

NELL What!

MISS GEM You know they were looking for the man that owned that there revolver. And it seems they've proved it was 'is. Here, dearie, come and sit down. I didn't mean to bring bad news to you. I thought you'd know all about it. That's why I came over. There, sit down there. By rights I should be in the Temple this afternoon—it's Mr Thrale's day away from the office, and 'e doesn't like cleaning when 'e's there—but I knew you'd be upset at them taking Mr Williams, so I come over. I was sort of surprised at you bein' so merry and bright, but it never crossed me mind you wouldn't know.

NELL What else did it say? Have you the paper?

MISS GEM No, I didn't think you wouldn't 'ave seen it, see?

NELL What else did it say?

MISS GEM It didn't say much. Just that he was goin' to be brought up this morning. If I'd 'ave known in time I'd 'ave gone to the court. I don't believe 'e did it, do you? A mean murder, like that. He 'ad too nice a face.

NELL But what about the other man?

MISS GEM What other man?

NELL The man it said they had detained.

MISS GEM There wasn't anyone else. It was 'im they 'ad all the time. 'The man the police have been detaining for the last two days is now known to be'—that's what the paper said, see?

[NELL *buries her face in her hands.*]

MISS GEM Don't take on, dearie. It'll all come right, you'll see. I'm sure 'e didn't do it. And they don't 'ang innocent men, not in this country they don't. Don't you worry about it. You be thankful your 'usband reformed in time. It might 'ave bin 'im in Williams' place. That would 'ave been a pretty mess!

[*The electric bell rings. NELL sits up startled.*]

MISS GEM Shall I see 'oo it is, dearie, and send them away?

NELL No. No, I'll have to go.

[*She goes to the front door.*]

A VOICE (*at the door*) Is this where Ted Hanna lives?

NELL Yes.

VOICE Could I see him for a minute?

NELL He's not in. Will you leave a message?

VOICE Well, if it's all the same I'd like to wait for him.

NELL Yes, certainly. Come in.

[*She comes back leading a LARGE FAIR MAN who has plain-clothes officer written all over him.*]

NELL This is Miss Gem.

BURT Pleased to meet you. My name's Burt.

[MISS GEM *glares at him. He spells his name.*]

MISS GEM (*enlightened but not mollified*) Pleased to meet you.

NELL Won't you sit down?

BURT I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs Hanna, but I'd like to see your husband for half a minute.

MISS GEM You an old friend of Mr Hanna's?

BURT Well, not exactly, but I've known him for quite a while now.

NELL (*busy clearing away her ironing*) This place is an awful mess, but in a flat

this size you do things where it happens to be handiest. If you'll excuse me a minute, I'll put on the kettle and we can have tea.

MISS GEM Not for me, dearie. I didn't come to stay.

BURT Please don't bother, Mrs Hanna.

NELL Oh, but we might as well have tea. It isn't too early for you, is it, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM Tea's never too early for me, but I said when I came that I wasn't stayin', and I didn't come to eat, so no tea for me.

NELL Oh, what nonsense. *(She carries the linen and the iron into the kitchen)* I won't be a minute.

[MISS GEM stares in a hostile silence at BURT.]

BURT *(doing his best)* Wonderful day, isn't it? Just like summer.

MISS GEM Might be worse. *(She stares at his boots until he moves them uncomfortably)* It's a mystery to me why they don't issue you with fancy boots for this kind of work. These regulation number tens are as good as an advert.

BURT Number nines, Miss Jewel.

MISS GEM The name's Gem. Well, let me tell you you're wasting your time nosing round 'ere. Ted Hanna reformed ages ago.

BURT Oh?

MISS GEM Yes, 'e married the nicest little girl in London, twelve months ago, and stopped associating with the police. 'E's got a business of 'is own now. 'E's reformed, I tell you.

[NELL comes back, crosses to the sideboard and begins to prepare a tea-tray.]

MISS GEM Mr Burt says it's time they reformed the way they number the 'ouses round 'ere.

NELL Yes, it is a silly way, but this part used to have fields and things between the houses, and when they built new ones they were rather up the gum-tree about the numbers, see?

BURT Awful how every place is getting built over, isn't it? You been long in this district, Mrs Hanna?

NELL *(choking and recovering)* Twelve months.

BURT Nice district. Nice shops, and all that. Some of them'll beat the West End

for bargains. At least so I've heard the wife say.

MISS GEM You married, Mr Burt?

BURT I am, Miss Gem.

MISS GEM (*nastily*) Fancy!

BURT When people haven't to pay big rents they haven't to charge about twice what the stuff is worth. I expect you've found that, Mrs Hanna?

NELL I don't buy anything but food down here, I'm afraid. It isn't only rent you pay for in the West End, you know. It's cut and finish.

MISS GEM Of course it is, but you wouldn't expect a——(*She is going to say 'bobby', but stops herself in time*) man to see that.

BURT Oh, I expect most women'd like West End clothes if they could afford them. But not many husbands can afford Bond Street prices, eh, Mrs Hanna?

NELL There are such things as sales.

BURT Oh, I know. Where you ruin the clothes you have on trying to get something that won't go on when you get it. Ha, ha!

NELL Oh, come, Mr Burt! You don't call Oxford Street the West End, do you?

BURT (*punctured*) Not the West End? What is it, then?

NELL (*shrugging*) The waste end, I should say.

BURT Ha, ha! You're a wit, Mrs Hanna, you are. And what do you call the West End, if I may be so bold?

NELL I don't know if you'll recognise it, but it's the kind of place with a piece of tweed and a string of beads in the window, and 'nothing at that price, modom' inside.

BURT Well, you seem to know, Mrs Hanna, you seem to know. Do you go up often?

NELL Once a week, perhaps. But I don't buy clothes every time.

BURT I suppose you go up to theatres. That's one thing you miss down here.

NELL Oh, I don't know. There's always the cinemas.

BURT Yes, it's a good district for that. You could almost go to a different one every day of the week. And fine houses, too, most of them. They had a big star—forget his name—appearing in person at the Playhouse one day last week. Thursday, I think it was. You didn't happen to be there?

NELL Thursday? No we had a party here on Thursday. It was the anniversary of

the day Ted and I (*she looks defiantly at BURT*) got married.

BURT Oh? A party?

MISS GEM Yes, and what's more, I was there.

BURT Oh?

MISS GEM Six of us was there.

BURT Quite a celebration. Was it a gay night, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM If you mean were we tiddly, then the answer is no.

BURT Oh, I didn't mean that. You misunderstand me. I only meant did you keep it up late?

MISS GEM Oh, late enough to be satisfactory and not late enough to be awkward.

BURT Awkward?

MISS GEM Last Toob, you know. My Rolls is bein' over-hauled.

BURT I see. Tubes were very handy that night, too. Nothing like a Tube in a fog.

NELL Yes, it was pretty bad. I was quite anxious till Ted came back from seeing Miss Gem to the station.

BURT Oh? Did he take long?

NELL Not very. It was striking eleven as we locked up, I remember.

BURT Oh? Glad to drop into bed, I suppose.

NELL Well, we washed up first. I never can bear to see dirty dishes in front of me in the morning. But we were in bed by half-past, I should say.

BURT Very respectable. It's about time they found some way of stopping these fogs. They say there is a way, but they haven't found it out yet. So I suppose we live in hopes. They're worse this side of the river than the other, too. That's about the only bad thing that can be said about this district. When there's a fog it is foggy. But bar that, it's the nicest suburb in London. I've always had a soft spot for South London myself. Smells of the sea more than up Hampstead way, and the sea was one of my ambitions. I did want to be a jockey once, but I grew a bit too much. Then I wanted to go to sea, till they took me for a row at Margate. But I still like to see the masts and funnels over the roofs when I'm crossing the river. Quite worth living on the south side for, that is. You don't have anything like that up Hampstead way. That was a nasty affair Hampstead way last week.

NELL Yes.

BURT Awful to be done in like that, without any warning, just because someone lost his nerve. Nice chap, he was, too.

NELL Yes. Dreadful.

BURT The kind that feeds birds in the parks, that's what he was. Wouldn't harm a fly. The kind that puts spiders out the window. Well, that Williams chap is for it, that's one comfort.

NELL Fluff didn't do it!

BURT No? Why d'you think that?

NELL It isn't—it isn't his line of business, for one thing.

BURT That's true. More your husband's preserve, eh? Isn't he jealous?

NELL Ted's out of that now. But he wouldn't believe that Fluff did it, either.

BURT No? Well, I'm a little surprised at Williams, myself. I never knew Fluff lose his nerve before. But they've got him with the goods on him this time. Unless a miracle happens he'll be taking a short walk one of these days.

NELL But he didn't do it, I tell you! No one who knew Fluff could believe he did it. What have they got against him?

BURT They've got about ten finger-prints on the revolver, and he admits it was his.

NELL But that doesn't prove anything!

BURT Not alone, it doesn't. But he has no alibi for Thursday night. He was 'walking', if you please! Walking, in that fog!

NELL But that is just like Fluff! I tell you, if you knew him——Fluff liked mooning round by himself.

BURT Yes? Well, it's going to prove an expensive hobby for him, I'm afraid.

NELL Oh, how can everyone be so stupid! Fluff wouldn't do a thing like that.

BURT You'd be surprised at the things people'll do. You seem to know Williams pretty well?

NELL Yes, he used to come to my uncle's shop for tobacco. And—he used to be a friend of my husband's.

BURT Used to be? Aren't they friends any more, then?

MISS GEM Of course they're not! Mr Hanna has a respectable business of his own now.

BURT Yes? Then you haven't seen Williams for a long time?

NELL (*after a pause*) I hadn't till last week.

BURT Last week, eh?

NELL He happened to look in to wish us many happy returns when we had that party last Thursday. Just for old sake's sake.

BURT I see. Pity you finished the party so early. If you hadn't locked up so early you might have given him an alibi. That's to say, if he didn't do it. Sure you locked up at eleven?

NELL (*after a pause*) Yes, quite. Surely Fluff has some kind of defence!

BURT Oh, he says he sold the gun to a man he met in a teashop a week ago. Doesn't know the man, or anything about him. That's a fine defence for a murder charge!

NELL But they haven't charged him yet, have they?

BURT (*looking at his watch*) They have, by now. I expect by this time he's committed for trial. I say, it's later than I thought. I think I'll change my mind and not wait for your husband, Mrs Hanna. (*Stands up*) If you tell him that——

[*The outer door opens and shuts, and HANNA comes briskly into the room. He stops abruptly on seeing BURT, but recovers himself.*]

HANNA (*smiling*) Well, if it isn't Burt! Looking for me?

BURT Not exactly. Inspector Wilkins would like to have a talk with you first time you're passing the station.

HANNA What! another one! He's getting quite gossipy, isn't he?

BURT Oh, have you seen him already?

HANNA Yes, we had a jaw about an hour ago.

BURT Oh, in that case it's all right. Someone got in before me with the message. Sorry to have bothered you, Mrs Hanna. Thank you for the interesting conversation. Good-bye, Miss Gem.

[MISS GEM *bows coldly.*]

BURT Pleased to have met you. You've got a very nice little place here, Hanna. Well dug in, aren't you?—every way. How's the commercial stunt doing?

HANNA Oh, enough to keep the—wolf from the door.

