

Plays II

The Pomp of Mr Pomfret

Cornelia

Patria

and Three One-Act Plays

Gordon Daviot
[Elizabeth Mackintosh]
1954

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PLAYS BY GORDON DAVIOT



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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

II

THE POMP OF MR POMFRET

CORNELIA

PATRIA

and Three One-Act Plays

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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.

Further plays on modern themes will appear in a subsequent volume.

THE POMP OF MR POMFRET

CHARACTERS

MATHEW POMFRET, M.P.

HERMIONE POMFRET, *his sister*

JOHN JUDD, *successful exile home from Canada*

DONALD MACALLISTER, *newspaper-man*

VALENTI, *a young music-hall performer*

ROSA, *his sister*

GIOVANNI, *maitre d'hôtel*

WAITER

ASSISTANT WAITER

SIMS, *a butler*

ARTHUR, *a snack-bar attendant—who does not speak*

SCENES

ACT I

SCENE 1 *The balcony at the Mayflower Restaurant*

SCENE 2 *Corner of a snack bar*

ACT II

SCENE 1 *The Small Drawing-room at West Lee*

SCENE 2 *The same*

ACT III

SCENE 1 *The same*

SCENE 2 *The same*

ACT I

SCENE I

The set is a shallow one, set down stage.

The Scene is a small balcony overlooking the floor of the Mayflower Restaurant, most famous and most expensive of London's West End eating-places. The balcony, which is only a few feet above floor level, holds two tables, and occupies only the R. half of the stage. To L. a corridor runs. To R., off stage, are the steps to the restaurant floor.

At the L. table are seated VALENTI, a young man of Italian appearance and great good-looks, and his sister ROSA, still in her early twenties, brown-haired, well dressed, demure, and entirely English in appearance.

At the R. table are two men. One is JOHN JUDD, a smallish man of sixty-five, with a self-contained manner, a well-scrubbed appearance, and a Canadian drawl. The other is DONALD MACALLISTER, a newspaper-man four years out of Glasgow, twenty-five, eager, enthusiastic, kindly, uncouth, and quite sure that the world is his oyster. MACALLISTER is sitting back to back with ROSA.

When the curtain goes up, a WAITER is taking JUDD'S order. VALENTI and his sister have just been given their coffee and liqueurs; ROSA leaning on the balcony edge, turned away from the audience, watching the scene below, VALENTI taking his cigarette-case from his pocket.

JUDD Then we'll have *filet mignon*. (To MACALLISTER) Like beef?

MACALLISTER Indeed I do.

JUDD And I think that will be about all for the moment. If we find we can eat any more we'll order it later.

WAITER Thank you, sir. Vegetables with the partridge, sir?

JUDD (*his drawl more obvious*) Whatever in your professional mind would seem to be appropriate.

WAITER Thank you, sir. I shall send the wine waiter to you.

JUDD Don't bother. Send us a magnum of your best champagne.

WAITER Thank you, sir.

[He fusses for a moment over the table, in recognition of the champagne

order, and then goes.]

ROSA (*to her brother, who is offering his cigarette-case*) No, I am going to have some of these first. (*She indicates the plate of friandises*) They make the best in London. (*She helps herself to a sweet, and smiles at him*)

VALENTI Happy? (*She nods*) Me, too.

MACALLISTER You know, I have interviewed a good many people in my time, Mr Judd, but never over dinner at the Mayflower.

JUDD Where did you interview them, mostly?

MACALLISTER Oh, everywhere from the front steps to the bathroom.

JUDD The bathroom?

MACALLISTER He was a round-the-world flier with only three minutes to spare.

JUDD Well, come to that, I don't often give more than three minutes myself. To be honest, young fellow, if this weren't my first night back in the old country, you'd be having the usual drink and cigar like the rest of them.

MACALLISTER I hope you won't think it's just cupboard love, if I say that I'm glad to be celebrating with you.

JUDD Thank you. I'm rather glad you turned up. Did the *Clarion* send you because you are Scots?

MACALLISTER (*in his rich accent*) How did you know I was a Scot? Oh, my name, of course. No, they sent me because nothing but the best was good enough to interview John Judd.

JUDD (*appreciating this right-and-left*) There's a great future in front of you, Mr Macallister.

MACALLISTER Well, there's a fine example only two feet in front of me at this moment. Did you always mean to be a success, Mr Judd, or did it just happen?

JUDD I actually meant to be a crane-driver, but somehow it didn't come off. I still stop and stare at a crane. No, I was a success in Canada because I found out how to get on the blind side of the Scots.

MACALLISTER The Scots?

JUDD Yes. What the French left of Canada the Scots took. It's my greatest distinction that, being nothing but a snivelling little nobody from Camden Town, I made a million sterling out of pure-blooded Scots.

MACALLISTER Congratulations. I take it there was a formula.

JUDD Yes. It's quite simple. The Scots are a great people, but they have two weaknesses. They're vain; and they're avaricious. Well, the trick is to let them think they are getting something for nothing (that satisfies their avarice), and to let them think you don't know (that satisfies their vanity). After that they'll practically adopt you.

MACALLISTER (*ruefully*) You don't like us, I see.

JUDD Like you? Lord love you, every girl I was ever in love with was a Scot. That is why I never married.

MACALLISTER Why?

JUDD They were all looking for something better.

MACALLISTER (*philosophically*) Well, I've had my leg pulled before.

[*Enter* WAITER.]

WAITER I beg your pardon, sir. I'm very sorry, sir, but this table is engaged. I can give you a very good one on the floor of the restaurant.

JUDD Since when has the table been engaged?

WAITER It should have been marked reserved, sir, only it was forgotten. I'm very sorry, sir, but there are several very good tables vacant, and you can have your choice, sir.

JUDD I don't want another table. I like this one. It seems to me to be one of the only two tables in the place where you can hear yourself speak.

WAITER Yes, sir. Perhaps, sir. But I can give you a corner one by the far door. If you will just follow me, sir. (*He is in a hurry, scarcely hides his impatience, and takes it for granted that JUDD will rise at once*)

JUDD Listen, young man. You brought us to this table, didn't you?

WAITER Yes, sir, I did. But I didn't know then that it was reserved. The gentleman has now arrived. If you will come this way, sir, I'll show you to another table.

JUDD (*mildly*) Go and fetch the *maître d'hôtel*.

WAITER Sir?

JUDD I said: Go and fetch the *maître d'hôtel*.

WAITER But——(*Catching JUDD'S eye. Very stiffly, and with as much insolence as he dare*) Yes, certainly, sir.

[*Exit* WAITER, R.]

JUDD I hope their food is better than their manners. (*Referring to ROSA*) I see that

England still grows pretty girls.

MACALLISTER (*without turning; gloomily*) Yes. And they still like tall dark men.
(MACALLISTER *is small and sandy*)

JUDD Oh, so you have eyes in the back of your head.

MACALLISTER Every good newspaper man has.

[*Enter the* WAITER, *making hurriedly for* ROSA *and* VALENTI.]

WAITER (*in passing, to* JUDD) The *maitre d'hôtel* is just coming, sir. (*To* VALENTI) I am very sorry, sir, this table is reserved for nine o'clock. Perhaps you wouldn't mind having your coffee in the lounge.

ROSA In the lounge? (*Protesting*) Oh, no! Why? The lounge is a desert just now.

WAITER I'm very sorry, madam.

VALENTI But we haven't been here an hour yet. If it was reserved for nine, why did you put us here?

WAITER I didn't know then, sir. I shall have fresh coffee served for you in the lounge in a moment.

[*Enter R. the* MAÎTRE D'HÔTEL. *The* WAITER *indicates with a gesture of his hand that it is* JUDD *who has demanded his presence. Exit* WAITER.]

MAÎTRE D'HÔTEL I regret very much to inconvenience you, monsieur——

JUDD You the *maitre d'hôtel*?

ROSA (*to* VALENTI) They're being turned out too! (*She listens quite openly*)

JUDD I came here for dinner because I was told that it is the best place in London. Now the waiter wants me to change my table because someone else wants it. Do you always do business that way?

MAÎTRE I regret very much. You see, the gentleman is a very frequent guest, and he is accustomed to having this table.

JUDD And in fact the table was not reserved at all. I never believed it was. Your favoured customer has turned up and wants his table, so the man who has just dropped in can be picked up and dumped somewhere else.

MAÎTRE (*retrieving*) Ah, no, monsieur. Believe me, the table should have been marked. But I can assure monsieur that there are excellent tables on the floor. If monsieur——

JUDD I like it here. It is quiet, and I want to talk to this young man. Moreover, I don't like your method of business. Go and tell your gentleman that the table he

wants is occupied, but that he can have the choice of all the good ones on the floor.

MAÎTRE I am sure that monsieur would not like to be the means of losing the waiter his position. That is what would result from his failure to reserve the table.

JUDD And *that*, my friend, is blackmail. Go and explain things to your client, and if he is the gentleman you say he is, that will be an end of the business.

MAÎTRE (*showing signs of nastiness*) I regret to insist, monsieur, but this table is not available——(*Catching JUDD'S eye. With a great air of long-suffering patience*) Very well, monsieur; I shall see what can be done.

[*Exit MAÎTRE D'HÔTEL, R.*]

ROSA (*to her brother, who is preparing to vacate their table*) No, wait. Perhaps we shan't have to go.

JUDD So that is what has happened to the Old Country! Or is it that I didn't move in the circles where such things happen, back in the old days. (*Running a finger round his collar*) You know, I've always been proud of my blood pressure, but I don't think it's what it used to be.

ROSA (*twisted round in her chair, and speaking to him past MACALLISTER'S shoulder*) Are you being turned out too?

VALENTI (*horrified*) Rosa!

JUDD (*pleased by her fresh youth and her friendly, almost schoolgirlish, manner*) Too? Are you part of the beleaguered garrison?

ROSA Yes, they want us to go and have our coffee in the lounge. Do you know the lounge? It is ten acres big, and at this time of the evening there isn't a soul in it.

JUDD Then my advice to you, my dear young lady, is to drink your coffee in peace. We shall stand siege together.

ROSA Of course, everyone knows that Giovanni is the biggest snob in London.

JUDD Who is Giovanni?

ROSA The *maître d'hôtel*. The man you were speaking to. Unless you appear once a month in the *Bystander*, you don't exist for Giovanni.

JUDD And what is the *Bystander*?

ROSA (*after a slight pause; doubtfully*) Aren't you English?

JUDD Well, a sort of poor relation. Canadian.

ROSA Oh. (*Considering*) Canada. (*Pleased*) Perhaps Giovanni has made a mistake for once.

JUDD How's that?

ROSA Canada is supposed to be bad to beat. (*Lifting her liqueur glass to him*)
My faith is pinned to the maple leaf.

JUDD Well, my own faith is pinned to English good manners. An Italian head waiter may be a snob, but I hope my countryman has a sense of humour. I hope it very much, because I am very hungry indeed. At least, I was. Come to think of it, my stomach feels very small all of a sudden.

ROSA That's your gorge rising.

VALENTI Rosa, darling!

ROSA Giovanni makes a lot of people sick at the stomach. Here he comes! (*She turns round again*)

MAÎTRE I am desolated, monsieur, the gentleman insists on having the table that was reserved for him.

JUDD You told him that the table was occupied?

MAÎTRE Assuredly, monsieur.

JUDD And you mean to say——

MAÎTRE Unfortunately, the gentleman is aware that monsieur has not yet been served. He thinks that it would be a simple thing on monsieur's part to move.

JUDD I agree with him. But I am not as simple as all that. If I happened to be the Duke of Kensington you wouldn't have asked me to move. Since I'm plain John Judd, I stay here on principle.

MAÎTRE Monsieur, I have done my best, but if this table is not given up we lose one of our best clients.

JUDD I have already lost my appetite; why should I care about your clients? Is it for the same client that you are turning out this young couple?

MAÎTRE My dear monsieur, there is no question of turning out! It is merely a matter of adjustment, of——

JUDD Don't quibble. Does the same man want that table too?

MAÎTRE I really do not know why monsieur——

JUDD Does he?

MAÎTRE Yes, monsieur.

JUDD Why?

MAÎTRE Why!

JUDD Yes, why? Is he with a party?

MAÎTRE No, monsieur. There is no party.

JUDD A lady with him?

MAÎTRE No, monsieur, he is alone. But I cannot see what this——

JUDD You are clearing out the balcony for one man?

MAÎTRE The gentleman dislikes publicity, monsieur.

JUDD Stop calling him a gentleman——(*Struck by a sudden thought*) It isn't royalty, by any chance?

MAÎTRE (*incautious and genuine for the moment*) Oh, no, monsieur, royalty would not——(*He pulls himself up*)

JUDD (*dryly*) No. I quite agree with you. Royalty would have better manners. It takes a commoner to be *that* self-important. Will you see what is keeping our dinner?

MAÎTRE You will not vacate the table, monsieur?

JUDD I will not.

MAÎTRE (*with a helpless gesture*) You make it very difficult for everyone.

JUDD I hope so. Tomorrow morning I shall buy this joint and make it still more difficult for everyone.

MAÎTRE If I could but persuade monsieur that the other tables I offer him are——

JUDD (*with the quick movement of a man whose held-back anger has overcome him, taking a ticket from his pocket and extending it to the* WAITER, *who is hovering in the background*) Bring our things from the cloakroom. (*As the* WAITER *takes it and goes*) You may have the best food in London, you damned little wop, but there's a stink round the place that would turn the stomach of a Kansas hobo. Run along and lick the shine off your client's patent leathers, and tell him he has the freedom of the place as far as we're concerned. He's probably more accustomed to the smell than we are.

MAÎTRE I am sorry you are upset, monsieur. The matter could have been adjusted so easily if monsieur had been accommodating.

[*Exit* MAÎTRE D'HÔTEL.]

ROSA Hooray!

VALENTI Rosa!

JUDD (*grinning at her, ruefully*) Dear, dear. I told you my blood pressure was

going back on me. And I have let you two young people down, haven't I?

ROSA Oh, no. It was lovely.

JUDD Dreadful to be defeated by one's own temper. Always a mistake to lose one's temper unintentionally. I can only suggest that you forgive me enough to come and have your coffee with us somewhere.

ROSA With you? I think that would be charming.

VALENTI But you haven't had dinner yet.

JUDD Do you mind watching us eat?

VALENTI No, of course not, but——(*He hesitates*)

JUDD My name is Judd. John Judd. And this is Mr Macallister of the *Daily Clarion*. You don't know anything about me, but the *Clarion* will vouch for my complete respectability.

VALENTI I am Valenti. And this is my sister, Rosa.

MACALLISTER (*involuntarily*) Your sister!

[*This breaks the ice. Laughter from the other three.*]

ROSA (*looking at him for the first time*) Yes, his sister.

VALENTI I shall get my things.

[*Exit VALENTI, R.*]

JUDD I am sorry about that good dinner we were going to have, Mr Macallister. You must think of another place.

MACALLISTER There's the Marguerite.

ROSA I don't think, somehow, that Mr Judd would like that tonight.

MACALLISTER No. Perhaps you're right. The—the smell is rather like the Mayflower.

ROSA They are practically twins.

JUDD Mr Macallister, lead me to a good steak and a boiled potato, and let us postpone the champagne to a more propitious occasion.

ROSA I suppose you wouldn't care for a snack bar?

JUDD I don't think I know exactly what a snack——

ROSA (*to MACALLISTER*) There's the Peacock.

MACALLISTER Yes, of course. Just round the corner.

JUDD If it is just round the corner that settles it. We go to the Peacock. What is it?

A pub?

MACALLISTER It's a sort of off-shoot of a pub. The food is grand. (To ROSA) That was a brain wave.

ROSA Oh, I'm very knowledgeable.

JUDD You are a very charming and helpful young woman, and I am distressed that the maple leaf has let you down so badly. It is one of the things I've always prided myself on: not letting people down.

[Enter VALENTI, hoisting himself into his coat, followed by the WAITER with two hats and coats, and VALENTI'S bill and change on a plate.]

WAITER (to VALENTI) Your change, sir.

[VALENTI takes it, leaving a tip; and the WAITER puts the plate on the table and offers to help JUDD with his coat. JUDD snatches it from him, MACALLISTER takes his hat and coat, and they prepare to go.]

WAITER (stiffly) I'm sorry, sir.

[A smaller WAITER strips the second table and removes it, while the WAITER puts JUDD'S table in the middle of the balcony.]

JUDD (as they are going) Wait a moment. I want to see what this All Highest looks like. (They pause, half-way down the corridor, L.)

[Enter the MAÎTRE D'HÔTEL, practically walking backward in front of MATHEW POMFRET. MR POMFRET is a well-preserved forty-eight. He has a presence, a jowl, a heavy foot, a cold eye, a good tailor, and immeasurable conceit.]

MAÎTRE I am truly sorry to have kept monsieur waiting so long. I can promise that the dinner will be worth waiting for.

POMFRET I hope so, Giovanni, I hope so.

[They seat him with reverent care.]

MACALLISTER So that's who it was!

JUDD (as they begin to move out, L.) Know him?

MACALLISTER There's practically nothing I don't know about him.

JUDD Come to the Peacock and tell me all you know.

WAITER (seeing that JUDD is performing an odd pas seul) Something in your

shoe, sir? Can I——?

JUDD No, I'm just shaking the dust off my feet, thank you.

BLACK OUT

SCENE 2

A snack bar, a few minutes later. We view the counter from the server's side. It curves slightly from down L. to the middle front of the stage, so that those seated at it are not in a straight row. The counter is not solid, and one can see the legs of the high stools drawn up on the other side.

Enter from the L., above the counter, ROSA, JUDD, MACALLISTER, and VALENTI.

ROSA (*calling*) Ahoy, Arthur!

[*Enter from the L., below the counter, a WAITER, white-coated.*]

ROSA Good evening, Arthur, (*ARTHUR acknowledges their presence with a lift of his hand half-way to saluting point*) We have brought you a new customer.

VALENTI Evening, Arthur.

ROSA He has never eaten anything but maple leaves.

JUDD And dirt. I've eaten a peck of dirt tonight.

ROSA He wants to try one of your grills. But meanwhile he had better have some soup.

MACALLISTER Have you any of that barley broth? (*ARTHUR nods*) Mr Judd and I will have that. (*To JUDD*) You don't mind barley, I hope?

JUDD Mind it?

MACALLISTER Lots of people resent every grain of barley that's outside a whisky bottle.

VALENTI Coffee for us, Arthur.

ROSA And some of your little sugar biscuits.

[*Exit ARTHUR, L.*]

JUDD (*contemplating the stool he is supposed to climb on to*) You know, I never sat on one of these things before. (*Handling it*) When I was young people sat on these to write in a ledger—leisurely; now they sit on them to eat—in a hurry.

(*Struggling on to the stool*) Is that progress?

ROSA You'll feel better when you've had some food.

JUDD I wish I hadn't lost my temper. It's ten years since I lost my temper. I despise people who lose their temper.

ROSA Anyone who calls Giovanni a damned little wop is a hero. A public benefactor. I shall put a cross on my calendar tonight. And I shall remember you in my prayers every night from now on.

JUDD Disgraceful of me. Do you go there often?

ROSA Oh, no; we can't afford the Mayflower. We were celebrating.

JUDD (*to VALENTI*) You know, I thought you were Italian, at first.

VALENTI (*after a moment's hesitation*) Actually our name is Marriott. But our grandmother was Italian, and I use her name professionally. It looks better.

MACALLISTER (*puzzling*) Valenti. (*Having solved it*) Of course! That's who you are. How stupid of me. The man who cuts women into pieces.

JUDD What!

MACALLISTER On the stage. You know. A magician.

VALENTI Ah, no. Not magic, I regret to say. Illusion, merely.

MACALLISTER It looked mighty like magic to me.

ROSA You've seen the show?

MACALLISTER More than—— (*Stopping to look at her*) And of course you're the—you're the——

ROSA I'm the stooge.

VALENTI Stooge, indeed! Without Rosa there would be no Valenti. That is what we were celebrating tonight. Our seven years together.

ROSA (*to JUDD*) Were *you* celebrating?

JUDD Yes. I was celebrating my first night in London after fifty years exile.

ROSA Fifty! But you can't *be* more than that.

[ARTHUR *brings bowls of soup and cups of coffee, puts them on the counter, and goes.*]

JUDD I was nearly sixteen when I left. Very grown up I thought I was. And every year since then I have been coming home, but somehow it never happened. I—I got—knitted into the fabric of Canada. It's a fine country. And I helped build it. I built myself a fortune too, but it's an honest one.

MACALLISTER That's what they said at the office.

JUDD Who said?

MACALLISTER When they gave me this assignment, the sub. said: Go and interview one fortune that wasn't made by playing the market.

JUDD Yes? (*He looks pleased*)

ROSA What do you do, Mr Judd?

JUDD I'm a builder.

ROSA Houses?

JUDD Only incidentally. Roads, and bridges, and railways. Another man designed them, but it is my job to see that they are built to last. They'll last. There isn't a bit of shoddy in one of them. There are monuments to John Judd all over Canada. My name's not on any of them, but my signature is, if you know what I mean. That's what I was celebrating tonight.

MACALLISTER (*touched; in a burst*) And a bladder of hot air like Mathew Pomfret had to spoil it! I hope his dinner is choking him.

JUDD Yes, I want to hear about this—what did you say his name was?

MACALLISTER Pomfret. (*Spelling*) P-o-m-f-r-e-t. Pronounced Pumfrey.

VALENTI Oh, that man?

MACALLISTER Do you know him?

VALENTI Who doesn't? Oh, not personally. But he's tipped to be the next Prime Minister, isn't he?

MACALLISTER (*agreeing*) Uh-huh. God help the Empire.

JUDD (*who still thinks of England in terms of the Nineties*) Aristocrat?

MACALLISTER Aristocrat! Huh! His name isn't even Pomfret. He was born Immenhausen. Oh, yes, he's English. His father was naturalised. A British passport covers a multitude of sins these days. Good soup?

JUDD Very. Married?

MACALLISTER Pomfret? No. Still looking round. Said to be thinking of the Earl of Aberfeldy's daughter.

ROSA But she's ancient!