[*They go out. NELL moves over to the window and stands staring out.*]

MISS GEM Good riddance! (*She looks uneasily at the back of the silent NELL, and begins to gather her scarf round her*) I'm goin' too, dearie, as soon as that's off the doorstep. I wouldn't be seen dead on the same flight of steps with it. I

suppose they've got to 'ave them, but it's a pity. Ever notice what a lot of necessary things are nasty? Castor-oil and ants and things. I didn't know about ants bein' any good till I listened on the wireless, but it seems they are. I can't remember what they do, exactly. Not go about asking silly questions, anyhow. Fancy getting paid for asking questions! Easy money, I call it. And all that about Mr Williams bein' for it! All swank, that is, dearie. I should worry! Something'll come to light in a day or two, and then they'll get the skunk that done it, and Mr Williams'll be out, as free as a bird. I shouldn't wonder if this didn't make 'im reform. It's an ill wind, you know.

[Enter HANNA. MISS GEM stands up.]

MISS GEM Well, I'll be goin'. I only looked in to cheer up your wife there about Mr Williams. All nonsense them taking 'im up, I says. But nothing to worry about. They'll 'ave the right man in a day or two and then 'e'll be out, and no great 'arm done.

NELL (*who has turned round during MISS GEM'S speech and is watching HANNA, who is avoiding her eye*) Oh, but Miss Gem, you were going to stay for a cup of tea.

MISS GEM Excuse me contradicting you flat, but I was nothing of the sort. I said distinctly I wasn't goin' to 'ave a meal in this 'ouse this day. I 'aven't got to the stage of coming for me food yet. You and me'll 'ave a date, one day, dearie, and I'll come and *call*. You know! Cake in the saucer.

NELL (*half-heartedly*) Oh, but the kettle's boiling.

MISS GEM Don't you shake me. I'm not 'avin' tea 'ere today. Any'ow, I think there's still time to do a little in the Temple. It'll only be a lick and a promise for more, but I don't expect Mr Thrale'll see any different. Gentlemen are like that. If you see a man that goes trailing his fingers to see if the mantelpiece 'as been dusted, you can bet your bottom dollar 'e ain't no class. The real kind never notices. Not that I don't do my work proper. I give them all a fair deal. Soap and water and plenty elbow-grease, that's me. A gentleman once said that I'd take a hose to the pearly gates. I never knew rightly whether 'e meant it nice or nasty, but I gave 'im the benefit. It sounds a bit blasphemous to me mind, though. Well, good-bye, dearie, don't you spoil them looks with worryin'. Good-bye, Mr Hanna. (*She goes out with NELL*) You'll find it's as I said——(*The door shuts*)

[HANNA walks restlessly round the room listening to the murmur of MISS GEM'S departure. When NELL comes back she shuts the door and leans against it, and he turns slowly to face her. There is a moment's

silence.]

NELL So it was Fluff's gun? (*He does not answer*) Why didn't you tell me it was Fluff's gun?

HANNA What did it matter whose gun it was?

NELL No, but you were afraid if I knew whose it was I wouldn't promise.

HANNA What difference did it make whose gun it was?

NELL Oh, Ted, you're like water—running through my fingers every time I try to—to feel you. How long have you known it was Fluff they had?

HANNA Only today. (*But it is obvious that he is lying*)

NELL How did you find out?

HANNA At the station.

NELL You knew when you came in after dinner?

HANNA Yes.

NELL And you didn't tell me.

HANNA I was far too upset about things to tell you. Don't you think it was a knock-out for me? Fluff's my pal. Don't you think it was a facer for me to find out that they had him.

NELL Yes.... I expect it was.... It's awful, Ted.... You didn't mention finger-prints when you wanted me to promise on Thursday night.

HANNA It wasn't because I wanted you to promise! Don't be trying to make me out a rotter. You'd think you were doing your best to put wrong motives to everything I do. How was I to think of Fluff's finger-prints being there? I'd had the gun nearly three weeks. How did I know it was going to be traced back to him?

NELL No, but I wish you'd told me it was Fluff's. What's the good of any kind of promises if we don't trust each other? And how am I to trust you, Ted? You keep me in the dark, keep back things that matter a lot, and then expect me to stand by you. I've done a lot of things for you since I began to be crazy about you, and most of it's been telling lies. About your reforming, and letting Uncle think we were married, and all that. And now I'm willing to tell lies on oath for you, but you don't trust me enough to tell me the truth.

HANNA But I did tell you the truth! I told you everything except whose gun it was, and I didn't tell you that because it wasn't of any importance. It never entered my head to tell you. Why should it? The gun was mine. If it wasn't traced to me I didn't expect it was going to be traced to someone else. It's just a bit of bloody bad luck,

that's all.

NELL Yes, it's bad luck, all right.... What are we going to do now?

HANNA Do? How, do?

NELL About Fluff. What can we do to get him out?

HANNA There isn't anything we can do at the moment. But don't you worry. They'll never convict him on the evidence they have. No jury'd stand for it.

NELL But you're not going to let him be tried for it, are you?

HANNA That's the best thing. How can we stop it? They won't convict him, I promise you.

NELL Ted! Do you know what you're saying? You're not going to let Fluff go through all that and not lift a finger to stop it, are you? Why, even if they didn't convict him he'd never be able to hold up his head again. A murder trial! Think of it. When he didn't do it!

HANNA My dear girl, I'd move all ten fingers willingly if you show me how that would help him.

NELL There must be a way—perhaps more than one way—if we think properly, both of us. (*With a sudden access of bitterness*) I suppose a crook can use his brains for other people instead of for himself for once in a way?

HANNA Well, suppose you lead the way, since you're so sure of yourself. You suggest!

NELL Well—suppose we went abroad, and you write a confession from there. There are places in the world where they can't send you back from. We could live there, and they couldn't touch us, could they?

HANNA (*laughing*) You don't know much about the ways of the English police, do you? Why, the taxi wouldn't be at the door for your luggage before half the C.I.D. would be inquiring where we were going and why, and suggesting reasons why we shouldn't go. They wouldn't give us a passport to begin with.

NELL Well, there's such things as forged passports. You're getting very squeamish, all of a sudden.

HANNA What would be the good of a forged passport if you were never given a chance to use it? I tell you, we wouldn't be able to move a step before they'd be down on us. It would be giving the show away. As soon as they'd stopped us they'd begin delving to find out why we were beating it at such a bat. And there's no saying what they might unearth. They couldn't get me for that affair on Thursday, but they

could get me for other things. The money that got your last set of crêpe-de-chine, for instance.

NELL Oh, yes, I'm as bad as you are. You didn't need to rub it in.

HANNA Well, be sensible, kid. We can't afford to do anything that would get us in bad, and not be a scrap of good to Fluff.

NELL Be sensible! Be sensible! Be selfish, you mean. D'you think Fluff is being sensible? Sitting there and saying nothing, though he knows you did it. What kind of a pal do you think you are? Isn't he expecting you to get him out of it? What are you going to do about it?

HANNA Oh, don't be silly. There's only one thing I can do. Go and give myself up. D'you want me to do that?

[*There is a moment's silence.*]

NELL (*in a quiet, curiously surprised voice*) D'you know, I've just discovered how surprised I would be if you did. You're a poor thing, aren't you, Ted? I used to think you so dashing. (*She gives a short scornful laugh*) I used to think you were a fine man wasted because you were a crook. Why, you're not even a good crook! But you're not low enough to let another man take your medicine for you, are you, Ted? I won't believe that of you. You're not going to stand by and do nothing while they try Fluff—on the off chance of him getting off in the end?

HANNA But I tell you, it's a cinch. He knows it. (*With a too obvious grasping at inspiration*) That's why he's saying nothing. *They* know they've got the wrong man too.

NELL How do they know it?

HANNA It isn't Fluff's line of business, or his way of working, or anything. They're not fools.

NELL No. 'More your husband's preserve.' That's what that man said. He said he'd never known Fluff lose his nerve before, (*HANNA winces*) Yes, you don't like that, do you? You coward!

HANNA Shut up, will you! It's enough to be worried to death with things happening like this, without you nagging me into fits and throwing names at me.

NELL Worried, are you? Oh, God, Ted, how funny you are! (*She sinks into a chair crying and feeling for her handkerchief*) How funny you are!

HANNA Oh, Lord! Oh, shut up! You'll be having hysterics in a minute and running out into the street with the story. Shut up and pull yourself together.

[NELL *cries for a moment into her handkerchief, wipes her eyes resolutely, and puts it away.*]

NELL Don't worry, I'm not having hysterics. And if anyone's got to pull themselves together it's you. You've got to think of a way out, Ted. You've got to think of something that will clear Fluff and save him having to go through all that.

HANNA Look here, kid, you're getting yourself all worked up because you're imagining things worse than they are. You'd hate to have to go through it, so you think Fluff will. Well, you're dead wrong. If anything, Fluff'll enjoy it. Lot's of chaps would give something to be in his place if they were as sure of getting off. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about.

NELL You think you do. But I know Fluff, see? I think he'd rather die now, on the quiet, than have to go through what he'll have to go through.

HANNA D'you think you know him better than me, who's been his pal for six years?

NELL Some pal! Oh, Ted, you can't be going to leave him in the lurch like this. You can't be!

HANNA You show me what I can do, and I'll do it.

NELL But why should I have to show you! You should be thinking, planning, half-crazy to find a way. But you're not. You're taking it all for granted. And he's in there keeping his mouth shut and waiting for you to move.

HANNA I tell you, he's only keeping quiet because he knows he's safe. They can't prove it.

NELL But that man said they could. They wouldn't charge him if they hadn't a good case. You know that, Ted. You know how careful they are.

HANNA Yes! And I know how they feel when the papers are making a song and dance and they've got nobody! They're only too glad to have anything that looks like a case so as to stop the racket. Be sensible!

NELL Sensible! You said that before. (*Going over to him and holding the lapels of his coat*) Oh, Teddy, don't be like this! It's like seeing something lovely come to pieces. I can't bear it. I can't bear it. Fluff in there saying nothing, and you coming to pieces here.

HANNA I told you you were getting hysterical.

NELL And I tell you I'm not. Ted, let's beat it out of the country now, tonight. There must be some kind of fishing-boat or something that would take us for money.

If we go now, before they're wise to us, we could manage it. I feel sure of it. I'll go and do all the arranging, and they'll never suspect me. With all that smuggling on the South Coast there must be a way of getting to the Continent without being stopped. Then you could——

HANNA Oh, for goodness' sake! You are a one-ideal little idiot. I tell you that way's no use.

NELL You mean you don't want to try it.

HANNA I don't want to try it, because it's a fool's game.

NELL That is something you should be good at!

HANNA Look here! I've had about enough of it. (*Reaches for his hat*) I'll have tea where the company's brighter.

NELL Listen, Ted. If you don't agree to do something in the next two days, I'll go and tell them all I know.

HANNA Oh, no, you won't.

NELL Why not?

HANNA Because you're in love with me.

NELL I think I hate you.

HANNA You think you do just now, but tonight you won't.

NELL There won't be any tonight if you don't do something.

HANNA Besides, you're a sensible little person at bottom. You know quite well that the minute you'd told the dicks that story you'd be damned sorry. You couldn't bear the thought of me being hanged, you know. And there wouldn't be any doubt about my being hanged. Don't forget that. In five weeks from now Fluff'll be coming round to tea. But in five weeks from now I'd be buried.

NELL (*coaxing again*) Listen, Ted. If you were to confess to something small and say that Fluff was with you when you did it, and that that was why he——

HANNA Oh, give it a rest!

NELL (*flaring*) I won't give it a rest! Why should you be allowed to rest? I'm going to go on suggesting things till we find one we can try.

HANNA Oh, you are, are you? Thanks for the warning. I'm not beating it out of the country, but I am beating it out of here. (*Takes a wad of notes from his pocket-book and counts it*) Here you are, beauty! You can go on suggesting things to these until you're tired of it. When you're tired of it put an ad to that effect in the agony of the *Daily Mail*, and we'll set up house again.

NELL Ted, don't be foolish. (*Lifting the notes and trying to return them*)
Please, Ted, don't be foolish.

HANNA Coming to pieces, am I? Well, you're growing into a shrew, and I never liked the wordy kind.

NELL Listen, Ted, don't go where I can't reach you. Don't go away. I must talk to you—persuade you—or I'll go mad.

HANNA Yes? Well, then there'd be two of us mad. And I'm not ending my days in an asylum if I know it. When you stop fussing, I'll come back.

NELL Ted, I *will* tell them, if you don't do something.

HANNA Yes? And tell your Uncle that you've been living with a crook for twelve months, and telling lies as if you were born to it? Besides, you wouldn't do it anyhow, because——(*He grips her suddenly so as to pinion her arms, and with his other hand presses her head back so that he can kiss her. After the first instant she struggles violently, and he releases her*) So long, beauty. I'll be back when you're feeling better.

NELL All right, go, then! But it isn't me you're running away from.

HANNA No?

NELL No, it's from yourself. And you can't do that. You'll come to your senses and see what you're doing, and then you'll have to face it. You can't go on running away.

HANNA Oh, you talk like a bloody revivalist. You should be wearing a bonnet. When you're tired of the tambourine let me know!

[*He goes out, banging the door.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The scene is the same as the previous one. It is nearly midnight, about six weeks later. The room is in darkness except for the moonlight, which illuminates the chimney-pots beyond the uncurtained window but does not shine into the room. After a pause there is the sound of a key in the lock of the outer door. The outer door opens and shuts, not noisily, but with no attempt at concealment. As the inner door opens the lamp by the fireplace is switched on, illuminating HANNA in the act of reaching for the switch by the door, and NELL in bed on the divan which she has drawn from the window to the lamp, so that it now protrudes at right-angles from the right wall. She is lying curled up on her left side. After a brief pause she lowers the hand which has switched on the light, and continues to look at him, wordless and motionless. He desists from his intention of switching on the main light, so that the scene is played in the light of the lamp.

HANNA Hullo, kid. Still here? Didn't know whether I'd find you here or not. Thought you might be so sore with me that you might have chucked it. Or perhaps got tired waiting. But you waited after all!

NELL Yes, I waited.

HANNA Well, that's very comforting for a chap, not to say flattering. How did the pony I left spin out? All right? I was short enough myself, I can tell you. I nearly came back, once, for some of that wad, but I didn't know how the sight of me might take you. Sort of hysterical ideas you had, eh? You're not still feeling sore with me, are you? You wouldn't have liked me in the 'Only Way' part, you know. I'm not cut out for it. And Fluff was born to it. Seen reason, now, though?

NELL Yes. I've seen reason.

HANNA You've no idea the time I had down in that hole of a place. Nothing to do but listen to their hell of a band and watch the waves break. Not a bean, and afraid to go out and get some in the normal way, because the dicks were too interested in me. And wondering all the time when you were going to blow the gaff on me. Why didn't you? You're a loyal pal, if ever there was one. I'll hand you that. Not that I didn't believe in your promise, but I was afraid of your conscience. Either that or that you'd have influenza or something and spill the beans when you had a temperature. Believe me, I spent sleepless nights over your having a temperature, and there were you in the best of health all the time.... Well, kid, got nothing to say to

me after all those weeks? Glad to see me back, even if I'm not a hero? You're looking a bit tucked up, aren't you? Why've you taken to dossing in here? (*He goes over to her*) Find the bed too lonely for one, is that it? (*Makes as if to sit down on the divan*)

NELL (*sharply*) Don't sit there! Keep away.

HANNA (*arrested*) What's the matter? Have you still got a grouch at me? Or are you ill? You haven't got anything infectious, have you?

NELL No, I'm not ill. You're quite safe that way.

HANNA Quite safe every way. We're sitting pretty now, my girl. And believe me, I'm going to be good to you, beauty. I never thought you'd stick to me the way you did. You're one in a million, Nell. Ask for the moon, and it's yours. I was thinking, coming up in the train, we might beat it out of England now, like you suggested, and give the Continent the once-over. You'd look good in Paris, and I suppose Paris would look good to you, eh? I'll have to collect some money first, but that won't be awfully difficult. I'll have a hundred by the end of the week, and that'll do us to start on.... You're not exactly chatty, are you? Didn't you expect me to come back? You'd think you weren't glad to see me.

NELL Yes, I hoped you'd come sooner or later.

HANNA Well, that's good hearing, but you might brace up a little. No one's smiled at me for so long. The girls down at that place have faces cut out of the native rock. The kind of thing you take away as souvenir and hate the sight of ever after but can't throw away. And the only alternative was a couple of dicks who never let me out of their sight except when I was in bed. And even then I used to feel exposed. The Yard are a one-ideal crew! Were they shadowing you?

NELL I don't know.

HANNA How, don't know?

NELL I never went out.

HANNA Not go out! Oh, moping, is that it? Not much wonder you're looking tucked up. You'll have to change that, or I won't take you to Paris with me. I want you to be a credit to me. We're going to have some good times, you and me. I'm dead sick of staring at the dam' sea and eating hash and having the Yard look sideways at me. I want a bit of life to take the taste out of my mouth. Besides, the farther away from the Yard we are the better we'll feel, eh? I don't think the Yard are awfully pleased with their work just lately, and when they get mad there's no saying where they'll end. Not that they can put anything on us—we're safe now—

but I played pool with one of those dicks one night, and he said some very nasty things. All wrapped up and polite, but insinuating. You know. Wilkins took them off when the business was finished, of course. They can't do anything to us now. But we'd be more popular in France. And you've never seen Paris. Just give me a week to get the dibs. Got anything to eat in the house? I could put away six courses.

NELL In the kitchen cupboard.

[He takes off his coat, flings it over the back of a chair, combs his hair with his fingers in front of the mirror over the fireplace, and goes into the kitchen. She raises herself to a sitting position on the divan, moving with the deliberation and lack of unnecessary movement that a sleep-walker uses. She sits there unmoving until his return. He comes back with cold sausage on a plate, half a loaf, butter, a bottle of beer, and a glass.]

HANNA I don't think much of your larder. But you always were one of the bun-and-milk brigade. It's good I'm too hungry to look even a sausage in the mouth. *(He cuts a slice of bread and butters it, produces a corkscrew and opens the bottle of beer and pours the beer into the glass)* I couldn't find any mustard. Isn't there any?

NELL No.

HANNA Another of your queer tastes. *(Watches critically as the beer flows into the glass. Looking at her over the bottle and glass)* Have some?

[It is then that he sees the automatic which is lying in her loosely curved right hand. He pauses with the bottle and glass held at right-angles in the air while one might count five.]

HANNA For God's sake, put that thing away! Where did you get it? *(He puts the glass and bottle down)*

NELL Stay where you are, I want to talk to you.

HANNA Nell, don't be foolish. Put that thing down. It isn't the kind of thing to play around with. You should know that by this time.

NELL Yes, I know it very well.

HANNA Well, give it to me and don't let me see you——

NELL *(as he is moving across to her)* Stay where you are. I want to talk to you.

HANNA But look here——What d'you mean? I'm not going to hurt you! What are you afraid of?

NELL I'm not afraid of anything.

HANNA Then why that thing? What's the idea? Have you gone dippy? What do you want with——?

NELL Be quiet, and get on with your supper. I want to talk to you. I've been thinking. Thinking more than I ever thought in my life before. I hadn't anything else to do all those days. My mind was in a dreadful mess trying to get things straight. A man who's done what you've done isn't fit to live. I didn't think there were men as low as you anywhere. Not English, I mean. I couldn't begin to tell you what I think of you. And yet I love you far too much to be able to live without you. Sounds dam' silly, doesn't it? But it's true. There'd be no point in living at all with you not there. That's why I'm going along too. I couldn't——

HANNA Stop that nonsense, will you, and give me that——

NELL Stay still, or I'll shoot you before I'm ready. And get on with the food. They always have a meal first, don't they? There's some salad. Would you like some salad? You're allowed to choose what you like within bounds. That's what the paper said. And there was a big photo of Fluff. I suppose you saw it. Fluff was a real man. It's a pity I didn't fall in love with Fluff instead of you. Then I wouldn't be going west tonight.

HANNA Look here, kid——

NELL Don't interrupt. I want to talk to you. I've got it all straight in my mind now. Simple, and clear, and easy. I've been waiting for you to come back so that I could finish it. This is the finish. Funny, isn't it? when you think of it, that this is what came out of your buying a packet of Gold Flake that day. If only I could have seen you then as I see you now—before you got me! You've still got me, Ted. I should have been free of you when you did that to Fluff. There must be something rotten in me to let me go on caring for you after that. But I'm still silly about you. The way you turn your head and move your hands and—all that bunk. That's love! That's what people write poems and things to! Love! You're not getting on very fast with your supper.

HANNA Look here, kid, a little less of the theatrical business and a little more honesty. You've worked up this to spring on me when I came back. Well, I'm back, but I'm not having any. You were sweet enough on me to let another man hang for me. I guess you're not going to shoot me now. That's logic. So a little less of the high falutin'.

NELL I didn't let Fluff die because I was sweet on you. You flatter yourself. I'd

given you my word. It was my word I'd given. I couldn't go back on that. I was nearly crazy trying to think of a way out. I couldn't find a way to save Fluff. Poor Fluff. He was joking when they killed him. I suppose you read that too? I wish I could have loved Fluff. He was worth while. He kept his mouth shut because of me, not because of you. I expect perhaps it made it easy in the end to think he was doing it for me. But I wish I could have thought of a way to get him off. I'm a poor reason for a man to sacrifice his life. Me! The person who's still silly about the man who let him do it! God, what a rotter you are, Ted. I never imagined anyone like you. But you're not getting away with it. Did you think you were? Did you think you could do that and go on living and enjoying yourself, eating and drinking and making love, without there being a reckoning? Well, you can't. This is the reckoning. There isn't any God, or Fluff wouldn't have been allowed to die. But I'm God now. All the God that's necessary. You can't do what you did and go on living. I can't live without you. So we go together. That's logic. You're keen on logic, aren't you? So get on with your supper. If I'd known you were coming tonight I'd have made it a nice one. Anything within reason, they said.

HANNA I say, Nell, for God's sake drop it. You've been thinking about things till you've got them all wrong.

NELL Yes, I've been thinking, but I've got things straight. Clear and straight and easy. Go on with your supper. There's some salad if you want some. I wanted to tell you what I thought of you so that——

HANNA I say, kid, you're not well, or you'd——

NELL Don't interrupt. I'm doing the talking. I'm not mad, if that's what you're thinking. I've never been so sane in my life. Nothing to be afraid of any more. Nothing to torment me. Everything straight and clear.