MACALLISTER (*omniscient as befits a newspaper-man*) Thirty-six. But she would bring him the only thing he hasn't got so far. Entry to Court circles. That's still something for which you need more than money and a British passport.

JUDD How did he make his money?

MACALLISTER Shares, and not sharing.

JUDD Mean?

MACALLISTER Outside public subscription lists, his meanness is practically pathological.

JUDD But he eats at the Mayflower.

MACALLISTER Oh, he's not mean about himself. He has a ten-room flat in the most expensive block in London. And a show place in the country. You know: the kind that is open to the public on the first Thursday in each month. Beds that Elizabeth slept in, and cupboards where Charles the Second hid. Considering how wide-awake that woman was, its extraordinary that beds should be the thing that——

JUDD Who keeps house for him?

MACALLISTER A sister. Very mousy and subdued, I believe. Never comes to town.

JUDD That all his family?

MACALLISTER As far as anyone knows. Why? (*Looking slyly at him*) Are you planning to destroy them root and branch?

JUDD (*not listening*) Your paper, Mr Macallister, is it owned by a syndicate?

MACALLISTER The *Clarion*? No, it's the partner of the *Evening Post*. The last privately owned papers in London. Why, Mr Judd?

JUDD I just wondered.

MACALLISTER When John Judd wonders a cold draught goes round the back of my neck. You're not planning to buy the thing and turn me into the street for recommending the Mayflower, I hope?

JUDD Is it for sale?

MACALLISTER Everything is for sale.

JUDD A truly journalistic point of view.

MACALLISTER You don't like the Press, I'm afraid.

JUDD My dear Mr Macallister, nobody *likes* the Press. They may court it, be afraid of it, or even reverence it, but no one has the slightest affection for it.

VALENTI Just like Mr Pomfret, in fact.

JUDD (*slowly; considering the subject again*) Yes. Mr Pomfret. You say he is an M.P.

MACALLISTER M.P. for his country place: West Lee. East Downshire the

constituency is. That is why he bought the house. And because it is a good setting, of course. He is always photographed at West Lee. He feels he goes well with Charles and Elizabeth.

ROSA If you don't stop talking about Mr Pomfret my gorge won't let my coffee down. (*Pointing to her throat where it meets her chest*) It is all stuck just there.

JUDD My dear young lady, if we are going to do anything about Mr Pomfret, it is very necessary to know all there is to know.

ROSA Are we going to do something about him?

JUDD I think it would be a good idea. In fifty years I have not come across a more needy object.

ROSA Oh, lovely. What are we going to do?

JUDD I think we are going to make him wish he had never been born. Tell me: is it, in your collective opinion, possible to make a man wish he had never been born, and still keep within the Law?

MACALLISTER As an ex-court-reporter, it's my considered opinion that the Law has thought of everything. They have only to look long enough in their files, and they'll prevent you picking your teeth.

ROSA Why do we have to keep within the Law?

JUDD Woman, the eternal outlaw.

ROSA Well, why do we?

VALENTI Are you proposing to murder him?

ROSA Don't be silly. I would love to, of course, but it isn't practicable. They are very fussy about murder in England.

JUDD To what extent does a young woman consider lawlessness 'practicable', then?

ROSA Oh, a little spot of blackmail. Or tarring and feathering. People are ducked in horse-ponds quite often, and I'm sure that that isn't legal, but the police don't seem to bother.

MACALLISTER They don't need to. The injured man gets bigger damages in a civil action.

ROSA (*seized by an idea*) I know! I shall sue him for breach of promise.

VALENTI You will not. I won't have a sister of mine dragged through the courts.

ROSA I shan't be dragged. I shall be dragging him.

VALENTI It's all the same. Headlines, and pictures, and interviewers. The whole

horrible scandal a nine days' wonder.

ROSA Well, even if it is——

VALENTI And anyhow, a woman who sues a man for breach of promise is beneath contempt.

ROSA Nonsense. If a woman has been basely deserted after a man has monopolised the best years of her——

VALENTI I tell you, you'll do no such thing.

JUDD Hey, hey; hold your horses. You don't even know the man!

ROSA (*equably*) Oh, that wouldn't take long.

JUDD And how would you get him to propose?

ROSA You don't need a proposal for breach of promise.

JUDD Don't you?

ROSA No. Just some evidence. And a new hat. And a little white frill round your neck. Judges love little white frills.

JUDD Upon my soul! I sometimes wonder if any woman understands morality.

ROSA (*ignoring him*) If the Pomfret man has been holding himself in for the sake of Lord Aberfeldy's daughter, he must be just ready to make a fool of himself. (*Calling*) Arthur! Arthur, more biscuits, please! Mayflower meals may be heavenly, but they have no lasting qualities. You know, the very thought of getting even with Mr Pomfret has cured my gorge. How is yours?

JUDD Better. But I think we wash out any ideas concerning breach of promise.

ROSA Oh. What a pity. I always thought it would be nice to soft-soap a judge.

VALENTI You may have to yet if you don't mend your ways.

[*Enter ARTHUR with biscuits.*]

ROSA Oh, well. Between us we could illusion him off the bench. Thank you, Arthur.

[*Exit ARTHUR.*]

MACALLISTER Pity you couldn't illusion Pomfret out of England. (*Hopefully*) You couldn't, I suppose?

VALENTI There is a limit even to the talents of Valenti.

JUDD Mr Macallister is thinking of magic carpets. And I quite see that these are not practical politics. But—I'm not sure that one couldn't illusion a man out of public

life.

VALENTI (*interested*) How, sir?

JUDD (*smiling*) Well, how? You to play.

VALENTI (*smiling back*) I don't know. I should have to think about it. What do you want? To stand him on his head, so to speak?

JUDD Yes, to stand him on his head. So that pomp will no longer be possible to him.

VALENTI It's a nice proposition.

JUDD Are you two working just now?

ROSA We were until Saturday. Now we have the summer free until we open in Boston in September. We are going to swim in the south of France, all day and all night, for weeks and weeks.

JUDD Forgive my asking such a personal question—it is not idle curiosity, I assure you—but what do you make a week when you are working?

VALENTI A hundred.

JUDD Dollars?

VALENTI No, pounds.

[JUDD *whistles.*]

ROSA But we will come to you for twenty-five.

JUDD (*taken aback at her quickness*) What!

ROSA That is what you were going to suggest, isn't it? That we should join you to put a kink in Mr Pomfret.

JUDD You are uncanny, young woman; uncanny.

ROSA Do let's, Val. It would be such fun. And I hate that man.

VALENTI So do I. But—I don't see what I could do. If I did, I would do it for nothing, I promise you!

ROSA (*reminiscent*) Coffee in the lounge, indeed! A howling desert.

JUDD Don't tell me that Valenti isn't the equal of a wind-bag like Pomfret.

VALENTI Of course I am. It is just that it is—something quite new. I should have to think about it.

JUDD Naturally. Naturally. I brief you to think about it.

ROSA (*pointing a dramatic forefinger at* MACALLISTER) Mr Judd!

JUDD What?

ROSA We've been talking in front of the Press!

MACALLISTER I may be Press, Mr Judd, but I'm your liege man. I'm deaf and dumb until you say otherwise. But of course, if there ever is anything you can tell the Press, I hope you'll remember me.

JUDD I don't see why you should be merely a passenger, Mr Macallister. After all, your wrongs are as great as ours; and Scottish wrongs into the bargain.

MACALLISTER You mean I can come in on this? With pleasure! You'll find a newspaper-man very useful to you.

JUDD (*thoughtfully*) Yes, a newspaper would be useful.

MACALLISTER Oh, I can't bring you the *Clarion*, you know. I'm just a humble reporter.

JUDD That's all right. I'll maybe get the *Clarion* for myself. (*As MACALLISTER laughs*) What's amusing you?

MACALLISTER I've just remembered something Giovanni said.

JUDD What?

MACALLISTER 'The gentleman doesn't like publicity'! Pomfret! Who's publicity mad!

JUDD We'll give him publicity.

CURTAIN

SCENE 3

The small drawing-room at West Lee on a midsummer afternoon. At the back is a large window looking out on the courtyard at the front of the house; and below the fireplace, L., is a smaller one. The room is raised considerably above the level of the ground outside (the remains of a moat still exist round the house), so that it is not possible to see the courtyard from the audience's point of view. The furnishings are what one would expect: chintz-covered chairs here and there among a collection of 'pieces'. Parallel with the fireplace is an oblong table with, among other things, a large jar holding several sprays of roses.

HERMIONE POMFRET *is sitting by the fireplace, knitting. It is a dull, rainy afternoon, and she has caused a fire to be lit. She is several years younger than her*

brother, but looks older. Her hair is greying, her clothes good but subdued, her manner gentle and self-effacing.

POMFRET (*calling, off*) Hermione! Hermione!

HERMIONE Yes, dear, I'm here. (*She starts up, putting down her knitting, as he calls again. She has got to her feet when he appears*)

POMFRET Hermione, what have you done with the——(*He sees the fire*) A fire! In the middle of June! Really, Hermione!

HERMIONE It is so wet and cold this afternoon, Mathew, I thought it would cheer things up.

POMFRET Have I not had central heating put in this house at enormous expense?

HERMIONE Yes, dear. But we couldn't have radiators put in this room, you remember.

POMFRET Then why not sit in a room that has a radiator? Why choose the coldest place in the house to spend the afternoon in?

HERMIONE Did you want something, dear?

POMFRET I said: why choose the coldest place in the house to spend your time in?

HERMIONE But I always sit here.

POMFRET Is that any reason why, for once, you couldn't sit elsewhere?

HERMIONE There's my bedroom, of course, but——

POMFRET My good Hermione, don't be ill-used and dramatic.

HERMIONE But I'm not! I——

POMFRET What is wrong with the other drawing-room, or the library, or the Blue Room, or any other of the half-dozen living-rooms in this establishment?

HERMIONE This is the Open Day, dear. Had you forgotten? Sims is showing a party round now.

POMFRET (*punctured*) Oh. (*Looking for a scapegoat*) Once a fortnight is far too often to have strangers tramping round the house in muddy boots. I must change that.

HERMIONE It is not often wet. And it is only once a month in the winter. It would be a pity to deprive people of beauty we don't use ourselves.

POMFRET Oh, well; I suppose they do go away and talk about it. (*Amending hastily*) I mean, they do take a great interest in the house, no doubt.

HERMIONE Oh, yes. Sims noticed a woman trailing her fingers over the surface of the Queen Anne desk.

POMFRET Admiring the patina.

HERMIONE No, looking for dust. (*One is never sure how simple HERMIONE'S speeches are. There is always a hint of something sardonic. But that, of course, would be unthinkable in so subdued and devoted a character*) Talking of dust reminds me——

POMFRET I came to ask you what you had done with the list of invitations for the twentieth. I left them on my desk, and they're not there now. Is it quite impossible for me to leave anything on my own desk for a moment and find it again when I ——?

HERMIONE Have you looked in your pockets?

POMFRET Don't be insulting, my dear Hermione. I left it on my desk. In the middle. Flat and open.

HERMIONE Perhaps Rose moved it, but I hardly think so. She is a very good girl. Quite the best we ever had. You wouldn't look in your pocket-book to make sure, dear?

POMFRET (*snatching his book out of his pocket*) Nothing will ever convince a woman but practical demonstration. The spiritual home of all women is Missouri. (*Laying out the contents of the wallet like cards*) There, and there, and there, and there, and——(*Coming on the missing list*) Dear me, how did that get there?

HERMIONE (*mildly*) I expect you put it there, dear.

POMFRET Well, upon my soul! I could have sworn——

HERMIONE Mathew, I wondered if you would do something for me.

POMFRET If it is money for your Children's Charity, I can't afford it. I am very hard up just now.

HERMIONE Oh, no, it isn't money.

POMFRET (*brightening*) Oh. Oh, in that case——

HERMIONE I wondered if perhaps you would speak to Rose.

POMFRET Speak to her?

HERMIONE Yes; she has given notice, you know. And it is such a pity. The best parlour-maid we ever had—and only five weeks with us.

POMFRET But what has that to do with me? It is Sims' business to engage the staff and see to their comings and goings.

HERMIONE Apparently she told Mrs Bleeson that she was going because you had been rude to her.

POMFRET !I I am never rude to anyone, and, emphatically, never to a menial.

HERMIONE You are sometimes a little hasty, you know.

POMFRET I don't suffer fools gladly, if that is what you mean.

HERMIONE If you would just——

POMFRET Just what? Are you suggesting that I should *coax* a domestic servant to stay in my employ?

HERMIONE No, dear, no. But if you just explained that you are hasty sometimes, and that what you say is never to be taken seriously——

POMFRET Not taken seriously?

HERMIONE I mean, anything you say in haste.

POMFRET Really, Hermione, you surprise me perpetually. You seem to have no realisation of our position. It is only the other day that I had to complain of the Markham woman hanging about, and now you expect me to apologise to my own servants. I tell you again that Mrs Markham may have all the qualities of an angel, but she is an auctioneer's wife, and as such should be invited only to entertainments connected with the Party. And as for Rose, if that is her name, I find your suggestion quite shocking. Quite shocking.

HERMIONE Very well, dear.

POMFRET (*simmering*) That I should bribe a maidservant with fair words to stay in my employment!

HERMIONE Even if she didn't stay, dear, don't you think it would be a pity to let her go with such a——such a false impression of you? Servants do gossip.

POMFRET If I had cared what people said of me, I should never have reached my present position.

HERMIONE No, of course you wouldn't, dear.

[*He looks at her doubtfully for a moment—that remark has sounded a little odd—but she is quite placidly knitting.*

[*Enter ROSA, to replenish the fire. She looks a very trim and efficient parlour-maid.*]

HERMIONE (*as ROSA goes about her work in silence*) Has Sims not finished showing the party round yet, Rose?

ROSA Very nearly, madam. They'll be coming through the hall in a few moments. But there is another party waiting at the door.

HERMIONE Oh. We are busy this afternoon in spite of the rain.

ROSA Yes, madam.

HERMIONE (*happily*) A few more shillings for the Nursing Association.

POMFRET (*to ROSA*) That's enough coal.

ROSA Enough? Enough to what, sir?

POMFRET To keep the fire in.

ROSA The idea, sir, is not to keep the fire in, but to make some heat come out.

POMFRET (*staggered*) I think you are being impudent.

ROSA No, sir. Merely informative. My mother always said that if you burned coal without getting warmth out of it, you might as well throw it into the river. If your idea is economy, sir, then I respectfully suggest that that is the most extravagant fire I have ever seen.

POMFRET You respectfully suggest! I see very little respect indeed. In fact, I have rarely encountered such impudence.

ROSA Oh, I hope not, sir. The last thing I should like to be is impudent.

POMFRET Are you the girl who is leaving because I am supposed to have been rude to her?

ROSA (*cautiously*) Well, I'm one of them.

POMFRET One of them!

ROSA I mean, the description fits, but I don't suppose I'm unique.

POMFRET Are you half-witted?

HERMIONE Rose, dear, this is most unlike you.

POMFRET When was I ever rude to you?

ROSA Every day except Sundays.

POMFRET Sundays?

ROSA Sunday's my day off.

POMFRET You know quite well that that is a monstrous piece of invention. Why, I—I have hardly ever noticed you!

ROSA Oh, sir! (*Before he can decide whether she is being arch or protesting*) You called me a good-for-nothing slut only the other day.

POMFRET If I did, I am quite sure the words were applicable.

ROSA No, you were just in a temper.

POMFRET I was——! My good woman——!

ROSA (*continuing with an air of sweet reasonableness*) I couldn't stay in a place where the Master called me anything that came handy every time his luncheon went back on him. I hope you see that.

POMFRET (*almost speechless*) My good woman, you will not only not stay, but you will leave this house before sundown.

ROSA Very well, sir. I'll go with pleasure.

HERMIONE Oh, no, Mathew! What will poor Sims do?

ROSA It will cost you extra wages, but I don't suppose you'll mind.

POMFRET I shall not pay you a penny.

ROSA If you don't, I'll take you to court. I might, of course, refuse to budge until you had paid me my due. But I shall be so glad to get out of this house that I'll leave argument to the Law. If it weren't for old Sims, who is a darling (*her manner is momentarily growing more like her own*), I don't think I could have borne to live with your bullying as long as I have. I think a down-trodden woman is the saddest thing in creation.

POMFRET How dare you say you were downtrodden?

ROSA Oh, not me. I'm all right. But the life Miss Pomfret leads would make the sphinx weep.

POMFRET My sister? How dare you!

ROSA If she weren't an angel she would have taken a meat-axe to you long ago. Good-bye. See you in court!

[*She turns away from him to the door. When she is halfway to the door the large jug holding the roses leaps from its place on the table by POMFRET'S right hand, hurls itself past her head, and shatters to fragments against the door. ROSA screams in apparent fright and horror.*]

ROSA (*after a shocked pause, turning to face the other two*) Well! So you throw furniture about too!

POMFRET (*in horrified bewilderment*) I didn't touch the thing!

ROSA (*in wildly sarcastic tones*) Oh, no. I suppose it got up from the table and sailed through the air of its own accord.

POMFRET (*still dazed*) Yes. Yes, that is exactly what it did.

ROSA You'll have a fine time explaining that to the judge.

[*Enter SIMS; a small, thin, elderly man, slightly bent, with a gentle, courteous manner.*]

SIMS Is something wrong, sir? (*Seeing the broken jug*) Dear me!

POMFRET It is nothing. There has been a slight accident.

[*SIMS has closed the door behind him without shutting it completely, and as he sees the mess of broken jug and flowers he moves to it instinctively, leaving the door unguarded.*

[*Like many doors in old houses it swings away a little unless firmly latched. The door is pushed open by the crowd he has been showing round, and they stand filling the doorway and gazing enraptured on the scene.*]

ROSA Accident! Accident, indeed! I suppose if you'd flung a grand piano at me instead of a jug, that would be accident too. (*Seeing out of the corner of her eye the audience in the doorway*) It's a fine state of affairs when a servant is first insulted and called a slut, and then refused her legal wages, and then attacked by having things thrown at her. That jug might have killed me, I suppose you know that.

POMFRET Get these people out of here, Sims!

ROSA And then you'd be had up for murder instead of assault. Murder!

POMFRET And get that girl out of here!

ROSA Oh, I'm going, don't you worry. Do you think——

POMFRET Shut that door, Sims!

[*As SIMS dithers between the crowd and ROSA.*]

ROSA—that I'd stay here to be made an Aunt Sally of! I always thought you were a monster, and now I'm sure of it!

[*She pushes her way out through the crowd in front of SIMS, who herds the intruders out and closes the door.*]

SIMS (*as he disappears*) I shall come back for the jug in a moment, sir.

HERMIONE (*aghast*) How could you do a thing like that, Mathew?

POMFRET Good God, you don't think I threw it, do you? I tell you, I didn't touch

it. (*After a silence*) Don't you believe me?

HERMIONE And that only makes it worse, you know.

POMFRET What does?

HERMIONE Trying to get out of it that way. (*Looking at the jug*) Dear me, what a mess.

POMFRET You mean you believe I flung the thing at her?

HERMIONE I don't know what you flung it at, my dear. It is childish to pretend that you didn't throw it at all.

POMFRET Great heavens, I tell you I didn't touch the thing. My hand wasn't even——It's a trick, that's what it is. A trick! (*He joins her where she has begun to collect the flowers and fragments, and begins frantically to rummage among the debris*) Of course it's a trick!

HERMIONE What are you looking for?

POMFRET The string.

HERMIONE What string?

POMFRET Don't you see! It was a booby trap.

HERMIONE My dear Mathew, what will you think of next.

POMFRET But it must be. Look for the thread. Find the thread. She mustn't be allowed to get away with this.

HERMIONE There isn't any thread. You'll have to think of something else.

POMFRET (*despairing*) But there must be!

HERMIONE I would as soon believe that the jug moved of its own accord as that a parlour-maid was capable of such perfect mechanics.

POMFRET Well, it did move of its own accord. That is just what it did. There was I standing next to it doing nothing, and the next thing I knew it was sailing through the air. Of course, it's just possible, just possible——

HERMIONE That you did it without noticing?

POMFRET Of course not. Don't be idiotic. It's just possible that it was a poltergeist. I never believed in the things, but——

HERMIONE A what?

POMFRET You know, a natural force.

HERMIONE A most unnatural force, I should say.

POMFRET A phenomenon, of course. But quite well authenticated. People are

always investigating instances. I never found it credible. But it is possible, I suppose. There are more things in heaven and earth——

HERMIONE I don't want to be interfering, dear, but wouldn't it be best just to admit that you lost your temper? More dignified, you know.

POMFRET Good God, Hermione——

[*Enter SIMS.*]

SIMS Let me do that, madam.

HERMIONE No, I'll attend to it, Sims. Go and take round the party that is waiting.

SIMS There is no one waiting, madam.

HERMIONE No one? But Rose said that a new lot were waiting at the door.

SIMS Yes, madam, there was a party. But they have gone.

POMFRET Gone? Why?

SIMS I am afraid that a garbled version of this——this accident must have been given to them by those going out. They consulted together for a moment, and then said that they had changed their minds. I shall get a cloth for that, madam.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

[*The telephone rings.*]

POMFRET (*at the telephone*) Hullo? Hullo? Oh, you, Wheatley. How are you? If it's about that golf——... What?... Wait a minute; *who* did you have on the telephone?... (*His jaw drops*) ... Charged me with assault! But look here, that's ridiculous. I didn't touch the blasted jug.... Yes; yes, it was broken.... No, I *didn't* fling it; it flung itself.... I don't care if it does sound odd, that is what happened. The thing rose off the table of its own accord and careered through the air.... (*Very stiff and dignified*) Yes, it did just miss her head. I can't see what that has to do with it.... Yes, that is my defence.... I can't help it if no one believes it. They have my word, haven't they? No, I will *not* think up a better one! I consider such a suggestion most... Book the charge and be damned to you. I don't care. (*He slams down the receiver*)

HERMIONE Was that the Chief Constable?

POMFRET Yes. He was in the station when that parlour-maid of yours telephoned her hysterical nonsense.