HANNA Look here, kid, I'll call your bluff. That gun isn't loaded. Even if it was, and you had the nerve to shoot me, you'd never have the nerve to shoot yourself. Don't imagine it.

NELL I don't imagine it. I don't like the idea of shooting myself at all. I'm not going to. I'd hate to be a mess, even when I'm dead. I always hated messy things. I'm going by the gas oven. Quite a pleasant journey. Reserved compartment, and no change. (*She laughs a little, and he is reassured*) Stay still! (*As he begins to advance*) I'll give you ten minutes to—keep away, Ted. Keep away! All right, then!

[*She pulls the trigger, holding the automatic at full stretch of her arm, amateurishly. HANNA hesitates in his stride at the impact of the bullet,*

and comes on stumblingly.]

HANNA (*in surprised fury*) You bitch! It was loaded. You bitch!

[He collapses across the end of the divan. After a pause NELL puts the revolver gently on the table at her side. She gets slowly out of bed, holding the right elbow where the kick of the revolver has hurt it. She moves to HANNA and looks down at him almost curiously. A sort of compassion comes into her face. She puts out her hand and touches his hair.]

NELL Poor Teddy! Poor Teddy!

[She goes out slowly through the kitchen door.]

CURTAIN

Barnharrow

CHARACTERS

JANET LINTON

ROB LINTON, *her father-in-law*

SIMON LINTON, *her son*

ISHBEL GRIERSON, *her niece*

A SERGEANT

BARNHARROW

The living-room of a small farm in the South-west of Scotland on a summer evening in the sixteen-eighties.

Against the back wall is a large dresser with plates and dishes. R. of the dresser is a cask of ale, and L. of the dresser the door to the passage. R., is the wide hearth with a peat fire burning. L., the window, against which is a bare wood table.

The door at the back is wide open, and so is the outside door (to the R. as one walks into the passage) so that both room and passage are flooded with the light of the westering sun, through window and open door; and anyone coming in by the front door casts a shadow in front of them.

There are two people in the room. At a smaller table, where the light falls on it between the window and the fire, JANET LINTON is ironing. She is forty; a dignified woman with an intelligent face, the remains of what must have been a quiet rather than a flashing beauty, and grace and good taste in her plain clothes. In a chair by the hearth is her father-in-law, ROBERT LINTON. He is not much more than sixty, but he is so crippled by rheumatism that he is physically an old man. Mentally he is alert, and his face is a great deal livelier than his daughter-in-law's.

JANET irons while she talks, and more or less throughout the play; changing her iron at convenient moments. The clothes to be ironed are in a basket on a stool to L. of the table. The finished articles she hangs to air by the fire if they are garments, or folds and lays over the edge of the basket if they are small pieces.

JANET (*casting a glance at the other iron which is heating at the fire*) Put another peat on the fire, Father. That iron's not heating.

[ROB reaches behind him for a peat, and lays it on the fire.]

ROB There are not many peats left. Simon was in such haste to get to town he forgot to bring in a load this morning. Is it a girl, do you think?

JANET (*more to herself than to him*) If only it were!

ROB (*carefully ignoring her reaction*) He's got to an age now to be looking

them over; but you need not fear for his picking. All the Lintons were good pickers. You never knew my Hannah, but when my son brought you over the threshold to me that day, do you know what I thought? I thought: Well, he had to go all the way to Dumfries to find a woman as good as his mother, but he's found her. Trust a Linton. And Simon will be the same. He may look them over down in Dalmeath, but he won't bring one home until——

JANET (*interrupting quietly*) Father; don't bother to pretend. You know as well as I do where he is.

ROB And where is that?

JANET Patrick Kennedy is preaching today at the back of the Tor hill.

ROB (*as one says: Indeed!*) A conventicle.

JANET (*bitterly*) Ay; a conventicle.... And my son's there.... I think Will must be turning in his grave....

[ROB searches in his mind for comfort to offer her, but finds none to hand.]

JANET ... Where have I failed, Father?

ROB Failed?

JANET What have I done, or not done, that Will's son should be up there listening to the raving of fanatics?

ROB It's no fault of yours, Janet.

JANET I gave him a good education, that he might have a mind to reason with.... Sending him to the minister to learn Latin and the like.... He used to be very fond of old Mr Pierse, but now, it seems, he's a 'priest of Baal'.

ROB It's nobody fault, Janet; neither yours nor good old Mr Pierse's. Look out of the window there and tell me what you see.

JANET (*glancing automatically out of the window without pausing in her work*) Moors.

ROB Ay. Moors. Go round the back of the house, and what do you see? Moors. Bogs and mist in the winter, and bogs, plain bogs, in the summer. And no moving thing, summer or winter, but the cloud shadows. What kind of country is that for a young man?

JANET Will lived in it, and so did you.

ROB Will came back to it. He'd seen the world, and had something to measure things by. And Will was a sober creature anyhow. As for me, I made my own

liveliness, God forgive me, before I met my Hannah. That is what I say to you. A man must make his own excitement in a country like this. Even if it is only listening to a bag of wind like Pat Kennedy.

JANET If it were only harmless as wind.... He makes them mad with words. He plays with them the way he would play with chuckie-stones. They have no wills or thoughts of their own by the time he's finished with them.

ROB Ay. It was all he was ever good at: talking.

JANET It's a fearful thing that one man's tongue can have such a power.

ROB (*amending her speech*) A tongue and one man's vanity.

JANET (*reflective*) Ay; vanity. I sat on a school bench with Patrick Kennedy. Even then he could never bear to come second—even in a game. We used to play Hang-the-man on our school slates, and if he was losing he would dash a wet rag over it before you could stop him.

ROB (*dryly*) He'll maybe make a successful hanging one of these days, for all that. Give a cry to Ishbel, and perhaps she'll bring in a peat or two.

JANET I would have to cry very loud. It isn't men like Pat Kennedy that end on the gallows, but their poor dupes.

ROB Is Ishbel not out-by?

JANET She is not. The last bannock wasn't off her girdle (*she tilts her head to where, under a clean cloth on the table by the window, the bannocks are lying*) this afternoon but she was out of the door like the flirt of a cat's tail.

ROB The conventicle, is it?

JANET Where else?

ROB Well, I could imagine better places. But I suppose listening to a man with a price on his head preaching treason is more exciting than a roll in the hay. That is what they want, Janet. Excitement.

JANET If she wasn't my sister's child she could search for excitement under some other roof.

ROB It's what gives Patrick Kennedy and all his tribe their power in the West. In Edinburgh no one would even pause to listen to them. And why? Because in the East their days are full, and there is entertainment for their eyes and their minds and their bodies. Every hour a new fashion, a new idea, a new dance step. Europe and the great world washes up on their doorstep, bringing its treasure like flotsam. And that keeps their spirits lively and their spleens uncongested. But what new thing ever

comes into this country? Even the pedlar plodding up the road from Dalmeath is the same one as last year. A new ribbon once a twelve-month won't keep a girl happy or a lad interested.

JANET (*casting him a slight smile*) You sound as if you would have liked to go to Edinburgh yourself, Father.

ROB Ay, I always had a notion to go east and see the world. But I would no sooner get the length of Dalmeath than I would notice a pretty girl. It might be a girl I had known for years, but I would notice for the first time what a fine little curl came down in front of her right ear, and I would have to stay in Dalmeath until I became better acquainted with that curl. That was before I met my Hannah, of course.

JANET (*going back to her preoccupation*) I have thought often of sending Simon away. But who would work the place if he left?... I did ask Mr Pierse about it, once. He was very proud of Simon. A good brain he had, he said. And when I asked him about finding work for Simon somewhere in the East he said he would speak for him any time. To the King himself, if need were. But of course that was before ... (*Her voice dies away*)

ROB Before Simon decided that Mr Pierse was a 'spawn of Satan'. Or is it 'a priest of Baal'? (*As JANET makes no rejoinder*) It's heady stuff, the Old Testament. Full of cursings and malediction. I doubt if any Covenanter has opened the New Testament since Tippermuir, way back in Montrose's day.

JANET Why Tippermuir?

ROB There's direct evidence that they'd at least heard of it then. Their watchword was: 'Jesus and No Quarter'.

JANET (*contemplative*) The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon. And never the mention of a Cross.... Good old Mr Pierse preaches about being a good citizen and respecting the rights of others, but I suppose it doesn't sound as fine as the Sword of the Lord.

ROB No; there's no glory in being a good citizen. Not in Galloway. Just think how dull life would be for Lady Kilenzie if she couldn't hide Pat Kennedy in her cellar now and then. Or for Daft Davie Dunbar if he couldn't run with messages about the whereabouts of the patrol, or for——

JANET (*bitter*) If Lady Kilenzie had a son she might see Patrick Kennedy in a different light. Would I care about his shoutings and his blasphemies if it were not for Simon!... Isn't every day I rise a burden to me for fear of what he may be led into.... If only Will had lived he might——

ROB (*interrupting*) Now, Janet, now; you know that is not so. Will could not have altered by one oat-straw anything that——

JANET (*passionate*) If Will had lived there would be someone to work Barnharrow, and Simon could have gone away, and learned to judge things with a better understanding in a wider world. To find worthier heroes than Patrick Kennedy. And a finer creed than—— (*Her head turns to the window*)

ROB Is that Simon now?

JANET No. It's Ishbel.

[*The girl's footsteps are not audible until she moves from the turf to the large flagstones that surround the door. As the flat, metallic sound of her feet on the stone is heard, one can see her shadow in the passage and she comes into the room.*

[*She is not yet twenty; still slim, but with the promise of a mature opulence; her auburn hair and full mouth suggest warmth and temperament. She is, indeed, the antithesis of her aunt.*

[*She is flushed with her long journey in the heat, and is carrying the small light-woollen shawl that she would normally be wearing as outdoor garment.*]

ISHBEL Whoa! Was there ever a summer like this one! The air on the moor is dancing in the heat like a cloud of midges. (*She picks up a dipper and draws water from a pail just inside the door, and drinks it thirstily*)

ROB (*watching her*) If you drink like a calf you'll have to go to the well again tonight.

ISHBEL (*pausing in her drinking but not turning*) I'll go to the well. (*She finishes her drink*)

JANET (*not nagging; merely casting her a glance and going on with her ironing*) Five miles is a long way to walk on a hot day for a sermon. You were never as fond of walking the mile to kirk.

ROB (*not archly; merely stating a fact*) Och, at kirk she had only the sermon, and a sideways keek of Johnny Stewart's black hair. At a conventicle she can throw her eye over the likely lads of three parishes. Indeed, if all they tell me is true, the young ones throw more than their——

JANET (*repressive*) Father!

ISHBEL (*equably*) I didn't go for sermon or lads. I wanted to see them drilling.

JANET (*standing stock-still*) Drilling!

ISHBEL (*a little pleased now to be able to shock them*) Yes. They have pikes. And forty muskets besides.

JANET (*to herself*) God help us.

ROB (*dryly*) And what great truth are they going to prove with a pike?

ISHBEL They're going to prove that they are better men than His Majesty's troops.

ROB That won't be difficult. (*AS ISHBEL looks surprised*) Nine to one is good odds, by any reckoning. There's eighty men down yonder at Kilmichael, and not another blink of a uniform in five hundred square miles. If Patrick Kennedy is anything of a General he can pick them off ten at a time—there are never more than ten in a patrol, because they can never afford more—and in a week he will be lord of the West.

JANET Father! How can you take it so lightly? So——

ROB (*soothing*) Because he won't do it, my dear. Pat Kennedy never had any stomach for a fight.

JANET (*doubtfully*) No; that's true.

ISHBEL Patrick Kennedy is a saint, and he has the courage of a lion.

ROB (*ignoring ISHBEL*) He wants to be a Gideon as well as a Moses. But reviewing a private army is one thing, and facing the business-end of a pike is another matter altogether.

JANET But, Father! Think. He preaches them daft and then puts muskets into their hands.

ROB (*reflective*) Ay. I wonder where he got those muskets.

ISHBEL They came from Holland in a ship that put into Loch Ryan. Mr Kennedy ordered them with money that godly folk subscribed.

ROB Folk who are too poor by their way of it to pay their taxes to the Government.

ISHBEL What have the Government ever done for us?

JANET (*tartly, rousing from her abstraction of worry*) They sent troops down to prevent our being rabbled by a crowd of hooligans because we choose to go to our own kirk of a Sabbath. For that if nothing else we are grateful to them.

ISHBEL Och, Barnharrow was never in danger of being rabbled.

JANET (*bitter*) Because my son stands well with the hooligans? It's a poor outlook when one's peace and safety are dependent on one's standing with the mob. Where is Simon, by the way?

ISHBEL I don't know. I haven't seen him.

JANET Was he not at the conventicle?

ISHBEL Oh, I expect so, but it was all over before I got there. (*She has taken a bannock from under the cloth on the table, and carried it to the dresser, where she finds butter to spread on it*) Someone had told the troops at Kilmichael that there was going to be a conventicle somewhere today. So it had to be cut short, and there was no drilling. It was safer to leave the arms in their hidey-hole.

ROB (*murmuring*) Safer for who?

ISHBEL I met everyone on their road home.

JANET Why didn't you meet Simon, then?

ISHBEL (*indifferent*) I don't know. I suppose he had a ploy of his own. The conventicle was ended by noon, and that would be much too early to think of coming home.

ROB And who told the troops about the conventicle?

ISHBEL Lady Kilenzie says it was Dallas the grocer in Kilmichael.

ROB Oh, was she there?

ISHBEL I met her riding home, and she stopped and we had cake out of her saddle-bag and a drink called claret. That's wine. Her saddle-bags were stuffed full of food—chicken and things—because she had planned for an all-day outing, and she wasn't pleased to be going home shortly after noon.

ROB I suppose that means that old Dallas will wake tomorrow morning to find his stock dumped in the river; or are they going to fire his place?

ISHBEL Oh, Lady Kilenzie just said it was Dallas because she doesn't like him. He once said she ran round like a hen with its head cut off, and she heard about it. No, it wasn't Dallas.

ROB Who, then?

JANET How can anyone know who it was?

ISHBEL They have a good idea. It had to be someone who knew about the conventicle in the first place.

JANET The whole countryside knew about the conventicle.

ISHBEL And it had to be someone who wanted Mr Kennedy to stop preaching;

and who would want that as much as his rival?

ROB His rival?

ISHBEL The man whose congregation Mr Kennedy stole away. Mr Pierse the minister.

JANET (*sharply*) What nonsense. Mr Pierse is too busy with the cares God put on his shoulders to go traipsing to Kilmichael with tales.

ISHBEL His grievance was in Kilmichael yesterday, though.

ROB And why shouldn't he be?

ISHBEL What took him all the way to Kilmichael? He's always got all he needed in Dalmeath.

ROB Is that what you call evidence?

JANET It's what Covenanters call evidence. But let me tell you, if you harm old Mr Pierse by as much as hamstringing his horses I'll see to it myself that every—

ROB Och, Janet, don't worry. Even Pat Kennedy's crowd wouldn't rabble an old man. (*Stirring the peats on the hearth*) And talking of old men, if Simon doesn't come soon, I know one old man who will have to carry in peats.

ISHBEL I'll get you a peat.

[*She goes out, still eating and carrying her bit of bannock. As she reaches the outer door we hear her greet her cousin as he approaches the house.*]

ISHBEL (*off*) Oh, there you are, Simon. We were wondering what had become of you. You forgot to take in peats this morning.

SIMON (*off*) I'll take them in after supper. (*He sounds either sulky or brusque*)

ISHBEL (*off*) Did you see Mr Kennedy a bit of the way? (*She sounds as if she is walking away to the house-end*)

SIMON (*approaching*) No, I didn't.

[*His shadow appears on the floor of the passage and he comes in. He is about twenty; pleasant to look at, but somehow too adolescent for his years; and there is an odd suggestion about him that the immaturity may become permanent. The combination of his mother's intelligence with the lack of humour of his good stolid father has produced SIMON, who has the wit to absorb ideas, but not the wit to sift them out.*]

[*He casts a glance round as he comes in, but says nothing. He is heated*

but pale, as if worn-out with exertion and emotion. He dashes some water with the dipper into a basin, sets it on a stool, and washes both hands and face.]

JANET (*into the silence*) Is that what you feel?

SIMON (*washing*) What?

JANET A desire to get clean.

SIMON I'm hot. It has been the hottest day for ten years. (*Towelling*) I am sorry about the peats.

ROB (*conversationally*) And how are you shaping with your pike?

SIMON (*pausing*) Who told you about the pikes?

JANET (*ironing*) Is there any secret about it?

SIMON (*scornfully*) No, I suppose nothing can be kept secret in this country. But it doesn't matter. The time cannot be far off when we fight for our liberty.

JANET Liberty to do what?

SIMON To worship God in our own way.

JANET (*calmly ironing*) No one is stopping you. No one has ever stopped you from worshipping God any way you please.

SIMON We will have no minister who bows the knee to a bishop.

JANET You and your silly phrases. Old Mr Pierse has never bowed his knee to any one. But if he bowed it three times daily what has that to do with your worshipping your God?

SIMON If he bows his knee to a bishop he acknowledges a temporal head of the Church. We will have no mortal as head of the Church in Scotland.

ROB (*dryly*) That must be a sad disappointment to Pat Kennedy.

SIMON Patrick Kennedy is a saint, who would rather live from hand to mouth in the wilderness than live fat under a bishop's patronage.

JANET He does not do so badly under Lady Kilenzie's.

SIMON Mock if it pleases you, but Patrick Kennedy will light a torch that will burn the chaff of prelacy out of the land and make it sweet and clean, as it was in the days of the Covenants.

JANET The Covenants! Always the Covenants! As if they were something God-given and holy. Instead of some very worldly and bargaining documents that have little to do with Christian teaching and nothing at all to do with freedom of worship.

SIMON That is blasphemy.

JANET So, according to you, is the Lord's Prayer. We are not likely to agree on blasphemy, my son. But one thing admits of no argument. The punishment for attending a conventicle is a fine; but for carrying arms it is prison. And——

SIMON And you think I would not go singing to prison for my faith!

JANET No doubt; but it takes more than singing to work Barnharrow, and who is to do it while you are bearing witness to your faith in Wigtown?

SIMON If the Lord calls me to be an instrument of his will, the Lord will provide a substitute.

ROB It's to be hoped the substitute will have a better memory for the peats.

[Enter ISHBEL carrying a few peats tucked under her right arm and in her hand; her left hand still holds her 'piece'.]

ISHBEL There are two soldiers coming to the house. *(The remark is mildly excited but not alarmed. She has paused to deliver herself of the news, and now moves over to the fireplace and bestows her peats behind her grandfather's chair)*

JANET Soldiers? Coming here?

[SIMON has made an abrupt movement of alarm, but recovered himself.

JANET puts her iron down in the hearth without haste and with apparent self-possession; soldiers, being the police force of the time, upset her no more than a police officer on the doorstep upsets a law-abiding citizen.]

ISHBEL Two soldiers with horses. They look as if they had come a long way. They are walking the horses up the hill.

JANET *(slightly puzzled)* Have they come up from the road?

ISHBEL No, from over the moor, I think. Here they are.

[There is the faint jingle of horse's bits, and an educated voice can be heard saying: 'You wait here, Bill.' A shadow appears on the passage floor; and there is a knock on the outer door. A voice says: 'Anyone at home?' and a SERGEANT appears at the inner doorway.]

SERGEANT *(to JANET)* Good evening, ma'am. *(To the others generally)* Good evening. Forgive me for intruding, but I wondered if we could water our horses at your well. In this weather the moors are burnt dry, and we have not been able to

give the poor beasts drink since the morning.

JANET But of course, sergeant. With pleasure. And you will drink some ale yourself, perhaps. You must be thirsty, and Barnharrow ale is famous.

SERGEANT Thank you, ma'am, that is kind of you. I'll just tell Bill about the horses. Shall we use the bucket that is there?

JANET The wooden one, if you please.

SERGEANT Very good, ma'am.

[He goes out to his companion and JANET draws two jugs of ale from the cask. ISHBEL peers from the window at the soldiers; and SIMON with an elaborate air of unconcern takes a piece of bannock from under the cloth, and sits down at the table to eat it, facing the centre of the room, his back against the wall and his feet thrust out.]

SIMON *(as the SERGEANT comes back; unable to hold his tongue; taunting)* Did you have to ask for the water?

SERGEANT *(good-humoured)* I thought it safer.

SIMON Safer!

SERGEANT Both from the point of view of good manners and good policy. In this drought you might not have had it to spare. That's manners. And if I took it without asking you might have made a complaint. That's policy.

SIMON *(sneering)* And what good would come of our complaining?

SERGEANT No good at all, believe me. It took me ten years to get me these stripes, but it would take only a couple of minutes to lose them. *(Accepting the ale from JANET)* Thank you, ma'am; and thank you for the beasts' drink.

JANET *(handing the second jug to ISHBEL)* Take that out to the soldier, girl.

[Exit ISHBEL.]

SERGEANT Your good health, ma'am.

JANET Have you come far?

SERGEANT We have been out on patrol all day. *(With a little grimace of self-mockery)* I used to think there was nothing worse than a wet day on patrol; with the rain running down the back of your neck and your saddle like a sponge. But after today, give me rain!

ROB Ay, the moor's no place for man nor beast with the sun beating like a flail. Have you far to go yet?

[*The SERGEANT has another swig from the jug.*]

SERGEANT We were on our way back to Kilmichael, but we got word that there was business for us here.

JANET (*in half-alarm*) Here?

SERGEANT (*tilting his head to an imaginary village in the valley*) In Dalmeath. This is wonderful stuff, ma'am. If this is ale, I can't think what it is they give us in mess at Kilmichael.

JANET (*smiling faintly*) The commissariat brew, I suppose.

SERGEANT That's so, ma'am; and plaguey thin, tasteless stuff it is, believe me.

[*Since JANET has seated herself, he has dropped in a tired way on the stool at the up side of the table and put his mug on the board; with the unexpected result that SIMON has leaped to his feet at his end of the table. The SERGEANT looks at him, surprised.*]

SIMON (*with the passion of the over-wrought*) I sit at table with no minion of a persecuting tyranny!

SERGEANT (*getting up easily; with a contemptuous good nature that makes SIMON'S gesture ridiculous*) Sit down, son. I'll stand.

JANET (*smoothly*) You must forgive my son. He reads too much.

SERGEANT (*politely*) Ah, well, it's a lonely country to be young in. (*To SIMON, conversationally*) Where have you been today, lad?

SIMON (*who has sat down again*) To market. (*He sounds sullen*)

SERGEANT Oh. Sell anything?