HERMIONE It was nice of him to telephone, before letting them put it in the book. You weren't very tactful with him, dear.

POMFRET Look here, Hermione, you saw the whole thing. You can bear witness that I never put a hand near that jug.

HERMIONE Oh, I couldn't do anything like that, Mathew. Please don't ask me. I couldn't, you know.

POMFRET Anything like what?

HERMIONE Bearing false witness. Perjury.

POMFRET Good heavens, I am not asking you to perjure yourself. How can you suggest such a thing? But you have known me all my life. Have I ever flung anything at anyone before?

HERMIONE No, that is one thing you have never done.

[*There might be more in her simple statement than her tone would convey, but MATHEW at least is unaware of it.*]

POMFRET And you were sitting within a few feet of me. You must have seen that I

HERMIONE But I was knitting. At least, I wasn't looking especially—I couldn't say that you *didn't*, Mathew, really I couldn't. (*As he says nothing*) Don't you think the best way would be to see Rose again, and ask her to reconsider it. Before they write it down in the book at the station. (*Pause*) It would be such a scandal. (*Pause*) And all so unnecessary.

POMFRET Are you suggesting I should apologise for throwing something that I didn't throw at all?

HERMIONE You might explain to her about the polter—the whatshisname. She mightn't believe in them either (*It is doubtful whether this refers to his previous statement of doubt, or to her own disbelief in his alibi*), but you could at least explain that there are such things.

POMFRET Well. Yes. I suppose I could do that. Of course, even if she charges me, I could manage to keep it quiet. I have all the local people in my pocket. But it would be much better if it didn't come to a——

[*Enter SIMS, with cloth for mopping the water from the carpet.*]

Sims, you—ah—you might ask Rose to speak to me for a moment.

SIMS Rose has gone, sir.

POMFRET Gone where?

SIMS She put on her hat and coat, and walked out.

POMFRET Well! Where has she gone, do you know?

SIMS She didn't say, sir. The five-o'clock bus to Farleigh passes the gates about now. I expect she took that, sir.

POMFRET Are her things still here?

SIMS Yes, sir. She said she would send for them.

POMFRET In that case we can search them.

HERMIONE What for, Mathew?

POMFRET They may provide some kind of counter-charge. If we could bring a charge of theft, for instance, she might reconsider that assault charge.

HERMIONE But we couldn't do that, Mathew. I mean, search her belongings when we hadn't missed anything. It wouldn't be right.

POMFRET Nonsense. It is very good politics. Get something on the other man, and he will be reasonable. Besides, there is nothing to prevent an employer searching the belongings of an employee.

SIMS I may be wrong, sir, but I think there is some kind of law against breaking locks.

POMFRET (*dashed*) Oh. Are they locked?

SIMS So Mrs Bleeson says.

POMFRET Oh. (*To SIMS*) Can you think of a charge that——(*Catching SIMS' eye*) I mean, has the girl been guilty of any—misdemeanour while she was here?

SIMS No, sir. She was a model servant.

POMFRET (*nastily*) Quite on your lines, eh, Sims? (*SIMS turns to the carpet again*) I had better get on to Forrester. A lawyer will no doubt be more help to me than my family or my servants.

[*Exit POMFRET at speed.*]

HERMIONE (*to herself, in inadequate comment*) Dear! dear!

SIMS (*busy mopping; by way of comfort*) It is good there was so very little water in the jug, madam. There will be no stain.

HERMIONE Very little water? (*She sounds puzzled. She moves from where she is standing, a few feet, to see*) Yes. So there was. (*After a pause she moves thoughtfully back to her chair and takes up her knitting automatically*)

SIMS (*rising*) It's a very dull, cold afternoon, madam. Perhaps you would like another cup of your own special tea?

HERMIONE I think not, Sims. But it was kind of you to suggest it. (*As he is going out*) Sims, was that jug upset already today?

SIMS No, madam. (*As she looks surprised*) It would be very difficult to upset.

HERMIONE Yes. Yes, I suppose it would.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

[HERMIONE *knits for a moment, and then pauses to look in a puzzled fashion, towards the place where the jug fell. We leave her thoughtfully sucking the end of her knitting-needle, obviously busy with some problem of her own.*]

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE I

The Scene is the small drawing-room at West Lee in the very late afternoon of the day on which the police court at Farleigh heard the case of assault against MATHEW POMFRET.

Enter HERMIONE *in outdoor things, taking off her gloves, followed by* SIMS. *She glances absent-mindedly through the letters which have accumulated since the morning, but does not open them.*

HERMIONE (*continuing the conversation as she comes in*) I thought he would have been home before now. No telephone message from him?

SIMS No, madam; no word. The applicant for the chauffeur's place has been waiting since early this afternoon.

HERMIONE I hope you gave him something?

SIMS Oh, yes, madam. Shall I get you some tea?

HERMIONE No, thank you, Sims. I had some in a shop in Farleigh. I felt I needed it.

SIMS Yes, it has been a very worrying day for you, madam. A glass of sherry, perhaps?

HERMIONE (*having considered it*) No. No, I think it is a mistake to upset one's routine for every little—little deviation from the normal.

SIMS (*tentatively*) I hope it was not necessary for you to—to take part.

HERMIONE Oh, no, they didn't need me. I just sat and listened. Sims, I arranged a particularly nice dinner with Mrs Bleeson for tonight. You'll see that everything is as he likes it, won't you? He is bound to be very upset. They told him not to waste the time of the Court, and he took it very badly.

SIMS Waste time?

HERMIONE With that defence, you know. Frivolous, they said it was. They fined him five pounds.

SIMS So I understand.

HERMIONE Oh, you had heard? I suppose someone telephoned. Yes, he was greatly upset—in fact, he talked of taking it to the House of Lords, but he remembered that the House of Commons would hear about it on the way, and that

would be very awkward. It was much better to do what they are doing: hushing it up. Mr Forrester has seen all the local people, and if it is printed at all it will be in one line and without any names. Why are you looking so odd?

SIMS I don't approve of gambling, madam, but Mrs Bleeson and some of the maids like to put their sixpences on a horse now and again. So—and——

HERMIONE Gambling? What are you talking about?

SIMS And of course they have to see the results. So naturally the housekeeper's room always has a London evening paper. And in fact—today—(*in a rush*) well, madam. I think you had better see this before Mr Pomfret comes home. (*He produces from inside his coat a folded newspaper, and indicates the front page*) The London Evening Post, madam.

HERMIONE (*taking it and reading*) 'The Jug That Threw Itself. Magnate's Novel Defence.' *Sims!* Half the front page! A London paper!

SIMS It is worse farther on, I am afraid.

HERMIONE (*having read a little*) Oh. Oh, how dreadful... And how very well written... It *is* amusing, you know. If it weren't about my brother I should laugh... Oh, goodness, and that awful slap at the end!

SIMS I am afraid that Confucius has a bit about it too.

HERMIONE Confucius? The funny man?

SIMS Yes, madam, on the middle page. I think that is the front door, madam; if you'll excuse me.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

HERMIONE (*reading on the middle page*) 'Today's Problem'. Oh, yes, he always has a problem. 'How far will the new Pomfret technique take me? If I throw my landlord down two flights, can I do a Pomfret and say the stairs hit him? Or would it be better to throw him over Westminster Bridge and say the river licked him off it?' Do a Pomfret. Dear me. That is the kind of thing that sticks.

[*Enter SIMS.*]

SIMS Madam, there is a reporter to see Mr Pomfret.

HERMIONE A reporter? Oh, no! Send him away at once. Quickly, before Mr Pomfret comes home. Didn't you say he was not here?

SIMS Yes, madam. But the man asked if he could see you?

HERMIONE Me? How did he know about me?

SIMS I don't know, madam. I certainly didn't suggest it. I understand that he is anxious to have Mr Pomfret's own version of the—incident.

HERMIONE But they always say that, don't they? To make people talk. And then they write dreadful things that one hasn't said at all. No, you had better send him away. What paper is he from?

SIMS The *Clarion*, madam. I understand that they are interested scientifically.

HERMIONE You think I should see him, Sims?

SIMS It is always best, I think, to be tactful with the Press, madam.

HERMIONE But I am terrified of reporters. Really I am, Sims.

SIMS He appears to be quite a pleasant little man. Of course, I could ask him to wait and see Mr Pomfret when he comes home.

HERMIONE Oh, no. I don't think that would do at all. Not after the day he has had. He would be bound to be tactless, and then everything—I think I had better see the newspaper-man. What did you say his name was?

SIMS His name is Macallister, madam.

HERMIONE Very well, show him in, Sims. Do we offer him something, do you think?

SIMS The *Clarion* is a very respectable paper. I think he might be offered a glass of sherry.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

HERMIONE Yes. Yes, I shall offer him a glass of sherry. It will make the occasion less like the dentist's.

[*Enter MACALLISTER, shown in by SIMS. Exit SIMS.*]

HERMIONE Mr Macallister? You wanted—

MACALLISTER Good evening, Miss Pomfret. It's very kind of you to see me. I had hoped your brother would be at home by now. My paper is very anxious to get Mr Pomfret's own version of that jug business.

HERMIONE Won't you sit down?

MACALLISTER Thank you. (*Warmly approving her chair covers*) Pretty covers you've got. I don't know if you read the *Clarion*—

HERMIONE No; no, we have *The Times*—

MACALLISTER —so that you may not know that for the last fortnight we have been running a correspondence on poltergeists. Off and on, you know. As letters

turned up. Not enough to sicken people of the subject. Just enough to whet their appetite. So this jug affair happens to be very much up our street.

HERMIONE You mean my brother would be copy for you?

MACALLISTER No, no indeed! We should be a forum for him. Perhaps you have seen the *Evening Post*?

HERMIONE Yes. Yes, I have. Just now. Too dreadful.

MACALLISTER Yes; well. The *Evening Post* is written for tired business-men going home in the bus. They naturally write up the funny side. There *is* a funny side, Miss Pomfret, you see that?

HERMIONE Oh, yes, I do see it.

MACALLISTER But the *Clarion* is a sober paper, with a most intelligent public. It believes that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of by the *Evening Post*. In fact, we are prepared to believe that there has been a miscarriage of justice, and to give your brother space to state his case. Our readers are already interested in the subject, and here a sample occurs under their very noses, as it were.

HERMIONE (*doubtful*) I see. But I think it would be much better, you know, to let the whole thing drop. Of course, it is very dreadful about the *Evening Post*, but if no one else said anything people would forget very soon.

MACALLISTER Do you think they would, Miss Pomfret? That phrase that Confucius used is a very catchy one, you know. When I left Town at four o'clock the whole office was using it as if they had known it all their lives.

HERMIONE You mean, you mean——

MACALLISTER 'Doing a Pomfret.'

HERMIONE Yes. Yes, I thought that too.

MACALLISTER You did? You have news sense, Miss Pomfret.

HERMIONE (*pleased*) Oh, no. Though I did write for the school magazine. But that was long ago. Will you have a glass of sherry?

MACALLISTER Thank you, but I never touch it. You were present when the incident happened, weren't you, Miss Pomfret?

HERMIONE Yes; yes, I was here, but——

MACALLISTER Is this the room?

HERMIONE Yes, but——

MACALLISTER Very interesting. And that would be the table, I suppose. Where did the jug land?

HERMIONE By the door. But I would——

MACALLISTER (*with a little whistle*) A neat job, I must say.

HERMIONE Job?

MACALLISTER (*recollecting himself*) On the part of the poltergeist. Did you——

HERMIONE I would rather not talk about it, Mr——

MACALLISTER Macallister.

HERMIONE Mr Macallister. It was a very painful scene.

MACALLISTER (*full of compunction*) Yes, of course. It must have been. I don't want to upset you in any way. We'll leave the questions for your brother.

HERMIONE Do you like your profession, Mr Macallister?

MACALLISTER (*surprised*) Like it? I love it. Does that surprise you?

HERMIONE It amazes me. How can a kind young man like you enjoy dabbling in murders? A policeman *has* to do such things, but——

MACALLISTER Oh, now, wait a minute. As a Scot, I don't 'dabble', and as a journalist for every murder I cover, I go to ten dog shows, twenty weddings, thirty film-star interviews, forty political meetings, fifty exhibitions, and sit through seven hundred and ninety speeches. After that a murder is a blessed relief.

HERMIONE Yes. I suppose you feel like murder yourself by then.

MACALLISTER You have it. (*That is his idiom for 'You are right'*)

HERMIONE And yet you chose such a profession.

MACALLISTER Yes. It takes some explaining, I suppose. Let us say that as a profession it has bigger prizes to offer and better fun while you're qualifying than any other I can think of.

HERMIONE Have you been a journalist long?

MACALLISTER Ten years.

HERMIONE I suppose you began in Scottish papers and worked up to London ones.

MACALLISTER Well—London would say so, if Scotland didn't.

HERMIONE You know, when I heard that you were a newspaper-man I was terrified. But I find it quite—quite——

MACALLISTER Painless?

HERMIONE No, quite thrilling, in a way. I live so quietly that it is quite a——(*She breaks off, hearing someone in the hall*) Oh, there is my brother. You must let me

explain a little before you say anything. You see, I don't know whether he has seen the *Evening Post* or not, and if he has not, he——

[*Enter POMFRET.*]

POMFRET Hermione——Oh, I did not know that you had a visitor.

HERMIONE Mathew, this is Mr Macallister.

POMFRET (*bowing*) How do you do? (*Would-be playful*) Are you inveigling my sister into some new charity expenditure?

HERMIONE No, Mr Macallister is a journalist.

POMFRET What! A——

MACALLISTER I came to see you, Mr Pomfret. I——

POMFRET I never give interviews except by appointment. My sister knows that. I don't know why she allowed you to wait.

HERMIONE You don't understand, Mathew——

MACALLISTER (*to HERMIONE*) No, let me. (*To POMFRET*) In the special circumstances we thought that——

POMFRET What special circumstances?

MACALLISTER I'm from the *Clarion*, and——

POMFRET That hardly constitutes a special circumstance.

MACALLISTER (*holding himself in*) If you'd let me finish, sir. The *Clarion* sent me because they thought you might be glad of an opportunity to give the public your version of this jug affair.

POMFRET This——! I never heard of a more blatant, a more shameless attempt to exploit an incident for copy! I shall certainly not take any such opportunity, as you call it. And I shall take very good care that the *Clarion* makes no further reference to the incident. I should like to know how the *Clarion* heard about a purely domestic occurrence settled in an obscure police court.

MACALLISTER Oh, I expect one of the *Evening Post's* country correspondents happened to be in court, sir, and thought it would make amusing copy.

POMFRET The *Evening Post*? I thought you said you were from the *Clarion*?

MACALLISTER Yes, I am. But we knew nothing about it until we saw the *Evening Post* headlines.

POMFRET Headlines! (*MACALLISTER offers him the paper*) Good God! Good God! But this is iniquitous! An outrage!

MACALLISTER You see even Confucius has the story.

POMFRET (*having found Confucius and read his contribution*) ‘Do a Pomfret’! (*Rushing to the telephone and shouting into it*) Get me the office of the London *Evening Post*.... I don’t *know* the number! Look in your book for it! This is Mathew Pomfret.

MACALLISTER (*mildly*) I shouldn’t do that, Mr Pomfret. It won’t get you anywhere.

POMFRET When I want your advice I shall ask for it.

MACALLISTER The number is Central 28X20.

POMFRET (*into the telephone*) Central 28X20.

MACALLISTER It would be much better policy, you know, to let us print your version of the affair in a sober paper like the *Clarion*.

POMFRET I don’t know why you are still here, Mr—Macallister.

MACALLISTER I’m here to give you the right sort of publicity. My paper——

POMFRET (*into the telephone*) This is Mathew Pomfret, and I am in a hurry.

MACALLISTER My paper has been printing an extremely interesting and dignified correspondence about poltergeists, and——

POMFRET (*his attention arrested*) Poltergeists!

MACALLISTER Yes. Just that. And if you want an answer to the *Evening Post* we are the ones to provide it for you. (*Indicating the telephone*) There’ll be no one of importance there at this hour. You don’t want to blow up a sub-editor, do you?

POMFRET What is this about poltergeists? (*In answer to someone on the telephone*) No, I don’t want it just now. (*Slams down the receiver*)

MACALLISTER Well, it’s been a correspondence that has brought in a lot of letters, and caused a lot of comment in other quarters. The evidence in some cases was amazingly strong. Simply amazing. We can offer you, Mr Pomfret, something that no one else can. A public all ready with open minds to consider the possibilities of your case.

HERMIONE (*tentatively*) It seems a very sensible suggestion, Mathew dear.

POMFRET Yes. Yes, I see. (*This to MACALLISTER not HERMIONE*)

MACALLISTER Now there are lots of what you might call sympathetic angles to this case. You have never been a violent man——

POMFRET No, I haven’t.

MACALLISTER I take it you never flung things about the house before?

POMFRET Certainly not!

MACALLISTER Then again, this is an old house. Lots of strange things must have happened here. I don't say that a poltergeist on the ran-dan in a place like this is more possible than it would be in a Peacehaven bungalow, but it is much more credible. I won't interview you about it, Mr Pomfret. I'll leave you to write your own story. Our readers are just ripe for it.

POMFRET (*reluctant*) Well—there is something in what you say. Now that this scandal has been broadcast to the world, some kind of answer is called for. (*Furious*) If this were a really free country, I would have the *Post* suppressed for this. By the way, I thought the *Post* belonged to the *Clarion*?

MACALLISTER It does. But the two are entirely separate. Management, aims, policy, politics, and public; all different.

POMFRET But I tell you, I am going to have the *Post*'s blood for this. How can I have the blood of one paper while I am contributing to its partner!

MACALLISTER You can't get blood out of a stone, Mr Pomfret. You might as well try to bleed Ben Nevis as knock a hole in a newspaper.

POMFRET If this were old Davison's paper still, I would have everyone concerned thrown out on the street tonight. Who owns it now?

MACALLISTER Some Canadian millionaire, I believe.

POMFRET They seem to make a habit of it. And the *Clarion* too?

MACALLISTER And the *Clarion* too.

POMFRET (*nodding*) Bought them the other day. I remember.

MACALLISTER Bought them both in a morning, so they say.

POMFRET What does he want with them?

MACALLISTER Want?

POMFRET It isn't publicity, apparently.

MACALLISTER I think he believes in the Empire.

POMFRET Good heavens, does he think he can keep a circulation going on that?

MACALLISTER It's a better bet than it used to be. And of course we have other attractions. The best correspondence page in Britain, for instance. Quoted all over the world. We shall look forward to your contribution, Mr Pomfret. Can we have it by midday tomorrow?

POMFRET I must think about it. But I imagine that—yes, I suppose that could be managed.

MACALLISTER Thank you very much. Then I won't keep you longer. It was kind of you to see me, Miss Pomfret. I am very grateful.

POMFRET (*as MACALLISTER is making for the door*) At the usual rates, of course.

MACALLISTER Rates?

POMFRET At my usual rate per word for contributions to the Press.

MACALLISTER Oh. I see. We don't pay for letters, Mr Pomfret. But I'll see what the editor can do about it.

POMFRET That is a little grudging, isn't it, after having solicited a contribution?

MACALLISTER So!——! (*Controlling himself*) Oh, I hope not, Mr Pomfret. I'm sure anything you write will be well worth the price we pay for it. Good evening; good evening, Miss Pomfret, and thank you.

[*Exit* MACALLISTER.]

POMFRET Really, Hermione; it is hardly loyal of you to entertain the Press behind my back.

HERMIONE I would hardly call it entertaining, Mathew; I——

POMFRET Whatever it was, I call it most indiscreet. What could you have been thinking about!

HERMIONE What I thought most about was a way out of it, but there didn't seem to be one. After that front page in the *Evening Post* it seemed better to be friendly than to——

POMFRET And how did you know about this—this disgraceful report?

HERMIONE Sims showed it to me.

POMFRET Sims!

HERMIONE Just before you came in. The housekeeper's room gets an *Evening Post* from the village, it seems.

POMFRET So even my servants knew before I did! (*Shaking the Post at her*) Do you realise that practically every soul in the south of England is reading that damnable thing! That in every club in London, in every inn in the country, people will be sniggering over it and making a mockery of the name of Pomfret! Good God, what have I ever done that this should happen to me?

[*Enter* SIMS.]

SIMS I beg your pardon, sir, but the young man about the chauffeur's place is waiting to see you.

POMFRET I cannot see anyone today. Send him away.

SIMS He has been waiting since early this afternoon, sir.

POMFRET I cannot help that. I cannot possibly deal with domestic details tonight. Tell him to come back tomorrow.

[SIMS looks to HERMIONE for help.]

HERMIONE Dunning's substitute is going at the end of the week, dear. We shall be without one if we don't engage someone soon. Perhaps I could see him for you——

POMFRET Engage my chauffeur! Certainly not.

HERMIONE But why, dear? I know quite well what you want and——

POMFRET I should never dream of it. Send him in, Sims. And tell him to be quick about it. I haven't any time to waste. It will soon be dressing time.

[Exit SIMS.]

Though I must say I feel more like going to bed than dressing.

HERMIONE (*hopefully*) Why don't you, Mathew? I can send you up a nice light dinner. There are all your favourite dishes.

POMFRET You *would* have all my favourite dishes on a night like this! So that they taste for ever of Farleigh Police Court.

HERMIONE (*dashed*) I'm sorry. I didn't think of that. I merely wanted to give you a nice dinner. Perhaps a little gruel——

POMFRET Gruel! Don't be ridiculous. I am not a physical wreck——yet! I shall have dinner in the usual place and at the usual hour.

HERMIONE Very well, dear. I shall go and change now, I think.

[*She goes out as SIMS shows in VALENTI VALENTI, in chauffeur's uniform and cap in hand, looks a very efficient and respectable young man. SIMS presents him and goes.*]

POMFRET You are the applicant for Dunning's place.

VALENTI Yes, sir.

POMFRET Do I know your name?

VALENTI Marriott, sir.

POMFRET You are a friend of Dunning's, I understand.

VALENTI Well, an acquaintance, sir. It was through him I heard about the vacancy.

POMFRET Did he also tell you that he left me at a week's notice to drive a

millionaire at a film-star's salary?