SIMON I took nothing to sell.

SERGEANT Oh. Bought something.

SIMON (*losing control again*) If you are going to arrest me, why don't you do it without all this play-acting!

SERGEANT (*in genuine astonishment*) Arrest you!

SIMON (*defiant*) You think you have a reason, don't you?

SERGEANT My good lad, if I were going to arrest you I'd need more than a reason. I'd need a warrant. I'm the humble representative of law and order in this country. The only people who are free to do as they please to anyone at any time are the Covenanters.... Though we aim to put an end to that, sooner or later.

JANET You have done much as it is, sergeant; and we are grateful. Before the

Government sent you down we were helpless. No one who went to kirk was safe. Now the Covenanters may still rabble us, but not with impunity. It was the impunity that hurt.

SERGEANT We'll do our best, ma'am. Prevention's not easy, with just the little handful of us in this big territory, but we'll provide the retribution.

ROB Isn't it time you laid that madman by the heels?

SERGEANT Kennedy? High time, sir. But he was born in this district, and knows it like his own palm. We'll get him, though, and that cache of arms too.

ROB Has he arms?

SERGEANT Forty muskets from Flushing, and about a hundred pikes that the smith at Monigaff made for him. And who do you think is teaching the pike drill, but old Tim Gantry, home from the wars in the Low Countries. I remember Tim when he was with the Scots Brigade in Steenvoorde. He wouldn't know one end of a Bible from the other, but he dearly loved a neat squad. It must be the breath of life to him to be putting them through it.

SIMON If you know so much, why have you not arrested the smith and Tim Gantry?

SERGEANT (*eyeing him*) In law there is a thing called evidence. And information received is not evidence. One day, if we patrol long enough, we'll catch them red-handed; and then Patrick Kennedy won't seduce the youth of this country with his tongue any more. (*He looks reflectively at the liquid in his jug*) They say there's nothing like drink to bedevil a man's judgement; drink, or gambling. But it's a fair amazement what two hours of hell-fire preaching will do to a man. It makes him wild, and daft, and furious, and powerful-feeling, and he must do something at once to show off that power. It takes him one of three ways: love-making, arson, or murder. If there's no lass handy he sets fire to some stacks; and if there are no stacks to hand, he remembers his enemy and goes looking for him.

[*As his voice, very quiet and somewhat fateful in the last five words, dies away there is a moment's silence. It is broken by the sound of ISHBEL coming back.*]

SERGEANT Well, it is time I was on my way.

ISHBEL That is a fine chestnut you have, sergeant.

SERGEANT Yes, she's a good mare, Betsy. She has only one fault.

ISHBEL What is that?

SERGEANT She is too conspicuous. Three miles away they say: Here comes that Sergeant and his chestnut mare. Thank you again, ma'am, for your hospitality. We get so many frowns in our day's work that it is pleasant to have a welcome. (*To ROB*) When we catch Kennedy, sir, perhaps you'll honour me by having a drink with me.

ROB I'll do that, sergeant.

JANET Are you staying long in Dalmeath?

SERGEANT Some time, I expect. Some of the troop are moving up here from Kilmichael.

JANET It must be serious business, yours, to warrant that.

SERGEANT Very serious. They shot the minister this afternoon.

JANET What minister?

SERGEANT The minister at Dalmeath.

JANET Mr Pierse?

SERGEANT Yes, old Mr Pierse. Shot him dead. On his own doorstep.

JANET (*almost speechless*) Murdered!

SERGEANT Well, I understand they don't use that word.

JANET They?

SERGEANT The Covenanters. They call it execution. It seems they blamed him for giving information about the conventicle.

SIMON And didn't he? (*He means the tone to be defiant, but there is an awful fear at the back of it*)

SERGEANT (*quietly; looking him full in the eye*) No. (*He holds his look for a full three seconds, and then his glance goes on to the others*) They'll have to 'execute' someone else. Good-day, ma'am, and thank you again.

[*Exit SERGEANT.*]

[*There is a stunned silence.*]

JANET (*slowly*) Good old Mr Pierse. Murdered. And in cold blood.

SIMON (*with sudden vehemence*) It was not in cold blood! He came to the door with a pistol in his hand! How was anyone to know that—— (*He becomes aware of what he is saying and stops, but it is too late*)

JANET (*looking at him with horror; whispering*) Simon! (*She puts out her hand to the table for support, subsides on to the stool, and with her elbows on the table buries her face in her hands. In a despairing cry*) Will!... Oh, Will!

[ROB *begins to struggle into a standing position, preparatory to going to her; and ISHBEL stands looking in bewildered dismay from SIMON to her aunt as the curtain comes down.*]

CURTAIN

The Staff-Room

CHARACTERS

MISS CARTER

MISS HINCH

MISS BOYD

MISS SIGGINS

THE HEAD

MR WOODINGTON SMITH

THE STAFF-ROOM

The scene is the staff-room of a girls' High School, in the middle of a Spring morning. In the rear wall is a door; near the corner, and to the right of it, as one looks at the stage, a large window. Between the door and the window is a small table, and above it hangs a large baize notice-board, liberally covered with notices. Against the right wall is another small table, and occupying the centre of the room is a large one, strewn with books and attaché-cases and guarded by rush-bottomed chairs. Against the left wall is a set of book-shelves, divided into compartments so that each member of the staff may know her own boundaries and not cause trouble by trespassing. A basket chair is turned to what would be the fireplace in the fourth wall, and at the back, below the window, is a cretonne-covered couch.

At the moment the room is empty except for MISS CARTER, the classics mistress, who is correcting exercise-books at the side table. MISS CARTER is thirty-two, but looks forty-five and does not care. She has a round, flabby face and a round, flabby body, and her hair is done in thick, greasy plaits round her head in a way that she fondly hopes is classical. As usual, she is completely absorbed in her work. Every now and then she draws her pencil vigorously through a word and utters a loud 'humph'. When she has uttered her third 'humph' the door opens and MISS HINCH comes in.

MISS HINCH is the English mistress. She is tall and thin and weary, and her ash-fair hair is always on the verge of falling from its insecure knot at her neck. She likes that knot, however. It suggests art and literary coteries, and most of MISS HINCH'S life is suggestion. It is like the knot; ineffectual and posing.

She goes in silence to the table and begins to take the books out of the attaché-case which she has been carrying. MISS CARTER utters another 'humph'. MISS HINCH pauses in the act of laying down a book, and then lays it down with an exaggerated gentleness which suggests that it is only by superhuman self-control she refrains from flinging it on the floor. She picks up the four-folded piece of blotting-paper from the middle of the table, examines it, sighs impatiently at its exhausted condition, and throws it into the waste-paper basket under the table. She goes to the drawer on the down side of the table, and finds it empty.

HINCH There's no blotting-paper, Carter.

[*No answer.*]

HINCH Carter, there's no blotting-paper.

[CARTER *turns round, the mists of correction still hovering about her.*]

CARTER Isn't there any in the drawer?

HINCH If there was I shouldn't be fussing.

CARTER There must be some somewhere. There! (*Pointing triumphantly*)
There's a bit—in the waste-paper basket.

HINCH Yes, I've just put it there.

CARTER Oh? What's wrong with it?

HINCH It is too literally blotting-paper.

CARTER (*helpfully*) Well, I should take it out again, if I were you. It seems to be the only bit on the horizon.

HINCH But look here, Carter, it's your job to keep this room supplied with stationery. You can't expect us to use blotting-paper as filthy as that.

CARTER (*mildly*) It's your own fault for not asking for it at the proper time. You all know that stationery times are from nine to nine-fifteen on Mondays and Thursdays. If you don't ask then, you'll have to do without. Besides, everyone is far too extravagant with blotting-paper. When Siggins spilt her milk yesterday she mopped it up with a piece that wasn't more than half-used.

HINCH You're a gold-mine to the company, aren't you, Carter?

[CARTER, *already reabsorbed in correction, takes no notice.* HINCH *sits down at the large table with her back to the window and arranges her books for correction. She peers into the various attaché-cases and abstracts a fairly clean sheet of blotting-paper from one. She begins correction with a red-ink pen and a fastidiousness which is a direct contrast to MISS CARTER'S blue pencil and heavy hand.*]

CARTER (*blue-pencilling*) Humph! (*Three lines further*) Humph!

HINCH Carter, I wish to goodness you'd get out of that habit!

CARTER What habit?

HINCH That 'humphing'.

CARTER I wish to goodness Dorothy Baker would learn a little common sense,

even if she can't learn Latin. Why don't her people take her away and make a lady of her? It's all she's fit for.

HINCH I think she's a nice child. You can't blame her if she doesn't think her future is going to be empty because she can't translate Cicero.

CARTER It's Ovid.

HINCH Well, Ovid. I should say that she had too much imagination to take well to dead languages.

CARTER Oh, I forgot you were friendly with Mrs Baker. Sorry! (*She giggles a high giggle, which comes particularly ridiculously from her bulk*) Quite the wrong thing to say!

[*Enter MISS BOYD. She is the gymnastics mistress, and is dressed in the usual blue tunic and black stockings of her tribe. She is about twenty-five, and has a quiet but alert air. A looker-on at things.*]

HINCH Don't be silly. Dorothy writes the best essays in her form. I don't see why she should be considered mentally deficient just because she doesn't take any interest in Latin. (*To BOYD, who has crossed in a leisurely fashion to the open window and is staring out into the sunlight*) Don't you think so, Boyd?

BOYD What?

HINCH What is Dorothy like for you?

BOYD Dorothy who?

HINCH Dorothy Baker.

BOYD (*indifferently*) Oh, nice kid. Awfully flat feet, though.

CARTER How are *you* free just now?

BOYD My patient isn't here today.

CARTER Well, I must say, some people get off easily. I wish *forms* took to being absent so that *we* could have unexpected free times—and no correction to do.

BOYD Cheer up, Carter! When someone falls off the fire-escape no one brings the mangled heap to your door. It's an ill wind, you know. Besides, you know you'd be bored stiff if you had a 'free'. Oh, blast! I have a hole in my stocking. (*She sits down on the couch, removes her shoe, pulls the stocking forward at the toe so that the hole at the heel disappears, and resumes her shoe*)

HINCH D'you know, Boyd, that Amy Higgs and Betty Bartlett were kicking the netball along the corridor to the garden door yesterday afternoon, and they didn't make the slightest attempt to stop because I was coming. I had actually to step aside

to avoid the ball.

BOYD Oh?... Sorry!... I expect they were on their way to games and feeling a bit above themselves.

HINCH Well, it isn't the kind of thing we can afford to encourage. The discipline in this school is a byword already. Not that you could expect anything else with a Head who thinks yelling is good for children. But, still!

BOYD I'll talk to them, if you like. They can miss their next game. That will sober them, I'll warrant.

HINCH No girl is allowed to miss a game as a punishment.

BOYD Oh? Well, I didn't know that before. But surely the punishment should fit the crime.

HINCH No girl is allowed to miss a game. And, anyhow, I would rather you didn't say I complained. I've no desire to find myself in Amy Higgs' black books.

[BOYD *makes a slight grimace, swings her legs on to the couch, and lies there looking out of the window.*]

CARTER Do you know what Amy Higgs did in Grimmett's lesson yesterday?

HINCH No?

CARTER Grimmett asked them to suggest a question for their next French debate, and Amy suggested 'Are form mistresses bad form?'