VALENTI I heard he got a good job, sir.

POMFRET What experience have you had?

VALENTI (*producing an envelope*) This is my latest testimonial, sir.

POMFRET (*taking it and reading*) 'Peter Marriott has driven Lady Jane Charleston daily for the last two years. He is an excellent driver, a good mechanic, and has always been most courteous and obliging.' Well, what's good enough for Lady Jane——(*He is impressed against his will*) Why did you leave her?

VALENTI (*remembering with the ghost of a grin JANE'S passion for night clubs*) She kept me out very late, sir.

POMFRET Married?

VALENTI No, sir, but I like my sleep.

POMFRET What did she pay you?

VALENTI Four pounds a week, sir.

POMFRET I never give my chauffeur more than three pounds ten.

VALENTI I'll take it, sir.

POMFRET (*still smarting from the day's experiences*) You are prepared to risk being one of the household?

VALENTI Risk, sir?

POMFRET If you have been with my servants all the afternoon, you have no doubt seen the *Evening Post*.

VALENTI I have, sir.

POMFRET You are not afraid that I may throw a jug at you?

VALENTI Oh, no, sir. I am greatly interested.

POMFRET Interested!

VALENTI It is a subject that has always attracted me, if I may say so, sir.

POMFRET What subject?

VALENTI Poltergeists.

POMFRET Poltergeists! There was no mention of poltergeists in the *Post*. And what do you know of the subject?

VALENTI Quite a bit, sir. You see, my hobby drew my attention to it.

POMFRET And what is your hobby?

VALENTI Sleight-of-hand, sir.

POMFRET An extraordinary hobby for a chauffeur.

VALENTI My father was a conjurer at children's parties, sir.

POMFRET But sleight-of-hand has no relation to poltergeists.

VALENTI They're not related so much as connected, if you know what I mean, sir. A great number of those 'manifestations' are just tricks, so those who do tricks themselves naturally take an interest. And then they come across the cases that can't be explained by tricks.

POMFRET (*completely captured*) Exactly. Exactly. That can't be explained by tricks, as you say. You believe in the existence of poltergeists, then.

VALENTI I don't say I've ever met one in the flesh, so to speak, sir, but there's very good evidence in favour. Very learned evidence, sir.

POMFRET I wish the magistrates in this part of the world had half your intelligence.

VALENTI Of course, the evidence was pretty black, wasn't it, sir?

POMFRET What!

VALENTI The girl being there, right in the line of fire, you might say, and you having a bit of an argument. It's a great——

POMFRET I don't argue with my servants.

VALENTI (*subsiding, demurely*) No, sir.

POMFRET (*regretting that he has cut himself off from the comfort so unexpectedly discovered; giving way*) But I interrupted you.

VALENTI No, sir. I was only going to say, sir, that it's a great pity it couldn't happen again.

POMFRET (*dumbfounded*) A pity! Oh, I see.

VALENTI In better circumstances, if you know what I mean, sir. When you weren't there at all, say.

POMFRET Yes. Yes, it is a great pity.

VALENTI (*cheerful and comforting*) It may, sir. You never know.

POMFRET Yes. Yes, who knows. (*Reverting to his formal manner*) I shall expect you to take up your duties on Saturday. The temporary man goes then. Come in the morning, and he will show you round.

VALENTI Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?

POMFRET Yes, that is all.

VALENTI Thank you, sir. Good evening.

POMFRET Good evening. (*As VALENTI is going*) You must show me your sleight-of-hand prowess some day.

VALENTI With pleasure, sir.

[*Exit VALENTI.*]

POMFRET (*thoughtfully*) ‘A great pity it could not happen again.’

FADE OUT

SCENE 2

The small drawing-room at West Lee, on Open Day, the following week. Mid-afternoon.

MISS POMFRET *is writing letters at her desk.*

Enter SIMS.

SIMS I beg your pardon, madam——

HERMIONE (*without looking round*) Is Major Muddock a D.S.O., Sims?

SIMS No, madam; merely an M.C.

HERMIONE I can’t think how the silly little man got either.

SIMS He is General Cradberry’s brother-in-law, madam. I’m sorry to interrupt, madam, but have you——

HERMIONE Shouldn’t you be showing people round, Sims? It’s Wednesday, isn’t it?

SIMS That is what I came about. Have you looked out of the window lately, madam?

HERMIONE No. Why? Is there anything——

SIMS Would you please look now, madam.

HERMIONE (*seeing his agitation*) Why, Sims, you’re all——(*Going to the window and seeing for herself*) Good Heavens! Oh, good heavens!

SIMS I should have opened the door to the first party five minutes ago. I have been looking for Mr Pomfret, but I can’t find him.

HERMIONE (*still shocked*) But, Sims! What are we going to do?

SIMS I don’t know, madam. Marriott has just come in from the village; he says it is

like that all down the avenue. And charabancs unloading more at the gate.

HERMIONE There must be nearly a thousand!

SIMS I was afraid to open the door in case they—they rushed it. They don't look at all our regular crowd, Miss Pomfret.

HERMIONE Of course not. They are our publicity. They haven't come to West Lee just to look at the house. I think you had better fetch Mr Pomfret, Sims. He is in the north attics with the carpenter. Send Jane; you mustn't go running up all those stairs, (SIMS goes. *She contemplates the crowd once more*) Dear me! (*She comes down to the telephone*) Farleigh 32, please.... Is that Farleigh Police Station?... Oh, is that Sergeant Redvers?... Good afternoon, Sergeant. This is Hermione Pomfret.... Yes, West Lee. You have always been so kind to me, and we are in a little trouble this afternoon. I wondered if you would send that very nice Constable Bloggs over for a little.... Oh, well, Constable Roberts. He is very nice too.... Well, you see, about a million people have turned up to see the house this afternoon.... Yes, of course, the unfortunate publicity. And ... No, I think we could manage to show them over if we all took a party and extended the time. It isn't that exactly. You see, they are not at all our usual sort of people. When my brother sees them he may refuse to open the doors at all. And I really don't know what they might do in a case like that.... Yes, I shall tell my brother to be wise, but he is apt to be ... Yes; yes, I am afraid he is. Thank you very much, sergeant. You are always so kind. How is your little girl? Better, I hope?... That is good.... Oh, it was not much to do. Good-bye. (*Hangs up. Contemplatively*) Constable Roberts. I'm afraid he is a little stupid. However, he is bigger than Bloggs. I wonder if Mathew can be persuaded to show some people the

[*As she is going back to the window, a large empty jar on the mantelpiece hurls itself across the room and breaks in pieces on the floor near the door. HERMIONE gives vent to an involuntary scream.*]

HERMIONE (*regarding the pieces*) Well! I wouldn't have believed it! (*Going nearer and looking at the pieces without handling them; still more slowly*) I wouldn't have believed it.

[*Enter POMFRET, followed by SIMS.*]

POMFRET Did I hear you scream, Hermione? Dear me, have you had an accident?

HERMIONE No. I didn't touch it. It flew off the mantelpiece and broke in pieces.

POMFRET So! It has happened again, has it?

SIMS Let me get you something, madam. The shock——

HERMIONE No, Sims, no. I am all right.

POMFRET (*enjoying himself*) It is good that no one's head was in the way, isn't it, Hermione? Or you would be appearing next Monday at Farleigh Police Court with no one to testify in your favour. Well, we have no time for mysteries at the moment. What is this about a crowd?

HERMIONE There *are* a great many, Mathew, but I think if we extended the time to seven instead of five, and if we each took so many——

POMFRET (*having reached the neighbourhood of the window, and seen*) A crowd! My good Hermione, that is not a crowd, it is a mob. I will not have such people in my house under any consideration.

HERMIONE But, my dear, the house is open to anyone who pays a shilling.

POMFRET (*reverting to the idiom of his youth*) Not today, it isn't. It is open only by my goodwill, and my goodwill stops short at hooligans out of charabancs.

HERMIONE But, Mathew, they are all very quiet and orderly. We have no reason to refuse to——Yes, I know some are playing leap-frog. It's probably their half-day, poor dears. But they wouldn't do it in the Long Gallery.

POMFRET Do you believe for one moment that they want to see the Long Gallery!

HERMIONE No, of course not, dear. They want to see 'inside the house'. It is a very human emotion. It's what sends people to sales. And there *are* the legitimate ones to be considered.

POMFRET Legitimate?

HERMIONE The ones who have come to see the tapestries, and what not. (*There is the muffled sound of banging at the front door*) We are nearly a quarter of an hour late in opening already. I thought if we took twenty-five each, at intervals of three minutes, you and Sims and I——

POMFRET Me! Show that rabble round my house!

HERMIONE But they're not a rabble. (*More pounding on the front door*) And they *have* been very patient.

POMFRET This house is not going to be opened to the public today. (*To SIMS*) Go and tell them that owing to circumstances out of our control the place is not on view today. Nor until further notice!

SIMS (*dismayed*) But, sir——I beg your pardon, sir, but what am I to do if they refuse to accept the——If they force an entrance? There are, as you have observed,

a great many of them.

POMFRET Go and give them that——No. Wait.

[*He goes to HERMIONE'S desk, and prints a notice on a piece of paper.*]

HERMIONE Please, Mathew, consider. Some of these people may have come a long way. We have no right to——

POMFRET (*writing*) No right! Is this my house, or isn't it?

HERMIONE (*trying another tack*) And it is bound to create a very bad impression. In the county, I mean. It——

POMFRET It will be obvious to the county that I, as a Liberal, am upholding the right of every man to refuse admittance to his house when it seems good to him. Even to the King himself.

HERMIONE But it is so discourteous! I'm sure we could manage, Sims and I, even if we didn't get through the lot. It would show that we did try to cope with——

POMFRET Please don't argue, Hermione. It is very tiresome. (*Giving the paper to SIMS, with a drawing-pin from the tray on the desk*) Here you are. Since you are reluctant to do your duty verbally, open the door, pin that on the outside surface of it, and shut the door again. I hope you will find yourself able to do that?

SIMS Thank you, sir.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

HERMIONE Don't you think that it is a little dangerous, Mathew? To disappoint such a very big crowd?

POMFRET (*pompously*) Where it is a matter of principle, danger must always be a secondary consideration. To show the treasures of West Lee to the inquiring is one thing; to satisfy the vulgar curiosity of a horde of sensation-seekers at a shilling a time is quite another. I decline to do it. (*With bathos*) In any case, what can they do?

HERMIONE (*with gentle deliberation*) If I were they, and there was nearly a thousand of me, I should take West Lee to pieces, stone by stone.

POMFRET Really, Hermione, you are not yourself. Perhaps this unlooked-for manifestation——(*Indicating the broken jar*)

HERMIONE Oh, that didn't worry me.

POMFRET (*surprised and disappointed*) No?

HERMIONE (*picking up the bits*) After a lifetime of dealing with servants who 'never touched it, madam', one inexplicable breakage more or less doesn't impress

me.

POMFRET (*disgruntled*) I must say, you take very coolly one of the rarest phenomena in physical or psychical history.

[*From outside, muted to thin sounds, come voices from near the door to those farther away: 'It's not open! They're not going to open it!' A faint hubbub succeeds. Enter SIMS.*]

SIMS Is there anything else, sir?

POMFRET No, that will be all.

SIMS (*relieving HERMIONE of the fragments*) Let me take that, madam.

POMFRET And don't answer any front-door bells.

SIMS No, sir.

[*As he goes out there is a loud thundering of fists on the front door.*]

POMFRET Nor any summons of any sort.

SIMS No, sir.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

POMFRET (*referring to the row*) If they don't stop that, I shall send for the police. (*Pacing the room*) Good God, is it not enough to have been made a public laughing-stock without having my privacy invaded by a mob of curiosity-crazed morons! What did I buy this place for if not to have peace and quiet; a refuge from the buffeting of public life.

HERMIONE (*with her air of simple inquiry*) I thought you bought it so as to have a place in the county, dear?

POMFRET (*ignoring her*) And now, when more than ever I need a little peace! You can have no conception what my life has been like this last week. I never imagined that the House of Commons was distinguished for its intelligence, but upon my soul I had no idea that its conception of wit was so low. I can't even walk through the dining-room without having fools grab the water-jugs on the tables as I pass. It's intolerable!

HERMIONE It will blow over, dear.

POMFRET Blow over! This thing isn't a blizzard, it's a snowball. It wasn't enough that the *Evening Post* should make an afternoon's headlines of it, was it? Oh, no! They had to follow it up next day with a letter from the London Domestic Workers' Union saying it was no joking matter that domestic servants should have jugs thrown

at them. And was that all? No! Some ‘fan’ of mine—a *fan!*—wrote to say that any woman should be delighted to have jugs flung at her by Mathew Pomfret, and they printed that! As for my private correspondence, it is unbelievable. One man even wrote to say what a bad shot I must be. He suggested that he should teach me darts at a shilling an hour.

HERMIONE That was very reasonable.

POMFRET What was?

HERMIONE A shilling.

POMFRET Good God! I sometimes wonder if any woman is capable of relevance.

[*The hubbub outside has grown into a combined chant: ‘We want Mathew Pomfret! We want Mathew Pomfret!’ Hammering at door and distant ringing of bells in the interior of the house.*]

HERMIONE They don’t seem to be going away. You wouldn’t change your mind, would you, Mathew? (*Wistfully*) There must be nearly thirty-five pounds’ worth.

POMFRET Of what?

HERMIONE Of people. I can’t bear to think of the Nursing Association losing all that. We have never had more than five to ten pounds on one day before. (*Watching the crowd*) They have begun a parade.

POMFRET A what? (*He crosses to see*)

HERMIONE Going round and round the courtyard in procession. (*Sounds of a mouth-organ*) I suppose it is a protest.

POMFRET What is that they are carrying?

HERMIONE I think it is one of the gryphons from the balustrade, with a man’s hat put on it.

POMFRET But that is wilful damage! I won’t have it!

HERMIONE I expect they’ll put it back if you leave them alone, dear. It is just fun.

POMFRET Fun! What do they want with it?

HERMIONE I think it is supposed to be you, dear.

POMFRET Me!

HERMIONE Yes; an effigy, you know. (*As he makes a dive for the window*) Oh, no, Mathew! Please!

POMFRET (*opening the lower half of one of the leaded windows, and shouting at the crowd above the noise of the mouth-organ*) You, there! If you don’t

disperse at once and without further noise, I shall send for the police! I have given you fair warning! I will not have my property invaded by a rabble! You have five minutes to take yourselves off. (*As he shuts the window and turns away a stone comes through with a crash*)

HERMIONE (*regarding the stone*) Well! There's no mystery about that. (*To POMFRET at the telephone*) If it is the police you are ringing, dear, I shouldn't bother. Constable Roberts is coming up the drive now on his motor bicycle.

POMFRET (*hanging up*) How extraordinarily fortunate. Keep away from the window, Hermione. I shall go and see Roberts.

HERMIONE You are not going to open the door yourself, are you? (*It is not clear whether this is solicitude or incredulity*)

POMFRET Oh, no. Sims will take Roberts in.

[*Exit POMFRET.*]

[*The telephone rings. As she comes down from the window to answer it, ironic cheers outside greet the arrival of the constable.*]

HERMIONE Poor Constable Roberts. I expect he is blushing. (*Into the telephone*) Hello?... Oh, good afternoon, Mr Macallister.... Yes. Speaking.... You want to know about the riot? What riot?... Oh, my dear Mr Macallister, there is no riot.... Oh, a great many people turned up, of course. After all the publicity. But there is no trouble.... No, there were too many, so we are not opening the house to the public today. How could you possibly know about the crowds?... I do think the telephone is a very mixed blessing.... No, I assure you, no riot at all.... The police officer is dispersing the crowd now.... Oh, he just happened to be here on business.... Yes, of course; I'm very truthful. I hope your paper liked my brother's letter?... Yes, it was good, I thought. The quotation from Tennyson was my contribution.... No, not much of a poet, I fear, but very good for quotations.... No (*Her eye sliding round to where the broken jug has lain*) no further manifestations.... Yes, quite sure. It would be almost too appropriate if there were, wouldn't it? Good-bye, Mr Macallister. Good-bye. (*As she hangs up, POMFRET comes in again*) Are they going away?

POMFRET Oh, yes, they are going. In procession, blast their impudence. A mouth-organ *would* be their chosen instrument! I have told Roberts that he must find out who threw that stone, and charge him.

HERMIONE That would be difficult surely? And even if Roberts found who did it, a

court case would mean more of this regrettable publicity, wouldn't it?

POMFRET There is a saturation-point, even with publicity.

HERMIONE You mean you wouldn't mind a little more? That's a good thing, because I am afraid the evening papers are going to be very—informative about our Open Day. I have just had Mr Macallister on the telephone. He wanted to know about our riot.

POMFRET About what!

HERMIONE Of course I said there was no riot. You wouldn't call this a riot, would you?

POMFRET Certainly not. How did he know anything about——

HERMIONE Someone had telephoned from the box at the gates. I think I shall go and lie down for a little.

[*Enter SIMS.*]

Sims, would you ask Jane to bring some tea to me in my room.

POMFRET Your habit of giving in to every little headache, Hermione, will make you an old woman before your time.

HERMIONE It isn't a headache, dear. I just feel a little muzzy.

POMFRET (*nastily*) You don't like poltergeists perhaps.

HERMIONE (*going out*) Not when they are appropriate.

[*Exit HERMIONE.*]

POMFRET *What* did she say?

SIMS I understood Miss Pomfret to say: 'Not when they are appropriate.'

POMFRET Yes, that is what I thought she said. (*Dismissing HERMIONE'S queerness*) Very muzzy!

SIMS Marriott says he has an appointment with you, sir.

POMFRET Oh, yes. I'll see him now. (*He watches the crowd until MARRIOTT'S entrance*) Come in, Marriott. Has Sims gone?

MARRIOTT Yes, sir.

POMFRET Well, it worked!

MARRIOTT Of course, sir.

POMFRET I wasn't referring to your mechanics. I am referring to its effect on my sister. She was completely taken in.

MARRIOTT I hope Miss Pomfret was not alarmed. I should be sorry to have been the means of frightening her, sir.

POMFRET No. No, she seemed to take it quite calmly. (*He is a little puzzled about it*) Extraordinarily calmly. In fact, almost as if it were no surprise. Perhaps the business of this Open Day crowd acted as a counter-irritant. (*He finds that a sufficient explanation*) However, that is not what I wanted to talk about. Have you been following the correspondence in the *Clarion*?

MARRIOTT Well, off and on, you might say, sir.

POMFRET (*handing him a paper*) That is today's. You will see that Professor Sands and Sir John Halifax have expressed a desire to investigate the business personally. Professor Sands, in case you do not know, is one of the most distinguished scientists of the day; and Sir John Halifax is a well-known authority on psychical phenomena.

MARRIOTT Yes, sir. Very interesting.

POMFRET I have decided to invite them down to stay at West Lee.

MARRIOTT Yes, sir?

POMFRET It would be very—satisfactory if manifestations occurred during their stay. Now, this practical joke on my sister has been so successful that I think we might be daring enough to repeat it with a more distinguished audience.

MARRIOTT (*in virtuous haste*) You mean, fool the professor, sir? Oh, I couldn't do that, sir!

POMFRET And why not? Do you doubt your skill?

MARRIOTT Oh, no, sir. I've never failed with a trick yet.

POMFRET Then why the hesitation?

MARRIOTT Well, sir, a family joke is one thing, but something like this might get me into trouble.

POMFRET What kind of trouble, may I ask?

MARRIOTT I don't know. False pretences, or something like that, sir.

POMFRET The muddled thinking which is a habit with your class is a constant amazement to me. If your trick never fails, how can you be called to account? And if you have pretended nothing, how can there be a question of false pretences?

MARRIOTT No, sir. There is that.

POMFRET A practical joke remains a practical joke, whoever the victim may be.

MARRIOTT (*with an artistic air of doubt*) I would like to help you, of course, sir.

POMFRET I should hardly expect you to employ your skill on my behalf for nothing, of course.

MARRIOTT Oh, well, that's different, sir.

POMFRET Shall we say five pounds?

MARRIOTT Well—there's my discretion as well as my talent, sir.

POMFRET (*sharply*) Do you include blackmail among your talents, Marriott?

MARRIOTT (*injured*) Oh, no, sir. Certainly not! It's just——Well, a new set of conjurer's stuff would be very nice, sir.

POMFRET And how much does a new set of conjurer's stuff cost?

MARRIOTT About fifty pounds.

POMFRET *Fifty!* My good creature!

MARRIOTT When the Professor writes his report on the phenomena at West Lee, you'll feel like a million dollars, sir.

POMFRET No doubt. That will not alter the fact that I haven't got a million. (*After a pause*) Shall we say twenty-five?

MARRIOTT Twenty-five a piece, sir.

POMFRET A piece?

MARRIOTT Twenty-five for the professor, and twenty-five for the knight.

POMFRET But they will be here together!

MARRIOTT Maybe, sir, but they have to be fooled separately.

POMFRET But, fifty!

MARRIOTT (*smoothly*) They will be here very soon, I take it, sir?

POMFRET Oh, very well: fifty. But it is extortion. Yes; they are both gentlemen of leisure and of immeasurable curiosity, so I expect their visit will not be delayed once they have my invitation. In any case, an invitation to West Lee is not to be sneezed at, even by a Halifax. Now, I thought that we might arrange a manifestation in the Long Gallery before they come down. And then a further one, also in the Long Gallery, when they are here.

MARRIOTT Yes, sir. That ought to be easy.

POMFRET Twenty-five pounds to be paid to you after the first manifestation, and the rest of the money after the second. (*A shade nastily*) I hope that is satisfactory to you?

MARRIOTT Quite, sir. Thank you, sir. Will that be all, sir?

POMFRET Yes. All just now. We can decide later on the articles to be offered up in the cause of science. Perhaps you had better inspect the possibilities in the Long Gallery. I want results for my fifty.

MARRIOTT (*heartily*) I can promise you, sir, that the results will be beyond your wildest expectations.

CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE 1

The drawing-room at West Lee, about a fortnight later. Afternoon. MISS POMFRET is sitting at her desk, adding up something in a little notebook. She rings for SIMS, and goes on worrying about the notebook.