HINCH I told you she was an odious child!

CARTER That was just to show that they knew all about the row between Grim and Kelly over having the fifth form.

HINCH What did Grim do?

CARTER Nothing, apparently. Looked silly, I expect.

HINCH She *is* a dreadful funk. Besides having no conscience in other respects. She took the only Swiss bun on the plate at break today, although she knows quite well that I always have it. Just because the Head kept me talking and I was a minute or two late. I had to have a Chelsea, and I simply loathe Chelsea buns. And she always bags the *Punch* first on a Wednesday. It never seems to occur to her that someone else might like to see it first.

BOYD Talking of *Punch*—I see the voting list is up for next term's papers. Don't you think we might have something a little—a little more frivolous than the things we have now?

HINCH As what, for instance?

BOYD Oh, I don't know. The *Tatler*, or the *Bystander*, or something. Something not so terribly educational as the *Illustrated World* and the *Photographic Year*.

CARTER What on earth would we get the *Tatler* for? We don't want to see photographs of dressed-up ninnies making fools of themselves at Ascot.

BOYD You needn't look at it that week. But it would give us an idea how the world wagged and what skirts were looking like at the moment, and so forth.

HINCH You can see that in Wickins' window for nothing.

BOYD The skirts, perhaps, but not the world.

CARTER We don't want to buy papers for the staff unless they are of some use to us.

BOYD Oh? But no one ever opens the ones we get.

HINCH Speak for yourself, Boyd.

BOYD Oh, *I* open them. I read 'em all. I know all about the habits of the great auk, and the new railroad in Timbuctoo, and the various kinds of cactus, and all the rest. I like being educated. But don't you think we might get something for the staff-room that didn't educate us? Hyacinths to feed our soul, you know.

CARTER Hyacinths! We get enough flowers from the children to——

HINCH Don't be silly, Carter. Boyd is speaking figuratively, of course. You can put it on the list, Boyd, you know, and it will go to the vote in the usual way.

BOYD Here's the postman.

[*She springs to her feet and goes out hastily. The others exchange looks.*]

HINCH Carter, I must say I didn't think you would have been so stupid as to let her imagine you didn't understand her allusion.

CARTER But I didn't. Never heard of it. Hyacinths, indeed! A silly sort of expression—and quite beside the point, as far as I can see. It would suit her better to be attending to her work than making silly remarks about hyacinths. She's far too flighty for her job.

HINCH Oh, she's flighty. I grant you that. But she does keep the kids in order, and that's more than Pennington ever did. Not that I would flatter her by telling her so. I think she fancies herself as a disciplinarian. But, still!

CARTER What's the good of keeping the children in order when she wears a hat like the one she is wearing now?

HINCH It isn't the hat, my dear, it's the way she wears it. You know—so that people look again. And her landlady—don't repeat this—her landlady told my landlady that she never wears anything but crêpe-de-chine underneath.

CARTER Oh, Grimmett's told me that.

HINCH How did she know? Are Grimmett and Boyd getting friendly?

CARTER Oh, I don't think so. Her landlady probably told her. They're awful gossips, landladies. How do you think she can have crêpe-de-chine underwear on her salary? It takes me all my time to buy Jaeger, and I get nearly twice what she does.

HINCH Well, the Head did hint to Fry that her people were rather well-off.

CARTER What's she working for if her people have money?

HINCH Oh, something to do, I suppose.

CARTER Don't you believe it. Who would work if they hadn't to!

HINCH Carter! What a strange thing to say. Lots of people work because they like it, of course. (*She leaves it to be inferred that she herself is included in the 'lots'*) And as for you, you positively invent it, so you must like it.

CARTER I don't, but someone in this institution has to have a conscience.

HINCH Poor Atlas!

CARTER Poor what?

HINCH Oh, nothing. Then you don't think Boyd's people are well-off.

CARTER Not well enough off to keep her in crêpe-de-chine.

HINCH Then how do you think she gets it?

CARTER I really couldn't say. (*Her tone means that she not only does not know but would rather not speculate*) You did promise to take Fry's form last period this morning, didn't you?

HINCH I didn't promise. I was press-ganged into taking it. I wonder if a term will ever pass without Fry having something go wonky in her inside.

CARTER Well, do you mind if I speak to the form for a moment before you begin? I want to tell them about the Classical Society's——

HINCH Oh, you can speak to them for the whole of the lesson if you like.

[*Enter* BOYD, *carrying an opened letter and an envelope with a halfpenny stamp.*]

BOYD Nothing for you, Carter, and only a bill for Hinch. (*She gives the*

envelope to HINCH)

HINCH I fail to see how you came to the conclusion that it was a bill.

BOYD Well, since it's nearly the end of term it can't be a receipt, and I don't suppose your best man puts a ha'penny stamp on his letters.

[In a silence which can be felt but of which she seems unconscious she retires to the couch and continues to read her own letter.]

CARTER *(at the notice-board)* Boyd, will it be all right if I send half of Fry's form into Fifth Form gym next period?

BOYD *(reading)* Imphm.

[HINCH and CARTER exchange looks.]

CARTER You don't mind?

BOYD *(reading)* Oh, not a bit. The more the merrier.

[CARTER pauses at this unscholastic outlook, but recovers herself.]

CARTER Well, that's Fry's lot settled for today, anyhow.

[Enter SIGGINS. She is the geography mistress; small and plump and excitable. The kind who asks three porters and the guard, but is never sure until she arrives at her destination that she is in the right train. At the moment she is full of the importance of the bearer of dreadful news.]

SIGGINS Girls! Do you know who's here?

CARTER No. Who?

BOYD Not the Prince of Wales, evidently.

SIGGINS Woodington Smith!

HINCH No! Siggins, no! Oh, no!

SIGGINS Woodington Smith.

CARTER But the Head didn't tell me. Why didn't the Head tell me he was coming?

HINCH She said quite distinctly last week that he wasn't coming till the beginning of next term.

CARTER How do you know he's here?

SIGGINS How do I know? That's a good one. My dear, I've had him for more than an hour. He listened to me while I took a whole lesson, and stood there saying

absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing, my dear. I nearly died. Honestly, I did. You know the way he sits there saying absolutely nothing so that you wonder all the time what he's thinking. Simply nerve-breaking. And then when the bell rang and I thought it was all over he made me yank out the sand board and made the kids do a map on it there and then. Awful, my dear! Simply awful!

CARTER Is he staying?

SIGGINS Yes, I think so. I heard the Head say 'You'll have lunch with us', so he's staying to the end of the morning, anyhow.

HINCH (*wailing*) Oh, and it's my morning with Five B! It would be my morning with Five B. What shall I do?

SIGGINS The Third were simply awful, my dear. Joan Marriner said that the Euphrates was in Somerset. Can you imagine it! The Euphrates! In Somerset! I nearly killed her. And even then, he didn't say a word. Just sat there and said nothing. It was simply awful. Simply awful. And then Daphne Simpson upset the sand board and they had to start the map of Ireland all over again. I never hated Ireland so much before—not even in the rebellion. And there weren't enough blue beads for the towns to go round.

HINCH Oh, *what* can I do with Five B?

CARTER I really think the Head might have told me the minute he came, even if he walked in unexpectedly.

HINCH It *is* unsporting of him not to give us warning. He's worse than Grimmett. He would take a Swiss bun from a baby.

SIGGINS And Doris Palmer had hiccups in the middle and pretended she hadn't, instead of going out like any sane creature. In the end I had to say, 'Doris, I think you'd better go and have a drink of water, hadn't you?' I don't know what Mr Woodington Smith must have thought.

BOYD Who *is* Mr Woodington Smith?

HINCH Who is he? The H.M.I., of course!

BOYD What's that?

CARTER What's an——! Oh, of course, you did hospital work before. But I should have thought that in nearly a term of school you couldn't have escaped hearing about an H.M.I. An H.M.I., my dear innocent, is His Majesty's Inspector of Schools.

SIGGINS If only he'd *say* something! It's his not saying anything that's so awful.

BOYD What does this Smith man inspect?

CARTER Well, his own subject is French, but of course he inspects anything.

BOYD Why 'of course'?

HINCH Because that's his job. To come and pick holes in us.

BOYD (*comfortably*) Well, I don't suppose he knows anything about gym, thank goodness.

HINCH Oh, that won't make any difference.

BOYD Oh, won't it! It will if he starts to criticise.

CARTER My dear Boyd, don't make an enemy of Woodington Smith whatever you do. He could make things very unpleasant if he wanted to.

BOYD Does he insist on the Woodington?

CARTER Well, it's his name, isn't it?

SIGGINS You *would* think that a child who had hiccups would have enough common sense to know that she was a distraction to the others without having to be told, wouldn't you?

CARTER Did the Head stay all the time?

SIGGINS No, only for the first few minutes. That was one comfort. She smirked at him with that silly smirk of hers and tip-toed out. If she hadn't tip-toed no one would have looked at her, of course. As it was they were all watching till she shut the door. It was like an elephant being coy.

CARTER Well, I do think she might have come and told me he was here, instead of letting me find it out for myself. Especially since she wasn't with him all the time. Where is he now?

SIGGINS I think he's in the office with her.

CARTER Oh! Perhaps I had better go and see. Perhaps she hasn't made arrangements with Mrs Fox about lunch. It would be better, perhaps, if I——

[*Exit* CARTER.]

HINCH Hurt in her tenderest place! Isn't she priceless! I shouldn't wonder if the Head did it willingly. She must be as big a trial to the Head as she is to us.

SIGGINS Well, it's my day for taking School dinner, thank goodness, so I won't have to think up things to say to him at lunch. I think I deserve that bit of luck after the time I had this morning.

HINCH Oh, that's not so bad. I don't mind that so much. Anyhow, the Head is

usually so all over him that you don't have to say anything. But what am I to do with Five B? You know what they're like. What am I to do with them?

SIGGINS They'll behave when he's there, and that's more than they'll do any other time. You have that for consolation.

HINCH Yes, but you know what utter dolts they are. Mary Robbins said in an essay last week that the three great poets of the Renaissance were Burns, Shelley, and Yeats.

[BOYD *laughs.*]

BOYD Cheer up! That's nothing. She said in my physiology paper that we breathed through paws—p-a-w-s—in the palms of our hands.

HINCH That's your bad articulation, my dear.

BOYD Yes. I suppose I should have called them 'poorrrs', like Mac.

HINCH If I give them poetry they'll all be self-conscious and won't say a word. And I can't very well read a play with them. He mightn't consider that a lesson. And a grammar competition is rather childish for Five B.

SIGGINS Some beast has stolen my blotting-paper. (*Looking up from the attaché-case in which she has been searching, and challenging HINCH*) Did you go away with my blotting-paper?

HINCH I never saw your blotting-paper.

SIGGINS Boyd, did you take my blotting-paper?

BOYD Not guilty.

SIGGINS Well, someone has. I had a perfectly new sheet of blotting-paper in my mark book, and now it's gone. I do think it's hard that one can't leave one's possessions on the table without having them rifled. Some people haven't any conscience about other people's belongings. They think because a thing isn't worth five pounds, or something, that——(*She pauses for a moment, looking intently at something on the table. She leans forward quickly and snatches the blotting-paper from under the book which HINCH has been correcting*) There's my blotting-paper!

HINCH Your blotting-paper! What nonsense.

SIGGINS Oh, yes, it is. I know it by that red-ink blot. You took it out of my attaché-case, you beast.

HINCH My dear Siggins! Don't be ridiculous.

SIGGINS Well, if you didn't, where did you get it?

HINCH I took it out of the waste-paper basket, because there was none on the table.

SIGGINS And what beast put it into the waste-paper basket?

[Enter CARTER.]

CARTER The door is shut, but I can hear them talking inside. I thought I had better not disturb them. But Mrs Fox has been told about lunch. She's not pleased, either. That makes two extra. Some child is staying without notice, as well, it seems. She isn't a bit pleased.

SIGGINS That means only one helping of pudding, I suppose.

CARTER It doesn't matter. It's tombstone. I saw it on the table in the kitchen. (*She giggles her high giggle*)

HINCH What! Is Woodington Smith going to be offered that?

BOYD You should be glad that Mr Woodington Smith is going to suffer as you seem to be going to suffer with Five B!

HINCH I do think she might concoct something when Woodington Smith is here. Trifle, or something.

CARTER Heaven preserve me from any concoctions of Mrs Fox's. Oh, that nearly rhymed! I didn't mean to be clever.

HINCH We absolve you. Oh, what *shall* I do with Five B?

SIGGINS He mayn't come to you at all. He's got to spend at least one period with Grimmett, poor devil. Last time he said their French accent was more like Russian. Grimmett cried to Kelly about it afterwards. Don't say I told you.

HINCH My dear, everyone knew that.

SIGGINS (*aggressively*) *How* did everyone know it?

HINCH The same way as you did, I suppose. Kelly told them.

SIGGINS Well, I don't think it's very nice of Kelly to go round telling people——

[*The door opens, and the HEAD comes in. She is a buxom woman of forty-five, and looks rather like a successful farmer's wife. She is dressed in a very 'good', very ugly dress of slate-blue cloth with red-brown collar and cuffs. Her smile is saved only by its breadth from being a simper.*]

THE HEAD I know you won't mind; I've brought Mr Woodington Smith to see the new staff-room. As you know, it was largely due to him that we had it redecorated.

[*She ushers in MR WOODINGTON SMITH. He is a smallish, fair man, with*

pince-nez; about thirty-five, rather shy, and so harmless-looking as to be almost a nonentity. He belongs to the type who continually say 'Absolutely!' when they have made a statement, because they feel that they have been insufficiently impressive. He has an Oxford voice and a dithering manner.

[*At the entrance of the HEAD, CARTER, SIGGINS, and HINCH have leaped to their feet as men do at the advent of the orderly officer. BOYD removes her feet from the couch and sits up.*]

THE HEAD You know everyone here, I think, Mr Woodington Smith. Oh, no. Let me present Miss Boyd. Miss Boyd is our new games mistress. I don't think you have met her before.

[*BOYD gets unhurriedly to her feet.*]

BOYD (*gently*) Hullo, Biffie.

SMITH Why, Nell—Miss Boyd! Good gracious! Who would have thought of meeting you here. Well, well. (*Holding her hand, and going on shaking it*) This is a surprise. I'm frightfully glad to see you again. I didn't know you did (*he waves his hand vaguely*) this sort of thing.

BOYD Yes, this sort of thing is my job, you know.

SMITH Oh, of course. I'd forgotten you people were so versatile. Dancing and massage and everything, all mixed up, isn't it? And so you've taken up educational work?

BOYD Yes.

SMITH That must be a change for you.

BOYD Yes.

SMITH They must miss you at the hospital. Is this your first term?

BOYD Yes.

SMITH I say, I should love to see you take a gym class. Would you mind if I came in for a little?

BOYD No, not a bit. There's senior gym in the afternoon, if you'd like to see that. They're the best lot. My show-off people, you know.

SMITH Oh, thank you. I'd like to see that. Well, I mustn't be holding up the traffic, I suppose. How is your brother? Did he go abroad?

BOYD No, he has a job with a silk firm now. He's married and awfully settled

down at Ealing.

SMITH Oh? Well, I shall see you this afternoon if not before. You really don't mind my coming in?

BOYD No, not a bit. But would you mind staying at the back, where they can't see you all the time? It doesn't really matter, but it's less distracting for them.

SMITH Oh, certainly—rather! The shrinking violet won't be in it compared with me. I'm awfully glad to have met you like this.

[*He bows to the others and turns to go. Then he remembers that it is the room that he has come to inspect. He turns back.*]

SMITH Oh, yes. A very nice room indeed. Charming!

THE HEAD (*a little strained*) The kindergarten was done at the same time, if you would care to see it. It is just at the end of the corridor here.

SMITH Oh, thank you.

[*They go out, the HEAD shutting the door. There is a meaning silence.*]

CARTER (*coldly*) I think you might have said that you knew Mr Woodington Smith.

BOYD But I didn't know I did. He didn't have a Woodington when I knew him. He was a patient at the Ministry hospital where I worked. I think I knew his name was Smith, but no one ever called him anything but Biffie.

HINCH And why Biffie, may one ask?

BOYD Well, it was B. F. really, only it got shortened to Biffie.

CARTER B. F.?

BOYD Yes.... Short for silly ass, you know.

SIGGINS Did you—was he one of your patients?

BOYD Yes. (*She goes to her shelf of books and extracts a small notebook, which she consults*) Siggins, do you mind if I have Mary Hopper from geography instead of from Maths? King says she mustn't miss any more maths before the exam.

SIGGINS Oh, *must* she have remedials just now!

BOYD Yes, she must. Her back's a lot crookeder than her chances in the exam.

SIGGINS Oh, well, I suppose you must have her if you want her.

HINCH Did you—was Mr Woodington Smith your patient for long?

BOYD About six months. Thanks, Siggins. I won't keep her a minute longer than I

can help. (*She goes on consulting her notebook*)

HINCH You knew him quite well, then?

BOYD Oh, well enough. But I did twenty men a day, you see, so we can't be said to have been intimate.

[*A bell rings violently in the distance. MISS HINCH gasps, and begins to collect her books as one going to the scaffold.*]

SIGGINS Well, I have a 'free', thank goodness. And I shan't do any correcting, either. I think I'll go down-town. Anyone want anything?

CARTER Oh, yes, get me half a pound of butter, if you would be so kind. (*She is rushing round the room, collecting books which she packs into her attaché-case*)

SIGGINS Fresh?

CARTER What? Oh, yes.

SIGGINS International?

CARTER No, Maypole.

SIGGINS All right. (*To HINCH as they go to the door together*) Cheer up, Hinch. Good luck.

HINCH Don't talk to me!

[*This is meant to convey that one kind word may upset MISS HINCH irretrievably. They go out leaving the door open.*]

CARTER It *will* be all right about your taking those extra people of Fry's this period, won't it?

BOYD Oh, yes. That's all settled.

[*CARTER bustles out, leaving the door open. BOYD replaces in her tights' pocket the mirror she has been using in the process of combing her hair, pulls up her stockings, and tightens her suspenders. She is taking a last critical survey of the seams of her stockings, when MR SMITH passes on his way back from viewing the kindergarten. He is alone, having left the HEAD among the infants. He sees BOYD and pauses.*]

SMITH Hullo. D'you know, I can't tell you how surprising it was to find you here like this. (*Comes in*)

BOYD And it is very—amusing to find you here.

SMITH I say, you never would come out with me in the old days, so I'm almost afraid to ask you, but will you come out and have lunch with me in the town?

BOYD My dear man! And run away from staff dinner?

SMITH I shouldn't call it running away. It's a strategical retreat.

BOYD But they're expecting you to stay to lunch, aren't they? I heard them talking about it.

SMITH Yes, I usually stay. For policy's sake, you know. But I'll make that all right with the Head. She's an awfully nice woman, isn't she? A bit gabby, but awfully nice really. So—will you?

BOYD You'll miss the tombstones if you don't stay.

SMITH Tombstones? What are they?

BOYD Slabs of cold pastry. They taste like water-biscuit, and look like something dug up in an excavation.

SMITH I say, you know, I never imagined you in this sort of—milieu. Do you like it?

BOYD Oh, yes, rather!

SMITH (*doubtfully*) What do you like so much about it?

BOYD I like the kids.

SMITH Oh, yes, I see. But——(*He finds himself unable to express what he means and gives it up*)

BOYD Why do you put the wind up everyone here the way you do?

SMITH Me! Put the wind up them! What nonsense.

BOYD But you do. You frighten them into fits. It's nothing short of bullying. They blanch at the very mention of your name.

SMITH Nell! You're not serious, are you? Why, it should be the other way round. They're a dreadfully intimidating lot, really. That Carter woman, for instance. She makes me feel like a small boy who's been caught stealing jam. Absolute fact! I'm always afraid she'll ask my opinion about a timetable or something. She's a whale for timetables, and timetables never were my strong point.

BOYD No, you were always late.

SMITH And you were always angry.

BOYD I was never angry!

SMITH No, you let it be understood that you were not greatly pleased.

BOYD I had no idea that you were such an august person, of course.

SMITH I wasn't then. I was just schoolmastering. But one of my uncles knows an old bird in the Board of Education, and he wangled this for me.

BOYD And do you like it?

SMITH Oh, rather! Frightfully interesting job. And of course, it's all rot about their being frightened of me. I'm as mild as milk. I never say anything. I have to shove in a little report now and then, but I never say anything damning, you know. Just enough to earn my keep.

BOYD Well, perhaps when one becomes an H.M.I. one frightens automatically, as it were.

SMITH Oh, nonsense! What would they be frightened of? I say, you will come and have lunch with me, won't you?

BOYD I've just remembered that I've only a burberry to wear. It's a staff habit. We put a burberry on as a matter of course to save us having to think about our clothes. But if I go out to lunch in it on a nice bright morning like this it will be a deterrent for the rest of my life. Do you mind suffering for my ultimate good?

SMITH You're coming, then? By George, it is frightfully nice to see you again.

BOYD You'll have to take me to a 'Burberry' place, you know. Somewhere where they say 'Mash or chips?' I don't know that it will be very dignified for an H.M.I.

SMITH I say, don't rot. I'll go anywhere you like. Shall I wait for you at the front door when the last bell goes?

BOYD Yes, I think that would be best.

[Enter CARTER, through the open door.]

CARTER Oh, I beg your pardon. I had no idea.—So sorry.

[She makes a movement to withdraw.]

SMITH Oh, please don't go, Miss Carter. Miss Boyd and I were talking over old times.

CARTER I didn't mean to intrude. I just came back for a book I forgot. It's on the table, I think.

SMITH I'm just going. (To BOYD) *Au revoir*.

[Exit SMITH.]

[CARTER searches frantically round the room.]

CARTER You're rather late for your lesson, aren't you?

BOYD Yes, a little. I thought perhaps one waited to be dismissed when one was addressed by an H.M.I.

CARTER Where is that book? I'm sure I left it here. Have you seen my Ovid?

BOYD No. Where is the dinner book?

CARTER Under the notice-board. Oh, dear, and now I can't catch Mr Woodington Smith, and I wanted to consult him about the new timetable. I know he'll find fault with it if it isn't given to him for approval first. What are you doing with the dinner book?

BOYD I'm scoring out my name.

CARTER Aren't you staying to dinner, then?

BOYD No. I'm going out to lunch with Mr B. F. Woodington Smith.

[Exit BOYD, leaving CARTER staring after her.]

CURTAIN

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Plays III* by Gordon Daviot]