Enter SIMS.

HERMIONE Sims, about the schoolchildren's treat. Was it threepenny bags of sweets they had last year, or sixpenny?

SIMS Threepenny bags, madam.

HERMIONE You are sure?

SIMS Yes, madam. You may remember the choice was between a threepenny bag of sweets plus a banana, and a sixpenny bag minus a banana.

HERMIONE I suppose you couldn't do seventy-eight threepences in your head, Sims?

SIMS Nineteen and sixpence, madam.

HERMIONE Thank you, Sims, you're wonderful. Well, that is that. (*With a glance at the clock*) Nearly tea-time. I know neither of those two dear old things in the Long Gallery would dream of leaving it in possession of the other, but perhaps you can persuade them to cease their vigil long enough to have tea with me today. (*As SIMS hesitates*) Ask them nicely for me.

SIMS Professor Sands and Sir John have gone, madam.

HERMIONE Gone? Gone where?

SIMS They have left West Lee. I thought you knew, madam.

HERMIONE Left? You mean gone away for good?

SIMS Marriott has driven them to the station, and I understand that their luggage is to follow, madam.

HERMIONE But how extraordinary! To go without saying good-bye to me. Such charming people. Did they see Mr Pomfret?

SIMS Yes, madam, they had an interview with him in the library.

HERMIONE Interview! Why do you call it that?

SIMS (*confused*) I merely meant——

HERMIONE Has something gone wrong, Sims?

SIMS Not as far as I am aware, madam. Perhaps the gentlemen were merely excited over the latest manifestation.

HERMIONE Manifestation!

SIMS Though I must say they did not appear to be elated.

HERMIONE Another breakage? I hope it isn't the William-and-Mary glass?

SIMS No, madam; the Chinese jar.

HERMIONE What excellent taste.

[*Enter POMFRET, sizzling.*]

POMFRET (*to SIMS*) Did Sir John and the Professor leave an address for the forwarding of their baggage?

SIMS Yes, sir.

POMFRET Then see that it is forwarded instantly.

SIMS Yes, sir.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

HERMIONE What is the matter, Mathew? Has something gone wrong?

POMFRET The matter is that I have been made a fool of!

HERMIONE Is it possible?

POMFRET Possible! What do you mean, is it possible? Any man can be made a fool of, I suppose?

HERMIONE Oh, yes, dear. Of course. Was the latest manifestation not satisfactory?

POMFRET Satisfactory! What an extraordinary word——!

HERMIONE I mean, did the poltergeist—leave traces?

POMFRET There is no poltergeist. I have been the victim of a practical joke.

HERMIONE But who would do that, dear? All the servants have been with us so long.

POMFRET Marriott hasn't.

HERMIONE But Marriott was not here when you threw—I mean, when the poltergeist—I mean, when the joker first appeared.

POMFRET Then Sims. Sims has never liked me. He has always resented us. No doubt he is trying to get us out of the house.

HERMIONE Oh, Mathew, dear. That kind old man.

POMFRET Quite heinous murderers have looked like kind old men.

HERMIONE But why should Sir John and the Professor have been angry? It wasn't they who were——

POMFRET What makes you think they were angry?

HERMIONE They went without saying good-bye to me. So strange of them. One would have expected them to laugh a little and stay to tea.

POMFRET (*boiling over*) I find the attitude of Sir John and that little University upstart quite intolerable and unwarranted.

HERMIONE (*encouraging*) Yes, dear?

POMFRET They have the impudence to suspect that I—that I instigated the whole thing.

HERMIONE You, dear? Why should you do anything so silly?

POMFRET To——(*recollecting himself*) I expect the suggestion is that having flung a jug at my parlour-maid, I took steps to produce further manifestations as camouflage.

HERMIONE Dear me! Did they say that!

POMFRET They didn't say anything. They were both complete little gentlemen. So polite you could hear the ice tinkle. (*In a burst*) My God, I shall have something to say to——(*Remembering*) To the person responsible for this!

HERMIONE What a pity it went wrong this time, isn't it? If it hadn't, there would have been such good evidence in your favour.

POMFRET (*looking at her doubtfully*) Yes. Yes. (*With an attempt at an air*) However, we can only be thankful that the truth has come to light before the matter went further. It must be obvious to anyone not blinded by prejudice that the first occasion was also the work of a practical joker.

HERMIONE I hope so, dear.

POMFRET You hope so!

HERMIONE People always find the worse of two stories the better one. To repeat, I mean.

POMFRET (*furious*) If they repeat anything of that sort, I shall sue them for libel. There is not the slightest evidence that I had anything to do with——

HERMIONE Of course not, dear. Don't worry about it. In any case, I expect Sir John and the Professor will be discreet.

POMFRET Discreet?

HERMIONE I mean, not mention their suspicions.

POMFRET Suspicious?

HERMIONE It was you who said they were suspicious. I wish you wouldn't catch me up, dear. They will just report that it was a practical joke on you, and people will laugh a little——

POMFRET They'll do that all right!

HERMIONE ——and then they will forget about it. Even if someone does think of that good story——

POMFRET What good story?

HERMIONE About your doing it yourself as camouflage. Everyone who knows you personally will treat it as nonsense. They will know that you are not capable of it.

POMFRET (*surprised; his chest beginning to swell*) Well! At least one person finds me——

HERMIONE You have never been in the least mechanically minded, have you? (*As he is recovering from this*) What was it they found, by the way? A piece of string, or something?

[*Enter SIMS.*]

SIMS Mr Macallister from the *Daily Clarion* to see you, sir.

POMFRET Macallister? Oh, no. Tell him I'm indisposed. Tell him——

HERMIONE Shall I see him for you, Mathew?

POMFRET (*realising that the door has come ajar*) How often have I told you that that door swings open?

[*Enter MACALLISTER, in the open door.*]

MACALLISTER I won't keep you a moment, Mr Pomfret. How do you do, Miss Pomfret. I hope you are well. I really came to interview Professor Sands about that Winchester House affair last year, but I hear he has gone. Does that mean he has given up? I hope not!

POMFRET Can you *smell* carrion, Mr Macallister?

MACALLISTER Can I what?

POMFRET You seem to have a habit of turning up at the most——However, now that you are here, you may as well know that the mystery has been solved.

MACALLISTER No! So they have gone to London with a story!

POMFRET I expect you would call it a story. We have all been the victims of a practical joke, Mr Macallister.

MACALLISTER A joke! You don't tell me! And who is the joker?

POMFRET That we have to find out. I suspect my butler. He belongs to the place, you see, and he has always resented our coming to live here.

MACALLISTER (*regarding POMFRET with loathing*) What a nasty piece of work!

POMFRET I beg your pardon!

MACALLISTER (*smoothly*) Your butler.

POMFRET Yes. I shall no doubt dismiss him. Quietly, of course, and without fuss.

MACALLISTER You mean without inquiry?

[HERMIONE *begins a protest.*]

POMFRET Inquiry would only aggravate the scandal, and in any case would be unproductive. When he is dismissed those who like may put two and two together, of course. But there will be no accusations.

MACALLISTER I see.

POMFRET That is not for publication, of course.

MACALLISTER No; of course not.

HERMIONE But, Mathew, poor old Sims is the last person in the world——

POMFRET Please, Hermione.

HERMIONE And he would never get another——

POMFRET Hermione, please!

[HERMIONE *subsides.*]

MACALLISTER And how was the mystery solved, Mr Pomfret? It *is* luck for me that I happened in just now.

POMFRET A Chinese jar that stands in the Long Gallery was broken this afternoon. Apparently spontaneously. Unfortunately—(*recollecting himself*) unfortunately for the joker, that is—the means used to procure the breakage were plain for everyone to see. (*Forgetting himself again as emotion overcomes him*) I cannot imagine how he could have been so criminally careless——

MACALLISTER (*enjoying him*) The joker?

POMFRET (*hastily*) Of course; the joker.

MACALLISTER And how did the investigators take it?

POMFRET Very badly. In fact, they took it as a personal insult. The scientific mind has no sense of humour.

MACALLISTER I suppose not. And of course it must have riled them to have wasted their time on a try-on.

POMFRET (*not liking either the readiness to sympathise with Science or the word 'try-on'; stiffly*) They might have realised that I also was a sufferer, and to a much greater extent.

MACALLISTER (*breezily*) Oh, well, Mr Pomfret, your sufferings are over. At least this lets you out.

POMFRET Lets me out?

MACALLISTER This practical-joke discovery proves that you are no jug-thrower.

POMFRET Yes. I may appear as a fool, but at least I am absolved from being a knave. You can have no idea, Mr Macallister, how painful that imputation was to a creature like myself who has never lifted hand to man or beast....

HERMIONE He will be able to walk through the House of Commons dining-rooms now without having people clutch at their water-jugs.

POMFRET Hermione.

MACALLISTER (*delighted*) Dear me. Did they do that?

HERMIONE Yes. They even went to the length of calling him Juggins Pomfret. Juggins means silly. For saying that the jug threw itself, you know.

POMFRET Really, Hermione.

HERMIONE I suppose one shouldn't be saying such things to the Press, should one? But it doesn't matter now, does it, since everything is so nicely cleared up.

POMFRET The mystery may be cleared up, but it will take me years to live down the undesirable publicity.

MACALLISTER 'Juggins Pomfret' does come trippingly off the tongue. And of course you have given a new phrase to the English language, sir. 'Doing a Pomfret' is apt to outlive you. I don't think I'd let that worry me. It's a distinction in a way. The main thing is that you are absolved from the charge of throwing things about, isn't it.

POMFRET Undoubtedly. I, who am the kindest, the most self-controlled of men. It was intolerable. But some of the wits will look a little small now. There is that comfort.

[*Enter SIMS.*]

SIMS Marriott has come back from the station, sir. You wanted to see him.

MACALLISTER And I want to see the broken jar, if that is possible. A reporter always views the body.

HERMIONE I want to see it too, Mr Macallister. Shall we inspect the evidence together?

[*They go out as MARRIOTT is shown in.*]

MARRIOTT I wanted to see you, sir.

POMFRET (*almost beside himself*) You wanted to see *me*! You half-witted numbskull, you inept fool, you criminal bungler——

MARRIOTT I'm terribly sorry, sir. Really, I am. On my word of honour, this is the first time in all my life that any trick of mine has gone wrong.

POMFRET I am not interested in your past achievements. What we are considering is the monument of bungling that you achieved this afternoon. But for that bungling I should once more be a respected and admired citizen. A man who owned a poltergeist. And all I am is a laughing-stock. A man who has been tricked by his servants. It is no thanks to you that, if I am pilloried as a fool, I am at least proved not to be a knave.

MARRIOTT A knave, sir?

POMFRET A jug-thrower.

MARRIOTT Oh, I see. Well, that is partly what I wanted to see you about, sir. You see, being of a scientific turn of mind——

POMFRET Scientific! My God!

MARRIOTT —I've always had a great reverence for scientists. In fact, one of my greatest ambitions has always been to be chauffeur to a scientist. And, of course, Professor Sands is just the tops, sir.

POMFRET The what?

MARRIOTT The greatest ever, sir.

POMFRET What has this to do with me?

MARRIOTT Quite a lot, sir, I'm afraid.

POMFRET You are afraid!

MARRIOTT Yes, sir. You see, sir, I've come to give you back your twenty-five pounds.

POMFRET (*staggered*) But that was for the first trick!

MARRIOTT Yes, sir, but it was for my discretion as well, you remember.

POMFRET Yes, it was. (*Panic beginning*) You don't—

MARRIOTT Well, sir, I wanted to ask Professor Sands if he would let me be his chauffeur—next time he had a vacancy, I mean—but I couldn't do it just after trying to fool the old gentleman. The words stuck in my throat, so to speak. (*VALENTI is enjoying himself*) I've always had a delicate conscience. It's been a nuisance to me more than once, that con—

POMFRET Never mind your blasted conscience! What are you trying to tell me?

MARRIOTT Well, sir, I confessed to him before I asked him.

POMFRET Confessed! Confessed what?

MARRIOTT That I had done the trick.

POMFRET That *you* had done it? (*After a moment*) Was that all you said?

MARRIOTT Oh, I didn't say anything about you, sir, if that's what you mean.

POMFRET Didn't he want to know why you had done such a thing?

MARRIOTT Oh, yes. I told him the money tempted me.

POMFRET Money!

MARRIOTT Yes, sir. I told him I had been paid to do the trick, and that I was sorry to have done it to such a fine old gentleman.

POMFRET You half-witted fool. You told him that!

MARRIOTT I didn't mention any names, sir.

POMFRET Did you need to! Who would pay you to do a thing like that except me.

MARRIOTT (*with just a shade too much meaning*) I can't imagine.

[*The rage and frustration in POMFRET spills over. He reaches out to the nearest ornament—a china jug—and flings it with no great accuracy but considerable force at MARRIOTT. AS MARRIOTT is dodging it he reaches for another. There is a considerable selection of missiles, all breakable. He has reached his fifth or sixth, and MARRIOTT is skipping about among a growing collection of fragments, when the door is burst open and SIMS, MACALLISTER, and HERMIONE appear. They stand astonished for a moment before the curtain comes down on the skipping, protesting MARRIOTT and the furious flinger of jugs.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The small drawing-room at West Lee, a few weeks later.

Enter SIMS, showing in JUDD.

SIMS If you'll just take a seat, sir, I shall tell Miss Pomfret. She expressed a wish to show you the house herself.

JUDD (*surprised*) That was very kind of her. Extraordinarily kind. Thank you. Oh. Just a moment—I don't know your name?

SIMS Sims, sir.

JUDD Just a moment, Sims. I understand that Mr Pomfret is dismissing his staff. Is that so?

SIMS Yes, sir. Mr Pomfret has taken a furnished house on the South Coast, and there is a staff there already.

JUDD Yes. Have you been long at West Lee?

SIMS I have lived here all my life, sir.

JUDD Oh. You were with the original owners?

SIMS Yes, sir; I was the Ortons' servant for thirty years, and their butler for fifteen.

JUDD They owned the place for a long time, I understand.

SIMS (*simply*) They had been here for three hundred years, sir.

JUDD Well, if you have served one upstart, you mightn't mind serving another.

SIMS (*at a loss*) Sir?

JUDD Would you care to stay on as butler to a grocer's son from Camden Town? (*As SIMS says nothing*) Or have you already decided on another situation?

SIMS No, sir. It would be difficult at my age to—I merely thought—I am not a young man any longer, and——

JUDD And you want to retire.

SIMS Oh, no, sir. But I might not be able to give you satisfaction.

JUDD (*after a moment's pause*) My idea was that you might take charge of the show part of the house. It will be open as usual to the public, and it would be a great advantage to have someone who was familiar with it, and who—who cared about it.

SIMS It is very kind of you, sir. I should like nothing better.

JUDD Then I have a butler?

SIMS You have, sir. Thank you, sir. (*Turning back from the door*) I find it difficult to express my gratitude, sir.

JUDD I am glad to have you, Sims. Very glad.

SIMS I think I hear Miss Pomfret now.

[*He goes out, and presently HERMIONE comes in.*]

HERMIONE (*with a little smile*) Mr Judd? How do you do.

JUDD Miss Pomfret. This is very kind of you.

HERMIONE You have just done something much kinder. Sims has told me. It meant so much to him that he couldn't keep the news for a moment.

JUDD That wasn't kindness. It was merely good business.

HERMIONE You don't deceive me, Mr Judd. I have been running households for a very long time. An elderly servant is not much of an asset. You know, I think I am as grateful to you as Sims. It was very much on my mind. Sims and I are friends, you know. We have been a great comfort to each other.

JUDD Have you needed comfort? Or is that impertinent of me?

HERMIONE (*condoning*) Well, I began it, didn't I? There are always times in a domestic life when one wants a hand held, you know. Sims held mine.

JUDD I hardly expected a personal reception when I came to see my house. You don't hold it against me that I am turning you out of West Lee?

HERMIONE Oh, no. In any case, you are not turning us out.

JUDD Am I not?

HERMIONE It is we who decided to go.

JUDD I hope you are not very sad about going?

HERMIONE Oh, no. Since my brother resigned from the constituency, it is much better that we should go. My brother is very sensitive. He imagines that everyone is laughing at him.

JUDD Is that so serious? We have all been laughed at in our time.

HERMIONE Not my brother. No one has ever laughed at Mathew. I hope you will like the house, Mr Judd.

JUDD (*replying to a hint of anxiety in her tone*) You think it was a little rash to buy it without seeing it?

HERMIONE Oh, well, of course, it is a show place, and very famous. Are you American, Mr Judd?

JUDD No. Canadian.

[SIMS *brings in tea.*]

HERMIONE Canadians go in for bathrooms too, don't they?

JUDD Go in for?

HERMIONE (*anxiously*) I hope you won't expect one to every bedroom, or anything like that. We have only three, outside the servants' quarters. And it would be difficult to make more without spoiling some beautiful rooms.

JUDD I promise you I won't spoil any rooms.

HERMIONE And some of the fires don't draw too well. I hope you won't let that discourage you. They just want to be humoured. You'll find that opening a particular window—or not opening it—makes all the difference. Perhaps I could leave you a list of the most—(*Remembering*) But, of course, Sims will be here. He knows all about the—the lovable oddities of the house, shall we say? You will keep them right, Sims, about the relation between the fires and the windows and the prevailing wind?

SIMS Yes, madam, I shall see to that.

[*Exit SIMS.*]

JUDD You are very fond of the place, aren't you?

HERMIONE (*cheerfully*) Oh, yes, very. I think you will grow fond of it too.

JUDD Well, you see, I don't plan to live here.

HERMIONE No? Are you going to give it to the nation?

JUDD In a way. It is going to be a holiday home for children.

HERMIONE Oh. Oh, now *nice!* How really wonderful.

JUDD You think it a good idea?

HERMIONE Oh, Mr Judd, I couldn't imagine anything more perfect for West Lee. I never see those enormous attics but I think what playgrounds they would have been for me on wet days when I was small. It seemed such a shame that there was no one to use them. And all those gardens and paddocks that no one walked through except on Open Days.

JUDD That's what I thought. If I was going to buy the place I might as well put it to some good use.

HERMIONE And you thought at once of children.

JUDD I didn't think of them at all. My bath water was too hot.

HERMIONE I beg your pardon?

JUDD (*between sips of tea*) I live in one of these luxury hotels. I have a suite. The windows have what they call a good outlook. You know: green trees and expensive cars. But the bathroom is at the back, and has opaque glass. No one looks out of bathroom windows. I wouldn't have, if the room hadn't got steamy. It was a hot day anyway. And what do you think was down below? Eleven little shavers playing ball in an alley that would make a self-respecting prison yard blush. No sun, no room, no air. I knew then what I was going to do with West Lee.

HERMIONE (*after a pause*) I hope you won't think me silly or fanciful, Mr Judd, but I am sure West Lee will be glad about it. It has seen such generations of children.

JUDD You know, it is a great pity that you happen to have a good income and a brother to look after.

HERMIONE A pity?

JUDD It seems to me that you would make the ideal matron for that children's home of mine.

HERMIONE You think I would? (*She considers the question academic*)

JUDD I do.

HERMIONE What a wonderful idea. But of course you don't know anything about me. I am very unmethodical, and not much of a disciplinarian, I'm afraid. And it takes me a whole day to check the monthly bills.

JUDD I'm not suggesting you should be a working housekeeper. They are two-a-penny. I'm suggesting you should be hostess at West Lee to children on holiday.

HERMIONE (*her attention arrested; in a new tone*) You are not really suggesting anything at all, are you, Mr Judd?

JUDD Why not? You can't say you didn't like the idea. You said you did.

HERMIONE Oh, it is a most beautiful idea. Most beautiful. I love children.

JUDD And you love West Lee.

HERMIONE (*guardedly*) I am very fond of it, of course.

JUDD Then why not stay as——

HERMIONE But I have other duties in life, you know. A brother to take care of——

JUDD When a healthy man has to be taken care of, the only thing that's wrong with him is swelled ego.

HERMIONE (*demurely*) Didn't you like your sisters, Mr Judd?

JUDD No. Eliza was a tartar.

HERMIONE Well, I'm not. I'm a very nice woman. And my brother likes having me.
(*She is determined to keep it on a 'play' level*)

JUDD Is that all-important?

HERMIONE What?

JUDD What your brother likes.

HERMIONE (*hearing his voice in the hall*) Dear me, I thought Mathew was in Farleigh. I didn't tell him you were coming, because any talk of our departure seems to upset him.

[*Enter POMFRET.*]

POMFRET Hermione—Oh. Good afternoon.

HERMIONE This is Mr Judd, Mathew.

POMFRET I hope you are not inveigling my sister into more expenditure for her charities. She can never resist——

HERMIONE Mr Judd is the new owner of West Lee, dear.

POMFRET Oh. Oh, really. Well, I hope you won't be disappointed. Extraordinarily expensive place to keep up. If it isn't the tiles it is the drains, and if it isn't the drains it is window-sashes.

HERMIONE I have been telling him about the chimneys, but he doesn't seem to mind.

JUDD And I have been telling Miss Pomfret that I wish she would stay on and go with the house.

POMFRET As what, pray?

JUDD As hostess to my children.

HERMIONE Mr Judd is going to turn the house into a holiday home for children.

POMFRET Good heavens. This is a show-place, not a crèche.

JUDD I understand that the modern part will withstand even a horde of city brats. And the old part will still be available to the public. I have suggested to Miss Pomfret that she might like to look after the city brats.

[*He smiles at HERMIONE.*]

POMFRET Are you suggesting that my sister should be a sort of matron?

HERMIONE (*hastily*) No, no, dear. In any case, I——

POMFRET She could hardly entertain a proposition of that sort.

JUDD (*mildly*) Why not?

HERMIONE (*unexpectedly echoing*) Yes. *Why* not, Mathew?

POMFRET My good Hermione——

HERMIONE It is all right. I am not considering it. But I don't see any reason why I should not.

POMFRET Have you taken leave of your senses, my dear Hermione? It would be in every way unfitting.

JUDD You mean you wouldn't like your sister to earn her living?

POMFRET I don't think we need discuss it, need we, since the possibility does not arise.

JUDD You think it a poor suggestion?

POMFRET My dear Mr Judd, I think it ridiculous. In the first place, my sister is one of the most incompetent women now alive. In the second place, she has a charming home and every luxury that heart desires. Can you suggest any good reasons for leaving it?

JUDD A life of her own, three hundred a year, and her keep.

HERMIONE Three hundred a year! All for myself?

JUDD On a ten-year contract.

HERMIONE (*as one seeing visions*) Three hundred!

POMFRET (*furious*) What are you attempting? Bribery?

JUDD My dear Mr Pomfret!

HERMIONE Three hundred, and the children, and West Lee. Are you serious about this, Mr Judd?

JUDD Perfectly.

HERMIONE Then, thank you very much, I'll take it.

JUDD You will? Good!

POMFRET Hermione, you can't do any such thing. You can't be well. You—this is just a whim, a sudden fancy. (*To* JUDD) Take no notice of her. She will think differently tomorrow.

HERMIONE I don't think so, dear. (*Mildly*) You really shouldn't have called me incompetent. I know I don't add up figures very well, but I've always made you very comfortable, haven't I?

POMFRET Of course, of course.

HERMIONE So you really shouldn't have said that I was incompetent. You'll really find me quite a good manager, Mr Judd. I'm quite sure you'll never find anyone who can make a penny go farther than I can.

POMFRET (*losing all control; to* JUDD) How dare you come here with your suggestions and your bribery! Drinking my best tea——

HERMIONE It isn't yours, dear.

POMFRET Not mine?

HERMIONE No, I buy this out of my dress allowance. The house money doesn't run to it.

POMFRET Hermione, how can you do this to me? At such a time, when everything is breaking up under my feet: my home, my career, my reputation, my peace of mind, my very sanity, and you are all that I have left.

HERMIONE The dregs.

POMFRET What do you say?

HERMIONE Never mind. You mustn't take my defection too hardly, you know, Mathew dear. The staff at Cove are very efficient, I hear. And my taking a job—how strange that sounds; so exciting—my taking a job will leave you free to propose to Lady Kathleen.

POMFRET You know quite well that Kathleen would rather die than——(*Pulling himself up, and turning on* JUDD) I don't know who you are, Mr Judd, except that you had the money to buy my house, but let me tell you that your methods are underhand, equivocal, and altogether revolting. If you had come to this house to sell carpets you could not have used more questionable means of gaining a hearing. I am sorry to think that this splendid old place is doomed to fall into the hands of a man like you, and sorrier still that my sister has so little wit that she can take you at your face value. I only hope that she will come to her senses in the morning.

[*Exit* POMFRET, *banging the door.*]

HERMIONE (*unruffled*) I must apologise for Mathew. He is not often as rude as that.

JUDD I suppose I should be thankful that he refrained from throwing something at me.

HERMIONE Oh, he doesn't do that. Only once, at a chauffeur, and he had had great provocation.

JUDD A chauffeur? I thought it was a parlour-maid.

HERMIONE Oh, that. (*Indulgently*) Oh, he really didn't fling that jug, poor Mathew.

JUDD No? Don't tell me you believe in poltergeists.

HERMIONE No; you see, I filled that jug with water that very morning when I was doing the flowers. But when the jug was thrown there was hardly any water in it. At the time, I just thought it odd. But later I began to put things together.

JUDD And what is your theory?

HERMIONE (*half-playfully, in the tone one uses in telling a thrilling story*) Well, I believe that Mathew had an enemy.

JUDD Only one?

HERMIONE (*in her normal tones*) Only one clever one.

JUDD Clever?

HERMIONE One that knew his weak places.

JUDD And how did this enemy stage the jug-throwing? What is he? A magician?

HERMIONE Oh, it is merely a theory, as I said. I am not very clever, you see. I could never investigate things, or be a detective.

JUDD I see. But weren't you filled with a desire to get even with your brother's enemy?

HERMIONE I think Mathew's enemy might be quite a nice person.

JUDD (*floored*) Oh.

HERMIONE Now I am going to let Sims show you round. You don't mind, do you? I meant to do it myself, but now that Sims is going to serve you, I am sure it will give him great pleasure to do the honours. I won't say good-bye, because we shall be meeting soon again, shan't we? I can't describe to you how excited I am at the thought of my job. I only hope you won't be disappointed in me.

JUDD I don't think I shall. Thank you for taking it.

HERMIONE If you stay here, I shall send Sims to you. (*At the door, turning to speak to him where he is standing in the middle of the room*) Talking of magicians, did you ever see a music hall turn by a man called Valenti?

JUDD Valenti!

HERMIONE Yes. A young man and a girl. So very clever. My cousin Ursula took me to see them when I was in town last Christmas. Quite wonderful.

[*Exit* HERMIONE.]

[JUDD *sits down abruptly, and pulls out his handkerchief.*]

JUDD (*mopping his forehead*) Women! My God, women!

CURTAIN

CORNELIA

CHARACTERS

LUCAS BILKE, *gentleman of means, a bachelor at forty-two*

ANDREW WYLIE, *his friend and solicitor*

CORNELIA TAFT, *a young girl from Labrador, Bilke's ward*

LADY BINNACLE

SEBASTIAN, LORD BINNACLE, *her son*

PARKIN

SCENES

The Scene throughout is the main living-room in the home of LUCAS BILKE, thirty miles from London

ACT I *Late summer*

ACT II *A fortnight later*

ACT III *Six months later*

ACT I

The Scene during the whole of the play is the main living-room in the home of LUCAS BILKE, about thirty miles from London. The house is modern, and the room very beautiful. It has been furnished not by a designer, but by the owner, and his excellently chosen pieces give the room an individuality not common in modern decoration. At the back is the window, looking out front; L., the fireplace; R., the door to the hall. There are comfortable chairs; a round table up-stage; a wireless set in a Chinese cabinet on the up-stage side of the fireplace.

It is four o'clock on a late summer afternoon, and there are present two people:

LUCAS BILKE *and his friend and solicitor, ANDREW WYLIE.*

LUCAS *is a personable creature, a little over forty, with the amiable tolerant manner of a cat which has never lacked cream. At the age of twenty he inherited from his worthy and God-fearing parents a large fortune and a Gothic mansion. The fortune was made in tin-tacks, and the mansion built in 1860. LUCAS sold the mansion, and spent some of the fortune in various household experiments in the West End. When he reached the age of thirty-five, however, his tastes were established enough to make a permanent setting desirable; so he bought the best piece of land within a fifty-mile radius of Charing Cross and built on it a house of medium size and superlative beauty. Having been an eligible parti from the age of eighteen, and still a bachelor, he has an almost-pardonable complacence. He has irreproachable taste; and practically no imagination.*

ANDREW WYLIE *is a typical lawyer; lean, clean, and quiet; but he has also kindness and imagination. Having wrestled with a career and with human nature, both in himself and others, he has an understanding denied the spoiled and untried LUCAS. He is LUCAS'S senior by a few years.*

LUCAS *is, at the moment, relaxed in a chair, and ANDREW is walking about with his hands in his pockets.*

ANDREW Well, it is all very interesting, Lucas, but what are you going to do about it?

LUCAS I have never been a man to shirk my responsibilities.

ANDREW You have never had a responsibility to shirk.

LUCAS I once brought Millicent's Persian cat all the way from Prague.

ANDREW (*ignoring him*) You are talking like something out of an Edwardian novel. And I don't like it. The flight from reality is alarming. Suppose you stop straddling the hearthrug (*this is metaphorical, of course*) and tell me what you propose to do.

LUCAS (*equably*) I propose to accept my responsibility. (*With feeling*) And I have *never* straddled the hearthrug.

ANDREW In two shakes you will if you are not careful. You mean you are going to finance this girl? (*He accepts this as a not too unreasonable proposition*)

LUCAS You might put it that way. I am going to have her here.

ANDREW Have her——! For an interview, you mean.

LUCAS Certainly not. As my guest. She is going to live here.

ANDREW (*after a pause, shutting his gaping mouth*) And where are you going?

LUCAS I am going to live here too, naturally. It's where I *do* live.

ANDREW When you are not in Eden Roc, or Long Island, or Nassau. My dear Lucas, will you come out of that unbecoming and very unexpected Edwardian binding and talk sense. I have known you since you were six and getting over the mumps, and in all that time I have never known you to submit to a moment's discomfort that it was in your power to avoid.

LUCAS If you mean that I have never gone scrambling up mountains just to sit on the top and look at places that I knew were there all the time, then I haven't. But what has that to do with——

ANDREW You can hardly imagine that the presence of a girl like that in your home will be anything but highly uncomfortable and embarrassing.

LUCAS It will be highly entertaining. Think of it, Andrew. Think of showing a young primitive creature the glories of civilisation. Watching a young mind unfold——

ANDREW And a young mouth devouring peas off a knife.

LUCAS Nonsense. The cinema has put an end to all that.

ANDREW Do they have cinemas in the wilds of Alaska?

LUCAS Labrador. Even if she does eat peas off a knife——though I have never believed that anyone did; a difficult method it always seemed to me——even if she did, that would merely make it more delightful.

ANDREW (*with faint signs of exasperation*) Come out of your pipe-dream, Lucas. I have seen you turn faint when your butler blew the dust off a plate.

LUCAS (*reminiscent*) That was Halliwell. A notable barbarian. Nonconformist and a lover of port. My port.

ANDREW Don't ask me to believe that you would ever enjoy watching someone chew with their mouth open.

LUCAS You *are* hard on her. Have you decided that she is cross-eyed as well?

ANDREW (*turning on him*) No; but I suspect that you picture her as a raving beauty.

LUCAS (*self-analysing*) Now I come to think of it, I'm afraid I had. But of course I mustn't hope for anything like that, must I? She probably inherited Horace's nose. Do you remember it? Roman, with a bump in the middle, and a drop on the end from mid-November till the end of March.

ANDREW Lucas, did you ask me down this week-end as your solicitor or as your friend?

LUCAS Both, my dear Andrew, both.

ANDREW Then as both let me tell you that to install an unknown girl from the backwoods as a member of your household is quite unthinkable. You can't do it.

LUCAS Bernard Shaw did.

ANDREW Only on the stage. In real life he provided himself with a nice cultured wife and a nice quiet home, and took good care to keep it quiet. If you have an urge to reform someone, take to Boys' Clubs, or breaking horses, or speaking at Marble Arch on Sundays, but leave Elizas alone.

LUCAS (*plaintively*) I don't want to reform anyone. I merely want some—some leaven in my life.

ANDREW Is Persephone no longer leavening?

LUCAS She has gone to Tibet.

ANDREW What in the world for?

LUCAS To shoot lamas.

ANDREW You can't shoot lamas. They're priests.

LUCAS With a camera.

ANDREW I see.

LUCAS I shall be forty-two next month, and my life shows signs of developing a distressing sag in the middle. I find that all faces are beginning to look alike to me; brown, white, and yellow.

ANDREW Well, this girl's will look just like Horace's. You can hardly depend on

her for Some New Thing. Why don't you get married, Lucas?

LUCAS Parkin wouldn't like it.

ANDREW I am serious.

LUCAS So am I. There are two thousand women in London alone who would make passable wives, but in five continents there is not another butler like Parkin.

ANDREW What you need is a wife and children, and all that goes with them. School reports, and adenoid operations, and ponies, and Christmas parties and what not. You wouldn't have the time, then, to play with ridiculous schemes like having strange young women in your home so that you can teach them the difference between Botticelli and Bollinger.

LUCAS It isn't a ridiculous scheme. It is a—a sacred trust.

ANDREW (*unbelieving*) Sacred trust! Really, Lucas! That is the second cliché in the last five minutes. Coming from you that makes you practically certifiable. What was Horace to you, anyhow, that you should succour his daughter! (*The question is rhetorical*)

LUCAS My tutor. *Such* a good tutor—but not academically. And my mother always liked him. I think she would have married him if that nose had been a little shorter.

ANDREW Very well, he was your tutor and your mother's first love. What of it? All you can be expected to do is to see the girl when she arrives in England, find out what kind of career she is fitted for (if any) and see that she is trained for it. What did she do in Falls of—Wherever-it-is?

LUCAS Not Falls. Forks. Forks of Sagataw. I don't suppose there was anything to do. Made cheese of reindeer milk, perhaps. And caught fish through holes in the ice in winter. (*Enthusiastic again*) A girl like that must be shown some of the beauty of life, Andrew. Some of the warmth, the colour. I am glad she will see England before the summer is too old.

ANDREW When do you expect her to arrive?

LUCAS Four o'clock.

ANDREW Four o'clock! *Today!*

LUCAS That is what the telegram said.

ANDREW But it is ten past four now! So that is why you asked me down! You—you coward. Aren't you going to meet her?

LUCAS There isn't anything to meet. No train arrives anywhere near four o'clock,

either here or at the junction. (*Showing telegram*) That is all I know.

ANDREW (*reading*) 'Arriving four o'clock, Taft.' Charming economy. What is she doing in (*reading the postmark*) Aston-under-Limberly?

LUCAS (*taking the telegram from him*) Where?

ANDREW Hadn't you read the postmark?

LUCAS No. Why should I? (*A little nettled that he has missed this, and irritated as always by something that requires explanation*) I'm not a lawyer. Where is Aston-under-Limberly?

ANDREW I never heard of the place.

LUCAS (*trying to read the county mark*) Herts? Hants? Worcs? I can't read the rest. (*A little dashed*) I took it for granted that she wired from the docks. (*Dismayed*) Perhaps she has friends somewhere.

ANDREW (*fervently*) I hope she has.

LUCAS (*protesting*) But Horace left her to me! You read it yourself. (*Picking up the letter he has been showing to ANDREW before the scene opened; reading*) 'I am sending Cornelia to you because I have no relations I like to remember, and no friends who would be likely to remember me except you.'

ANDREW (*happily*) Perhaps she got married on the boat.

LUCAS (*in a wail*) Don't, Andrew! She is the hope of my middle-age! I have spent a week preparing the West Wing suite for her. Even Parkin grew interested.

ANDREW Good heavens!

LUCAS It was he who suggested taking up the little Regency escritoire from the morning-room. He said it was 'very civilising'.

ANDREW Talking of civilisation, I thought you were due to go to the South of France next week.

LUCAS I can take her with me. A few clothes. Some bathing-things. I shall teach her to swim.

ANDREW What makes you think she can't?

LUCAS A girl who has lived within bowing distance of the Pole! (*Off on his magic carpet again*) Warm blue water, and nights smelling of wild geraniums. Can't you see her eyes, Andrew?

ANDREW And if she weighs fifteen stone I suppose you will leave her to be civilised by the Regency escritoire.

LUCAS Andrew, I asked you here for help and sympathy. Not to——

[Enter PARKIN.]

[PARKIN is slightly over thirty; shortish, broad-shouldered, and solid. He has no pomp, but great natural dignity. His face with its high cheekbones and low profile has the smooth highlighted quality of a polished wood-carving, but his eyes are bland and child-like. Like ANDREW, he has toiled for his knowledge and his rating, but, like LUCAS, he is now immensely satisfied with himself and his surroundings.]

PARKIN Miss Taft is here, sir.

[CORNELIA walks past him into the room. She is a smallish, wiry person of nineteen; without either make-up, inhibitions, or affectation. Her clothes, obviously from a mail-order house, are cheap and badly cut, but not at all odd. The general effect is rather that of a neat nursery-maid on her day out. When she speaks, her voice is clear and deliberate, and her accent irreproachable. Only now and then a turn of phrase or an intonation reminds the listener of her unorthodox upbringing.]

LUCAS (going to welcome her) Oh, Miss Taft! I'm so glad——

CORNELIA (shaking hands) Are you Lucas? How do you do. I haven't enough money for the taxi.

LUCAS Taxi? Oh, yes. Parkin, will you see to it.

[Exit PARKIN.]

I am very glad to see you. I have looked forward so much——This is my old friend Andrew Wylie.

CORNELIA How do you do.

ANDREW I am delighted to welcome you to England. Did you have a good crossing?

CORNELIA Tedious. Very tedious.

ANDREW Yes, I suppose transatlantic liners are not the most exciting things in the world.

CORNELIA I didn't cross in a liner.

LUCAS Did you fly?

CORNELIA No, I came in the *Daisy Bell*.

LUCAS And what is the *Daisy Bell*?

CORNELIA She is the cargo boat that calls twice a year; at Forks, you know. She was coming over to England to be broken up, poor thing. They've got a new one. So I got a passage in her.

ANDREW Not much wonder it was tedious.

CORNELIA (*dismissing it philosophically*) It was better towards the end.

ANDREW That is reversing the usual procedure, surely?

CORNELIA By the end I wasn't speaking to anyone but the second mate. It was very peaceful.

LUCAS (*amused*) Why the second mate?

CORNELIA He was the only one who hadn't proposed to me.

LUCAS Do you object to proposals?

CORNELIA No. Only to people making them.

LUCAS (*light dawning*) I see.

[*Enter* PARKIN.]

PARKIN I beg your pardon, sir, but I don't seem to have enough to take care of the taxi.

CORNELIA Take care of it? Who wants to take care of it?

LUCAS All right, Parkin. (*Feeling in his pocket*) How much is it?

PARKIN Eleven pounds, seventeen shillings, and ninepence, sir.

LUCAS What!

CORNELIA (*equably*) I was afraid it might be quite a bit.

LUCAS Cornelia. How far have you come by cab?

CORNELIA From the docks.

LUCAS You mean you came all the way from Southampton by taxi-cab?

CORNELIA No; from Liverpool.

LUCAS But why didn't you take a train?

CORNELIA I didn't like the look of them.

LUCAS (*pulling himself together*) Forgive me. I must get some money from my desk.

[*He goes out with* PARKIN.]

ANDREW (*kind and amused*) What was so forbidding about the train?

CORNELIA Well, when I had just got used to riding in a car, it seemed a pity to get out and start all over again.

ANDREW Didn't you have a car at Falls of Wherever-it-is?

CORNELIA Not Falls. Forks. Forks of Sagataw. What would anyone do with a car?

ANDREW Are the roads so bad?

CORNELIA There aren't any roads. Only a bit of track between the mission and the store. And that's only wide enough for Barney's handcart.

ANDREW I see. And how did you persuade a Liverpool taxi-driver to come all this way?

CORNELIA Well, he says himself that if it hadn't been six o'clock in the morning he would have had more sense. But it's my opinion that he considered he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

ANDREW Oh? There was a lamb?

CORNELIA We had ridden a long way to the station, you see. And when he was doubtful about going farther I said I hadn't any money and if he wanted to be paid he had better take me where I was going. What is a caution?

ANDREW (*alarmed*) You haven't been in a police-court, have you?

CORNELIA Not yet. Why?

ANDREW A caution is a magistrate's lecture to an offender before dismissing a case. If you haven't been in a police-court, why did you want to know about a caution?

CORNELIA That is what he said I was.

ANDREW Who said?

CORNELIA George.

ANDREW Who is George?

CORNELIA The taxi-driver. (*Losing interest*) What do you do?

ANDREW I'm a solicitor.

CORNELIA (*with kindly interest*) Are you a good one?

ANDREW I—I'm generally considered reliable.

CORNELIA (*cheerfully*) Well, that's something. As old Barney at the store says: you want more in a pie than just crust.

ANDREW (*dazed*) Yes. Quite. Thank you. Yes.

[Enter LUCAS.]

LUCAS Well, now that that is settled, I expect you would be glad of some tea.

CORNELIA Yes, I should. I invited George in to have some tea. I was sure you would be having some about now. But he didn't seem to want any.

LUCAS Who is George?

ANDREW (*hastily*) George is the taxi-driver.

LUCAS Oh. No. No. But I have seen to it that he can afford any liquid refreshment he may desire on the way home. Would you like to see your room?

CORNELIA No, thank you; I would like my tea.

LUCAS Then take off your coat, won't you?

CORNELIA (*as she is being helped off with her coat*) He has some very nice cousins.

LUCAS Who?

CORNELIA George.

[Enter PARKIN with tea.]

LUCAS Oh?

CORNELIA We had lunch with them. At that place we sent the telegram from.

LUCAS Yes, we wondered how you got there.

CORNELIA They keep the public-house there. A very pleasant woman, and a daughter with goitre. (*To ANDREW*) That is the first time I have seen anyone with goitre.

ANDREW Very interesting.

CORNELIA They were nice people.

LUCAS It seems to have been a mutual admiration. He left a testimonial for you.

CORNELIA What is that?

LUCAS He said you had an honest face.

CORNELIA Yes, I have, haven't I? Only Father ever knew when I was lying.

LUCAS (*in the appropriate accents*) I was so sorry about your father.

CORNELIA (*in mild surprise*) Were you? No one else was. (*She is more interested in the cakes and the approaching tea than in what she is saying*) He had no discrimination, Father. And people found it expensive.

LUCAS I don't understand.

CORNELIA Well, he would get enthusiastic over a pair of deuces.

LUCAS Pair of deuces? Oh, poker. I see.

CORNELIA It wasn't always poker. It was just as likely to be a timber-mill where there wasn't any timber, or a scheme for growing maize in a bog. (*To PARKIN, who has handed her a cup of tea*) It's very weak, isn't it?

PARKIN It's China tea, miss.

LUCAS Perhaps you would like Indian, my dear. I should have thought of that.

CORNELIA I don't know anything about Indian or China. I just like the kind of tea you buy in silver packets in the store. Have you any of that kind?

PARKIN We have Indian tea in the kitchen, miss.

[*She looks doubtfully at the tea again, smells it, and decides abruptly that it cannot be done.*]

CORNELIA (*handing it back*) If it wouldn't be a trouble, I'll have some of your kind.

PARKIN Certainly, miss.

CORNELIA (*calling after him*) If you can see the bottom of the cup, it's no good.

[*Exit PARKIN.*]

ANDREW (*offering her a plate of cakes*) Have some scones to be going on with.

CORNELIA Yes, I will. Thank you. (*Examining him*) I don't remember what Lucas said your name was?

ANDREW Wylie. Andrew Wylie.

CORNELIA What a good name for a solicitor. What do you do, Lucas?

LUCAS I—I look after my interests.

CORNELIA Who doesn't? I mean, what do you do for a living?

LUCAS I'm afraid I——Didn't your father talk to you about me?

CORNELIA No. Is there a horrid secret about it? You are not in the white-slave business, are you? Or anything like that?

LUCAS Of course not. I merely meant that my income is inherited. I don't do anything for a living.

CORNELIA Oh. (*Pause*) What do you do all day?

LUCAS (*airily*) Oh, I am a very busy man; you'll see. (*As she continues to examine him over the scone she is eating*) A great many men don't work for a

living, you know. (*There is the faintest hint of testiness*)

CORNELIA Yes, I suppose so. But I have never actually seen one before.

ANDREW (*coming to LUCAS'S rescue*) I expect that you had a busy life at Falls of—
of—

CORNELIA Not Falls. Forks. Forks of Sagataw.

ANDREW Lucas tells me your father was part of the Mission there.

CORNELIA He was all of it. All there was.

ANDREW A church, was it?

CORNELIA Oh, no. He taught school. And married people at a pinch. It's mostly a
pinch in that country.

LUCAS How wonderful to live in a sort of morning of the world, and to bring to it
an age-old culture. Was it a big school?

CORNELIA Three Indian children, and Daft Davie from the Point. Davie has been
coming for twenty years, but no one likes to stop him.

LUCAS (*clutching after recovery*) Ah. Not much hope of an infant Shakespeare.
But at least your father would have more time for his books.

CORNELIA Oh, he burned all his books, shortly after he married Mother.

LUCAS *Burned* them?

CORNELIA He said they had all been all wrong.

LUCAS Oh. I—I don't think I met your mother. I expect you hardly remember
her?

CORNELIA Well, I was only five, but I do remember one thing about her. She had a
very quick——May I have another of those scones?

LUCAS (*while ANDREW is offering the plate*) Quick sense of humour?

CORNELIA Quick fist. I don't think she liked me very much. She always seemed to
believe that Father alone was responsible for my existence. Though I understand that
that's not possible.

[*Enter PARKIN with Indian tea.*]

LUCAS You poor child.

CORNELIA Barney says no one is poor, except the poor in spirit.

ANDREW (*genuine and kind*) In that case, Miss Taft, I think you are a millionaire.

CORNELIA (*looking at him for a moment; quietly*) Thank you. (*As a quid pro
quo*) I think you are probably quite good at soliciting.

ANDREW (*amending*) At being a solicitor. Didn't your father keep any of his books? He had a Shelley I used to covet.

CORNELIA Yes, we had two. A Bible and a Universal Home Handicrafts.

LUCAS That is what I call making the best of both worlds.

CORNELIA I liked the Home Handicrafts.

LUCAS But not the Bible?

CORNELIA (*to PARKIN, as he gives her tea*) That is good tea this time, thank you. (*To LUCAS*) Well, I hadn't much time for history.

[*She looks doubtfully at the little table which bears her cup. Coming to a decision, she picks up the cup and carries it up-stage a little to the round table, which is large enough to sit at. PARKIN automatically supplies a chair.*]

LUCAS History?

CORNELIA It's all about savage tribes in Asia, isn't it? (*As she establishes herself at the table*) I like to have my knees under a table when I eat. (*Going on with the matter of Holy Writ*) I liked some of the bloody bits. Where someone 'smote' someone, you know. But it's more important to know how to make a lavatory-seat than to know what Jael did to Sisera.

ANDREW Had you no story-books, when you were growing up?

CORNELIA Some of the fishing-boats that came in, in the season, had books. But they all seemed very silly. 'You will go, will you not, dear Tess?'! Does anyone talk like that?

LUCAS Tess? But that is a classic!

[*Exit PARKIN.*]

CORNELIA (*indifferently*) Is it? It was very daft, anyhow. (*Looking after PARKIN*) Is that all he does?

LUCAS Does?

CORNELIA Just hand round tea.

LUCAS Oh, no. Parkin runs my house, my servants, my cellar, my public and private lives, and would, I have no doubt, be equally efficient about my soul if I had any.

ANDREW (*offering her the plate again*) A whole-time job, Miss Taft. These are very little scones. (*This in case she minds her desire for more*)

CORNELIA (*taking one*) Yes. Why do they make them that size?

ANDREW Because we have forgotten how to be hungry. That medallion of dough, my dear Miss Taft, is merely an emblem. Part of a ritual that we go through at four o'clock daily. It has nothing to do with hunger.

[*He leaves the plate beside her.*]

LUCAS I'm afraid I am a very poor host, Cornelia. You might have liked an egg or something.

CORNELIA Will you be having something later on?

LUCAS Oh, yes. There is dinner.

CORNELIA Then I can wait. I hope I am not being a nuisance, coming like this.

LUCAS Cornelia, my dear, I am enchanted to have you. Enchanted. What do you want to do first, now that you have reached civili——reached England at last?

CORNELIA I want to buy something.

LUCAS Come, that cheers me a lot.

CORNELIA Cheers you? Why?

LUCAS It is something I recognise. Are you moved by a general urge to go shopping, or is there one special thing that you had planned to buy?

CORNELIA Oh, just one thing, of course. (*Rising, still eating, and going to the bag she has left on her original seat*) I'll show you. (*The bag is an enormous affair of embossed leather; fringed, ornamented, and practically unrecognisable as a bag at all. She picks it up, begins to open it, and then pauses as her attention goes to the bag itself*) Shall I have to carry this with me always now?

LUCAS (*unthinking*) What is it?

CORNELIA My handbag. I never used it before. It was a present.

ANDREW (*since LUCAS seems to have no words ready*) It—it must hold quite a lot.

CORNELIA Yes. It's a bit daft, really. I have nothing to put in it. (*Taking out a piece of paper torn from a magazine and giving it to LUCAS*) I want a pair of shoes like that.

LUCAS Very nice, but what is remarkable about shoes like that?

CORNELIA (*tapping the paper with a forefinger*) Heels. I want a pair of shoes with high heels. I could have got them from a mail-order place, of course, but in Forks they would have been——(*She pauses for a word*)

ANDREW Daft?

CORNELIA (*taking the scrap from LUCAS and showing it to ANDREW*) Yes, daft. So I promised myself that if ever I lived to walk on a street, I should buy shoes like that. (*She replaces the scrap of paper and sits down again, putting the bag on the table beside her, still taking a doubtful interest in the bag*)

LUCAS Tomorrow, Cornelia, bright and early, we shall go into London and buy you shoes with three-inch heels. Also a handbag so light and small that you won't mind being a perfect lady and carrying it.

CORNELIA (*putting out her hand to her bag in a half-gesture of kindness, but still eating*) I thought, perhaps, it was a bit large. Poor Adam. I expect he bought the biggest he could find.

LUCAS Was Adam the second mate?

CORNELIA Oh, no. He was a sailor I nursed once when he was ill. He had typhoid, and they put him ashore.

ANDREW Typhoid! But that is a very big nursing job, surely? A professional's job.

CORNELIA Oh, a little patience and a lot of carbolic; one-in-forty. (*Reminiscent*) We were very short of carbolic by the fifth week. (*Both men eye her in embarrassed respect, aware that they have been wrong in patronising her, even kindly*) I wish I could make scones like these. (*Examining the texture of the scones with professional interest*) Perhaps I never had the right oven. That oven at Forks was nearly the death of me.

LUCAS I expect Mrs Benson will be delighted to show off her ovens.

CORNELIA Who is Mrs Benson?

LUCAS My housekeeper.

[*Enter* PARKIN.]

PARKIN Lady Binnacle to see you, sir, and Lord Binnacle.

[*Enter the COUNTESS OF BINNACLE and her son. She is plump, downright, shrewd, kindly, vulgar, and still attractive; and in spite of her properly-shabby country clothes still carries about her a faint tang of the theatre. It is evident from her casual dress and manner that she is 'dropping in' from no great distance.*

[*Her son is not yet twenty-one, and looks younger. He has just left Cambridge to devote himself to more serious matters. A solemn youth*

with horn-rimmed glasses and a resentful manner.]

LADY B. (*talking as she comes*) I've come for those cuttings, Lucas. How are you, Andrew? Who would have thought in the old days that Lottie Limmer would ever be reduced to sticking little green things in the ground for lack of anything better to do! (*Seeing CORNELIA*) Oh.

LUCAS Lady Binnacle, this is my ward, Cornelia Taft.

LADY B. Your—*ward*, did you say?

LUCAS She has just arrived from Labrador.

LADY B. (*shaking hands with CORNELIA; to LUCAS*) But you were never in Labrador. [*Realising what she has implied*] I mean——

LUCAS (*a trifle coldly*) Cornelia is the daughter of my old tutor, Horace Taft. He left her to me. (*Smiling at a rather unresponsive CORNELIA, who is examining LORD BINNACLE and his mother with detached interest*) And this is Lord Binnacle, who doesn't think much of the world, but continues to think much about it.

LORD B. I know you loathe me, Lucas, but need you prejudice strangers against me? (*To CORNELIA, coldly*) How do you do.

LADY B. Never mind Sebastian. He is having a vegetarian phase, and it is even worse on the liver than that Mutual Confession Circle, or whatever it was, he belonged to in the spring.

[*Enter PARKIN with extra cups.*]

Give me some tea, Lucas, before we have to go and wrest vegetation out of your dank garden. The shock of finding you with a ward has unnerved me. Only the presence of Andrew makes it believable at all. If Andrew is here, it is bound to be all right. Parkin, you know that girl you sent me to be second parlour-maid?

PARKIN Yes, my lady. I hope she is proving suitable?

LADY B. There's a wiggle to her hips that doesn't go well with an apron.

PARKIN I am sorry to hear that, my lady. She comes of a most respectable family.

LADY B. She seems to have come a good way.

PARKIN I hope your ladyship will send her back at once to her mother if she is not entirely suitable.

LADY B. To her mother?

PARKIN The family have been in service for generations, and would be greatly pained to think that any member of it should be a discredit to her profession.

LADY B. Oh, well, I shall continue to hope for a little. (*Dryly*) Most of the outdoor staff are doing the same thing; but perhaps we are both wrong. Anyhow, mothers have no control over their children any more.

PARKIN In our class, my lady, respect for one's parents is still part of the family creed. (*To SEBASTIAN*) Would his lordship prefer a drink instead of tea?

SEBASTIAN You know quite well that I am a teetotaler.

PARKIN A little fruit-juice, perhaps?

SEBASTIAN I shall have tea, thank you.

[*Exit* PARKIN.]

LADY B. I never get the better of Parkin. Why should you, Lucas, who have nothing to recommend you but your father's money and some superficial charm, own a genius like Parkin, while the Binnacles of Compas, Binnacles who got in before the Conqueror and have been sitting pretty ever since, have had five butlers in four years?

LUCAS Perhaps Sebastian tried to be their social equal. I have heard that servants don't like it.

LADY B. (*refusing the plain cake that ANDREW is offering her*) No, I shall have some of those sweet ones.

LUCAS Aren't you dieting any more?

LADY B. Only on the first Monday in the month.

ANDREW What is that supposed to do for you?

LADY B. It reminds me what a good time I'm having for the other thirty days.

CORNELIA (*from the background*) What does a parlour-maid do?

LADY B. (*taken aback*) What?

CORNELIA I said: What does a parlour-maid do?

LADY B. (*dryly*) I've often wondered. They're *supposed* to dust.

CORNELIA If that girl doesn't stop doing things with her hips, can I be a parlour-maid for you?

LUCAS Cornelia!

LADY B. You? But——Are you writing a book, or something?

CORNELIA A book? No; why should I be writing a book?

LADY B. If anyone works at a job nowadays it is usually so that they can write about it afterwards.

CORNELIA Oh, no. I have to earn my living. And I am very good at housework. I had thoughts of being a stewardess, but if you wanted a parlour-maid that would be nice, because I could be near Lucas.

LUCAS But my dear good child, there is no question of your having to work. You are my guest, my ward, my dear Horace's daughter. You are going to live here and enjoy yourself for a change.

CORNELIA (*misunderstanding the force of 'for a change'*) Oh, of course I shall stay for a change, with pleasure. (*With her first smile to him*) Until I get used to heels, you know. But I couldn't sit and do nothing all day for always.

LADY B. If you think that by living with Lucas you will sit and do nothing all day, you have a shock coming. Lucas never stays in one place long enough to dent the cushions.

LUCAS In any case, there will never be any need for you to dust ornaments for a living. Especially the Binnacle ornaments. Are you *sure* that Chinese jar is entailed, Charlotte?

SEBASTIAN (*coming to life*) I think it most commendable in Miss Taft to want to work. If she wants to dust for a living, why shouldn't she? (*To CORNELIA*) Perhaps I could get you a job in the Party.

CORNELIA What party?

SEBASTIAN The People's Revolutionary Party.

CORNELIA What would I have to do?

SEBASTIAN Work in an office.

CORNELIA I don't know anything about offices, I'm afraid. (*Helpfully*) But I can clean guns.

SEBASTIAN (*with great distaste and quite at a loss*) Guns?

CORNELIA Don't you have guns in a revolution?

ANDREW Not in a British one, Miss Taft. In England a revolution proceeds by processions.

SEBASTIAN There is nothing in the term 'revolution' that necessarily demands lawlessness.

ANDREW (*soothing*) Oh, quite, quite. I am all for processions.

CORNELIA Couldn't I dust in your office?

SEBASTIAN Oh, a charwoman does that.

CORNELIA I suppose you don't pay people to walk in the processions? I should

like that. Do you have uniforms?

LUCAS My dear, the sight of a uniform makes them foam at the mouth.

LADY B. Don't you get mixed up with any of his processions. A lot of women with big bosoms and no use for them. Trapesing about with sheets on poles. A pole is no place for a sheet; even they ought to know that.

LUCAS Charlotte, don't be Rabelaisian. Eat your sticky cakes while I take Cornelia to her room. She has just arrived, you see. And then I shall have much pleasure in standing by while you steal things from my garden. Only you can't have that South American thing.

LADY B. (*unabashed*) Oh. That is what I came for.

LUCAS I suspected as much. It cost me nearly twenty pounds to get that rather stupid-looking object into my garden, and there it stays.

LADY B. I always said you were mercenary, Lucas.

LUCAS And I have never made any bones about calling you a cadger, most excellent countess. (*To CORNELIA*) Come, my dear, you must be tired after that long journey from Labrador.

LADY B. I expect she changed somewhere on the way. Don't take the first room he shows you, my dear. Ask to see another. That was the first thing my husband taught me on my honeymoon. And by far the most valuable.

CORNELIA Shall I see you again? Or shall I say good-bye?

LADY B. As long as you stay with Lucas, and as long as Lucas has a garden, you'll be seeing me. (*Indicating the cakes*) Didn't you want one of these?

CORNELIA Well, I did. But no one offered them.

LADY B. (*taking one from the plate and handing it to her*) Here. What a host you are, Lucas!

CORNELIA (*taking the cake matter-of-factly*) Thank you. (*Exchanging a friendly look with LADY B. and smiling suddenly*) Thank you. As old Barney at the store says: It's the buckshee bit that tastes the best.

[*She begins to eat the cake as she goes out with LUCAS.*]

LADY B. Now, Andrew, give me some more tea, and open up.

ANDREW Open up?

LADY B. Forget you are a solicitor, and let us have the truth.

ANDREW My dear lady, I always tell the truth according to my lights.

SEBASTIAN A solicitor's lights are stained-glass; simply chequered with alternative possibilities.

LADY B. When was Lucas in Labrador?

ANDREW Never, as far as I know.

LADY B. And since when has he taken to wildflowers? Lucas of all people, who never notices a woman unless she is lacquered like a workbox. It's a sign of middle-age, you know. He should see a doctor. What is he going to do with this girl?

ANDREW She is going to stay here for a little, I understand. She really is the daughter of old Horace Taft—whom you won't remember probably? He was quite a character at Oxford some twenty years ago.

LADY B. (*disclaiming any knowledge of Oxford*) Twenty years ago I was quite a character in the chorus.

ANDREW Not a bit of it. You were singing second lead in 'Melanie'.

LADY B. (*flattered*) How did you remember that?

ANDREW I used to go once a week.

LADY B. *You did!*

ANDREW I was hopelessly in love with Greta Fayne.

LADY B. (*dashed*) Oh. (*Laughing at her own discomfiture*) Who said solicitors weren't truthful!

ANDREW (*in mock reproach*) You were married, my dear lady.

LADY B. Since when has marriage been an obstacle to anything but matrimony? And what, may I ask, was the Oxford professor doing in the Polar regions?

ANDREW He married unfortunately, rather late in life.

LADY B. And couldn't Oxford take it? What was the matter? Did she crook her little finger when she drank?

ANDREW No, I gather that old Horace crooked his elbow. Anyhow, he disappeared from the academic world.

LADY B. And I'll bet he was glad to go!

SEBASTIAN You can't imagine the feelings of a scholar hounded out of his beautiful places by the sneers of the bourgeoisie!

LADY B. No, but I can imagine the joy of knowing that he was finished with all those swarms of callow faces for ever and ever. Even before I was seventeen I was sick of callow faces. Swarms and swarms of them; all the same. You know: little chins and big bouquets. I used to long for a bunch of violets and a large jaw. I

married Binnacle because he had a jaw like a steam shovel. (*With a thoughtful glance at her offspring*) But it was just an outcrop. Is the old boy dead, then?

ANDREW Yes. Quite lately, I gather. And Lucas is appointed the girl's guardian.

LADY B. Well, that will be a new role for Lucas.

SEBASTIAN I don't think she should be allowed to stay here.

LADY B. My dear, Lucas isn't as bad as all that.

SEBASTIAN (*coldly*) You know quite well that I didn't mean anything of that sort. Lucas is a gentleman.

ANDREW Coming from the People's Revolutionary Party I call that handsome.

SEBASTIAN But if she stays here she will be ruined.

LADY B. But you just said that Lucas was a gentle——

SEBASTIAN Mother! Can you imagine no more than one way of being ruined?

LADY B. Well——everything else washes off.

SEBASTIAN You know what Lucas's life is like. Useless, selfish, unproductive; interested in nothing unless it is amusing.

ANDREW *Or* beautiful. Give the devil his due.

SEBASTIAN (*pompously*) Nothing has beauty that is not also productive.

ANDREW Poor Florence.

SEBASTIAN Who is Florence?

ANDREW A town in Italy. Or are tourists reckoned as the product of pictures?

SEBASTIAN You are merely by-passing the real subject, which is the projected ruin of a fine, unspoiled girl.

LADY B. (*surveying her offspring*) Darling, I can't think where you get your pomp. Your dear father needed to get into his coronation clothes before he remembered there was such a thing. You weren't like that before you went to Cambridge. I only hope it is something that will pass off.

SEBASTIAN Is it pompous to care what happens to the people about one? To be sickened by the misery and the waste and the inequality of things? I know it is too late to expect you to care now, but was there never a time when you ached for the unhappiness of your fellow-man? (*The excellence of this speech is entirely discounted by the assumption of superiority on the speaker's part*)

LADY B. I was always too busy keeping an eye on my fellow-woman. And now I am too busy keeping an eye on your tenants.

SEBASTIAN Haven't I a competent agent to look after the tenants?

LADY B. Agents may be your fellow-men, but they are just human nature to me.

ANDREW I think you're ungrateful, Sebastian. There is a whisper in the countryside, you know, that your mother is the best estate-agent in five counties. Break down and confess that you are glad to have her mending the fences while you go tub-thumping. Or should I say crusading?

SEBASTIAN If Mother chooses to play with the estate, that is her affair. My point is that her leisure could be put to nobler uses. There are women in Whitechapel so poor that they cannot even buy soap.

LADY B. I really cannot run round Whitechapel on Monday mornings with bars of soap.

SEBASTIAN Of course not! Must you be so flippanant——

ANDREW I take it that the funds of your Party are largely supplied by the Binnacle estate, and therefore it seems to me that your mother is a direct contributor to——

LADY B. Don't be hard on him, Andrew. He inherited all that from me, you know.

SEBASTIAN From you!

LADY B. It's the theatre coming out in him. It's much more dramatic to be the Deputy Leader of a Party——

SEBASTIAN Assistant Deputy Leader.

LADY B. Assistant Deputy Leader of a Party, than to run an estate. Especially if the Party is for abolishing something. I forget exactly what it is they're going to abolish? The Empire, is it?

SEBASTIAN The Empire, incidentally. We are going to put an end to the class system, and all its capitalistic iniquities.

ANDREW (*lazily*) You'll have to bring your membership up a little, won't you?

SEBASTIAN You think we can't do it? You wait and see. You are going to get the surprise of your life. (*A la lanterne! in his voice*) Heads are going to roll.

ANDREW When?

SEBASTIAN At the next election. And you won't smile so contemptuously when we

ANDREW It's a happy smile, not a contemptuous one.

SEBASTIAN What are you happy about?

ANDREW Your mention of an election. It seems that the lamp-posts of England are still to be left to lovers and dogs.

SEBASTIAN We are not setting up a guillotine in Trafalgar Square, if that is what you mean.

LADY B. I should hope not. The traffic is congested enough already. As for this girl from the North Pole, Sebastian, I won't have you seducing her.

SEBASTIAN Seducing!

LADY B. Kitchen-tables and chairs may be very exciting to you, but I expect she is a little tired of them. If Lucas is going to give her a good time, don't you go meddling with her conscience. A few pairs of stockings at a guinea the pair will do more for her than marching about with sheets on poles.

SEBASTIAN Six months with Lucas, and her standards will be hopelessly ruined.

ANDREW I think you under-estimate Miss Taft. Have you considered what she might do to Lucas?

LADY B. No one has ever been able to do anything to Lucas. You know that as well as I do.

[*Enter* LUCAS.]

Well, did she like her room?

LUCAS She was very polite about it. I don't think she is very impressionable.

LADY B. That will be a nice change for you. Most of your women friends are giving off impressions at the pitch of their voices twenty-two hours out of the twenty-four.

LUCAS Unless you want more cake, Charlotte, I am ready to resist your wiles in the garden. Are you coming, Andrew?

ANDREW Whether it is to be blackmail or robbery with menaces, I hardly think a solicitor should be a witness. I shall see what Clark has managed to do with that axle.

LUCAS You, Sebastian?

SEBASTIAN No. Gardens make me sick. Hundreds of thousands of people have not enough to eat, and you spend money on gardens!

LADY B. (*going*) The gardeners like it.

[LADY B., LUCAS, *and* ANDREW *go out as* PARKIN *comes in.*]

PARKIN Had you finished tea, my lord?

SEBASTIAN Yes, but don't clear away just yet. Ask Miss Taft if she will speak to me for a moment.

PARKIN (*allowing the faintest hint of surprise to seep through his tone*) Miss Taft? Yes, my lord.

[*Exit* PARKIN.]

[SEBASTIAN *turns to the wireless and flips it on. Dance music fills the room and ebbs to a close. A voice, grotesquely caressing, says: 'You have just been listening to a performance of the foxtrot entitled: "Little dogs laugh but big dogs grin". We shall now give you a rendering of that popular melody: "Dearie, come in out of the wet".'*

SEBASTIAN *switches off. Turns the disc in search of better fare. A precise, high-pitched woman's voice says: 'Two table-spoonfuls of salad oil.' A man in an excited public-school voice is shouting: 'Jones has the ball. Jones has the ball. No, he hasn't, it's Robinson. Now he's passed it to Smith. No, Smith has dropped it. No, it isn't Smith, but it's very like him.'*

[SEBASTIAN *switches off in disgust.*

[*Enter* CORNELIA.]

CORNELIA Did you want to speak to me?

SEBASTIAN (*unexpectedly schoolboyish*) Yes, I did rather.

CORNELIA Well, don't make it too long, because I've run my bath.

SEBASTIAN (*abruptly losing any schoolboyishness*) I suppose you could run another.

CORNELIA I suppose so. It never occurred to me. I've never had a bath on tap before.

SEBASTIAN No taps? How did the water run, then?

CORNELIA It didn't. We pumped it up and heated it on the stove.

SEBASTIAN (*condescending*) I expect all this is a little bewildering for you.

CORNELIA All what?

SEBASTIAN Civilisation; luxury.

CORNELIA It's strange, of course—but nice, so far. (*Seeing the open cabinet*) Why, it's a wireless set! What a beautiful one. (*She begins to fiddle with it*)

SEBASTIAN You're acquainted with wireless, then.

CORNELIA (*only half-listening*) Of course; isn't everyone? The man who taught me to fly gave me a beautiful television set.

SEBASTIAN Fly? Can you *fly*?

CORNELIA Well, I can do everything but take off and land.

SEBASTIAN But how? I thought you——

CORNELIA One of those Polar fliers taught me. He fell into our cabbage-patch. When the machine was mended it was too late to go on. For the record, you know. You have to be very nippy about the Pole nowadays; practically everyone goes there. So he just stayed around a bit.

SEBASTIAN (*feeling that his discovery is not so exclusively his as he had imagined*) I see. Yes. Well, I wanted to say——

CORNELIA Can you fly?

SEBASTIAN No. I have never had time to take it up. (*Determined to get to the point*) I wanted to offer you a job.

CORNELIA Oh. What kind of job?

SEBASTIAN In the Party. I can find you something.

CORNELIA But I should have to know what kind of work it would be.

SEBASTIAN The work would be social service. You would like to alleviate the misery of the working-classes, wouldn't you?

CORNELIA Are they miserable?

SEBASTIAN (*firmly*) Very.

CORNELIA As miserable as you?

SEBASTIAN I beg your pardon!

CORNELIA I've never met a really miserable person before, you know. All the people I've known were very happy. Except a dog I had that lost its tail. Why are the working-classes like you?

SEBASTIAN Like me?

CORNELIA Miserable.

SEBASTIAN (*deciding to ignore the lesser issue*) Because the great majority live below subsistence-level. The wealth of this enormously wealthy country is in the hands of a few thousand people, and the rest live, year in year out, on the borders of want. It is that state of things that we must put an end to.

CORNELIA Are you not rich, then?

SEBASTIAN I am quite well off. But the estate runs away with a lot of money.

CORNELIA Then why don't you sell it, and share the money?

SEBASTIAN I can't. It's entailed.

CORNELIA I don't know what that is, but I'm sure there must be a way round it. As Barney says: There's a way round everything, even a mountain.

SEBASTIAN You don't understand. And of course you can't be expected to, since you are politically uneducated. Selling one individual estate would achieve nothing. What we are working for is the triumph of an idea; a revolution. The sale of one estate would merely be—nibbling.

CORNELIA Perhaps. But it would be a very personal and satisfying nibble, I should have thought. (*Struck by a sudden thought*) Do the women who work for you have to wear low heels?

SEBASTIAN Heels? I never examine women's heels.

CORNELIA If it's all the same, you see, I want a job where I can wear high heels.

SEBASTIAN I'm afraid your mind is more frivolous than I had anticipated. I cannot see that the wearing——

CORNELIA But we have plenty of time to talk about it later, haven't we? If you live near here. I am going to stay with Lucas for a little.

SEBASTIAN But if you stay with Lucas you will be——(*'ruined' he is going to say, but stops himself*) You may become infected with Lucas's hedonistic views.

CORNELIA With what?

SEBASTIAN Lucas lives for nothing but pleasure. He is a parasite.

CORNELIA (*coldly*) If you want to call Lucas a louse you should do it to his face, and not behind his back. I think I shall go and have my bath now.

SEBASTIAN No, no. You misunderstand me. You misunderstand entirely.

CORNELIA (*challenging*) Isn't a parasite a polite name for a louse?

SEBASTIAN No! Yes; yes, it is, of course. But that wasn't what I meant. A louse is a parasite, but a parasite is not necessarily a louse. Oh, dear.

CORNELIA (*unrelenting*) No, I suppose there are other varieties of bugs.

SEBASTIAN No, no. That is not it at all. There are *charming* parasites. Charming. Ivy, for instance. You know ivy?

CORNELIA I've heard of it.

SEBASTIAN You've never seen ivy!

CORNELIA (*dangerously*) Does it matter?

SEBASTIAN No, no. A very pretty green plant. It grows round trees and sucks the

life out of them. That is Lucas. He produces nothing to the common good, and exists by battenning on society.

CORNELIA But he is very rich—like you. You mean——Doesn't he pay the people who work for him?

SEBASTIAN Of course he does. He probably pays Parkin a fortune. (*This remark is full of subconscious resentment that a servant should be paid so much*) But why should any man wait on another?

CORNELIA Parkin doesn't have to be a butler if he doesn't want to. There's nothing to hinder him being an engineer, or a professor, or a storekeeper like Barney.

SEBASTIAN As long as people like Lucas pay money to be waited on, people will be found to wait on them.

CORNELIA Well? Lucas is happy, and Parkin is happy. Why shouldn't you be?

SEBASTIAN My dear good creature, twenty families could be kept on the money that Lucas spends on the upkeep of this house.

CORNELIA Perhaps it is entailed.

SEBASTIAN (*shortly*) No, it isn't.

CORNELIA And even if he sold it all, it would only be a nibble, wouldn't it?

SEBASTIAN I do not suggest that he should sell it. I suggest that he should accept responsibility for his fellow-man.

CORNELIA Well, he accepted me.

SEBASTIAN Oh, that.

CORNELIA It was very nice of him. And I really cannot consider leaving him just because you and the working-classes are miserable. I like Lucas.

SEBASTIAN (*bitterly*) Everyone likes Lucas. Parasites—I mean, idlers—are always popular if they are rich enough. (*Despairing of progress in the present atmosphere*) Perhaps if you came to our Headquarters one day, I could give you lunch, and explain our objects.

CORNELIA I expect I could do that.

SEBASTIAN I suppose you are a meat-eater.

CORNELIA When I can get it.

SEBASTIAN I must lend you a book about that. Now I shall join my mother in the garden. You won't absorb too many of Lucas's points-of-view before I see you again, I hope.

[Enter PARKIN, who holds the door open for SEBASTIAN as he goes out.

[CORNELIA has been about to follow SEBASTIAN, but when she sees PARKIN she changes her mind.]

PARKIN (as she watches him silently while he clears) I hope you found everything as you would like it, miss?

CORNELIA Everything is very nice, thank you. Parkin, is Lord Binnacle *all right*?

PARKIN All right, miss?

CORNELIA Right in the head.

PARKIN He has always been considered so, miss.

CORNELIA He thinks no one has any right to be rich.

PARKIN Quite a number of rich people are of that opinion, I believe.

CORNELIA Oh. (She is more interested now in PARKIN than in SEBASTIAN) It's a beautiful house, isn't it?

PARKIN The most beautiful house of its size in England, miss.

CORNELIA Yes?

PARKIN It has been illustrated in detail in all the best magazines and architectural journals.

CORNELIA Photographed? Has my bedroom been *in the papers*?

PARKIN That room, I think, five times. Not counting a publication called *Daisy's Weekly*.

CORNELIA Why don't you count that?

PARKIN It *doesn't* count, miss.

CORNELIA Won't Barney be surprised! Do you think I could get a photograph for Barney?

PARKIN I think that a photograph could be obtained. I shall make inquiries for you.

CORNELIA Oh, thank you. (Still considering him and the oddness of his occupation) Do you wash up, too?

PARKIN (with admirable poise) No, miss, that is not part of my duty.

CORNELIA (having considered him further) Have you a weak heart, Parkin?

PARKIN No, miss, my circulation is excellent.

CORNELIA Oh. (After a pause) Perhaps you have something else wrong with you that doesn't show?

PARKIN As far as I am aware, miss, I am a perfectly normal specimen of healthy manhood.

CORNELIA Don't be cross. I was only wondering how you came to this.

PARKIN *Came* to? To what, miss?

CORNELIA Tea-cups.

PARKIN (*after a pause to pull himself together*) I worked up to them, miss.

CORNELIA Worked up! From what?

PARKIN Boots. The initiation is long and strict.

CORNELIA You mean you chose, all the time, to—to be this? (*As PARKIN bows; seeking a solution*) Perhaps you tame lions in your spare time?

PARKIN No, miss, I am not fond of animals.

CORNELIA Haven't you a—a what-do-you-call it? A hobby? What do you do in your spare time?

PARKIN I shoot clay pigeons.

CORNELIA What are they?

PARKIN Targets that are shot into the air for one to aim at.

CORNELIA (*with a sudden glow of interest*) I bet I could beat you. Don't you go shooting rabbits in the woods round here?

PARKIN No, miss. It is against my principles to kill things.

CORNELIA What do you do with your fleas? Just shake hard and hope that someone else gets them?

PARKIN (*repressive*) I have not so far encountered a flea, miss.

CORNELIA (*judicially*) You must be very slow. I think your shooting at clay things sounds much better than darts. That is what George taught me at the public-house where we had lunch. When do you have time off?

PARKIN I choose my own time to conform with Mr Bilke's entertaining.

CORNELIA Is that what you call choosing your own time? Well, the first day you are free, I'll take you on. Only you must give me time to get used to the strange gun.

PARKIN Yes, miss. (*Tentatively*) Of course, Mr Bilke may not care for it.

CORNELIA (*incapable of understanding his real meaning*) Lucas needn't come if he doesn't like it. Where is it, the shooting-place?

PARKIN There is a club in the village.

CORNELIA (*beginning to go*) Well, that will be something to look forward to.

(Pausing) Are you a good shot?

PARKIN Fairly good, miss.

CORNELIA *(pleased)* That means very. *(With quite unconscious pathos)* It's a long time, now I come to think of it, since I looked forward to anything.

PARKIN *(melted)* I hope you liked the little escritoire? The little writing-desk in your room?

CORNELIA Yes, it's very pretty. I don't write much, you know. But it is nice to look at.

PARKIN That is what I thought.

CORNELIA Did you put it there?

PARKIN *(feeling that the personal is getting the upper hand)* I did suggest its transference to Mr Bilke.

CORNELIA It was a good suggestion. Thank you. Now I shall go and run the water again. It is great fun running water.

[She goes out.]

[For a long moment PARKIN stays still, with his eyes on the door.]

[He resumes his work slowly, and slowly comes to a halt again, his eyes on the door.]

CURTAIN

ACT II

The Scene is the same as before. The time is between tea and dinner exactly a fortnight later.

ANDREW *is alone, reading a newspaper. By his side a tea-tray. His clothes are town ones, and he has an air of having just arrived.*

PARKIN *comes in as the curtain goes up.*

PARKIN Shall I clear, sir?

ANDREW Yes, thank you, Parkin. It was very long-suffering of you to give me tea so late. Perhaps you are like me, and feel that you have been cheated if you don't have tea.

PARKIN I do like my cup of tea, sir.

ANDREW They are very late, aren't they?

PARKIN I think I heard the car go round to the back some time ago, sir. They are probably upstairs. They didn't go until after luncheon. It was to be only one round, it being Miss Taft's first game.

ANDREW Does Miss Taft appear to be settling down happily?

PARKIN (*judicially*) I don't think 'settling down' is the appropriate word, sir. She seems, however, to be quite happy.

ANDREW (*unable to resist it*) Is she what you had pictured, Parkin?

PARKIN Well—I had expected her to be more—clinging, if you know what I mean, sir.

ANDREW The Waif from the West.

PARKIN Something like that, sir. (*Going out with the tray*) Blake says you've forgotten your black ties again, sir. He has taken the liberty of supplying you with some of Mr Bilke's.

[*Exit* PARKIN.]

[*There is a pause, and then the door opens and CORNELIA comes in with the air of one coming into an empty room. She is hatless, and wearing smart, rough, golfing things, and a pair of very high-heeled black satin pumps.*

[*She teeters in on her high heels with an air of practising.*]

CORNELIA (*seeing ANDREW as he rises*) Oh, Andrew. You've come. I'm very glad. You didn't come last Saturday.

ANDREW No. I had to go to the funeral of one of my clients. I went with great reluctance.

CORNELIA Why? Wasn't the will all right?

ANDREW I wanted so much to come here instead.

CORNELIA Sit down. I'm not going to sit yet. All this bobbing up and down of men does complicate life. (*Indicating her shoes*) Do you like them?

ANDREW Very pretty. (*Tentatively*) They don't go very well with that suit, do they?

CORNELIA No. I know. I'm just practising while Lucas is out of the way. (*With a shade of regret*) I suppose you've had tea?

ANDREW Yes, thank you. Haven't you?

CORNELIA Yes, we had it at—at the—the place on the course, you know.

ANDREW The club-house.

CORNELIA Yes. I could do with another. But I suppose I had better wait for dinner.

ANDREW What have you done with Lucas?

CORNELIA He is having a bath. (*She is walking up and down*)

ANDREW (*arrested by a faint hint of scorn in her voice, though all her attention is on her feet*) Aren't you having one?

CORNELIA No. I had one this morning. It's a great waste to have more than one a day.

ANDREW Waste? Of soap?

CORNELIA Soap, and time, and energy. Have you ever seen my bathroom?

ANDREW I suppose I must have, some time or other.

CORNELIA All pink marble and silver.

ANDREW And don't you like that?

CORNELIA Oh, it's *beautiful*. But quite daft.

ANDREW Daft?

CORNELIA There's not much one can do in a bathroom. I shall have to go, presently, though, and get into the frock I eat in. Lucas won't ask me if I have bathed, but he could hardly fail to notice that I was eating in the wrong clothes. (*Her mind going back to the occasion her present clothes were worn for*) Do you

play this game, Andrew?

ANDREW Golf? Oh, I have played. But never seriously. Did you enjoy your first game, by the way?

CORNELIA (*unenthusiastically*) Oh, yes. I don't think Lucas enjoyed himself very much.

ANDREW I shouldn't worry over that. It is never very exciting for an experienced player to go round with a beginner. Wait until you are good enough to beat him. How much did he win by?

CORNELIA I won. (*Her tone is without enthusiasm or surprise*)

ANDREW You! Cornelia, my dear, you couldn't.

CORNELIA (*genuinely surprised*) Why not? It's just hitting a ball with a kind of stick, straight on all the time. And popping it into holes now and then.

ANDREW But he must have given you an enormous number of strokes.

CORNELIA (*at a loss*) Give me? He didn't give me anything. We each had a ball, and we each hit our own ball into all the holes, and he hit his oftener than I hit mine. That is winning, isn't it? It was quite good fun the first two or three times, but it seemed an odd way to spend a whole afternoon. There was a cow looking at us over a hedge, and I couldn't help wondering if she was laughing at us.

ANDREW Did you tell Lucas that?

CORNELIA No. Lucas seemed to be very absent-minded.

ANDREW I have no doubt. You seem to be making an impression in your short time. I hear you have nearly killed Lord Binnacle.

CORNELIA Oh, no. I just took him for a walk.

ANDREW Twenty miles, I understand.

CORNELIA Nonsense. It wasn't more than sixteen. And most of it on his own estate. He wasn't killed at all. But he isn't a vegetarian any more.

ANDREW No?

CORNELIA I had bacon and eggs for tea at that farm. And so had he. He had all they had in the house. Mrs Risley—that's the farmer's wife, a very nice woman; they have eleven children, six at the farm, two in the churchyard, and three in Canada—Mrs Risley said it did her heart good to watch him. Andrew, can I ask your opinion without paying six-and-eightpence?

ANDREW My wisdom is at your service.

CORNELIA Do you approve of marriage, as an institution?

ANDREW I do.

CORNELIA It's Mr Wylie the solicitor I'm asking. I know you were very happy with your wife, and that you have nice children. Lucas told me. But you must have seen a lot of marriages in your line of business. And you still think it a good thing?

ANDREW I do. Are you studying it as a phenomenon, or as a prospective investment?

CORNELIA I've never known married people, you see. Together, I mean. Barney was married several times, of course, but none of his wives was in Forks of Sagataw. There was one in Hong Kong, and one in Galway, and one had a boarding-house in Sydney. And I think there was one in Patagonia.

ANDREW Dear me. Did he divorce them, or was it the other way about?

CORNELIA I think he just moved on.

ANDREW Oh. I approve of marriage as an institution, but not as a habit. (*Watching her and picking his way*) I suggest in my capacity as advisor that you take a year or two to observe the married state, and make up your own mind about it. Have you enjoyed your first fortnight in England?

CORNELIA Oh, *very* much.

ANDREW What have you enjoyed most?

CORNELIA The lunch at your club.

ANDREW (*surprised, and somehow not too pleased*) What! A courtier already?

CORNELIA I loved those burning pancakes.

ANDREW (*laughing, relieved that she is still a child and honest*) Oh, Cornelia, my dear, you really are a darling.

CORNELIA You know, I think Lucas was a little jealous when I told him about them.

ANDREW But Lucas doesn't eat *crêpes suzette*.

CORNELIA I mean, because he hadn't thought about them first.

ANDREW Did you have lunch with Lord Binnacle?

CORNELIA (*shortly*) Yes. Vegetables.

ANDREW That was before the sixteen-mile walk, I take it.

CORNELIA Yes.

ANDREW And has he gained your adherence to the People's Revolutionary Party?

CORNELIA I don't think I should be any good at the kind of job he wants me to do. He's very fond of *fashionless* people, isn't he!

ANDREW Yes. It's a very prevalent form of mental perversity. The Cult of the Undeserving. What do you think you would like to do?

CORNELIA I suppose there is no profession that includes clay-pigeon shooting? I'm very good at that.

ANDREW I've not heard of one. Unless you became an act in a circus.

CORNELIA I don't think I should like that. I saw a circus once in television. The animals had frills round them. Well, I think I must go and change my clothes. Sebastian and his mother are coming to dinner.

ANDREW Oh. Not Lady Binnacle and her son, I observe. Or am I drawing deductions?

CORNELIA I don't know what you call it. I call it havoring. And I know what Barney would call it.

[*Enter* PARKIN *with evening paper.*]

Has the parcel post come, Parkin?

PARKIN Not yet, miss. It will be here any minute now.

CORNELIA (*remembering, and fishing in her jacket pocket*) Oh; there is the tuppence you won off me.

PARKIN (*accepting it, gravely*) Thank you, miss.

[*Exit* CORNELIA.]

PARKIN (*to* ANDREW) The evening paper, sir.

ANDREW Have you started a 'book' on the side, Parkin?

PARKIN No, sir. It was merely a frivolous transaction to enliven a game of skill.

ANDREW (*his attention arrested*) A game of skill between you and Miss Taft?

PARKIN Yes, sir.

ANDREW And—you won?

PARKIN I did, sir.

ANDREW Congratulations, Parkin! I don't know what the game was, but congratulations.

PARKIN It was not exactly a game, sir, it was——

[*Enter* LUCAS, *bathed and changed.*]

ANDREW How are you, Lucas? Sorry I couldn't get down earlier. Did you enjoy your golf?

LUCAS (*coming back from the window to which he has gone*) Come here. (*Taking ANDREW by the arm and leading him to the window*) Do you see that?

ANDREW A bonfire? It's early for garden rubbish, isn't it?

LUCAS That, my dear Andrew, is not garden rubbish. It is my golf clubs.

ANDREW Lucas, no! Not all those infallible instruments?

LUCAS Every last one of them.

ANDREW The Rankin putter? And the Heron cleek? And the driver that never failed.

LUCAS Yes, and the Mucklepiece brassie, and all the other pretentious pieces of pseudo-scientific nonsense. Where is the sherry?

ANDREW I take it that your afternoon was not a success.

LUCAS (*helping himself to sherry*) A typical piece of legal understatement.

ANDREW What went wrong?

LUCAS She *won*. Even yet I can't believe it.

ANDREW On level terms?

LUCAS Stroke for stroke. A girl who never saw a golf-course till this afternoon. She took two clubs and slammed her way round eighteen holes without looking twice at anything. When I think of the twenty years I have been addressing the ball, and studying my stance, and paying money to professionals for advice, I blush all down my spine.

ANDREW But she must be a genius.

LUCAS *She* doesn't think so. She thinks anyone who can't play a game like that must be a blind cripple; and anyone who does is a moron.

ANDREW Did she say so?

LUCAS Not in these words. But when two caddies and her partner condoled with her on failing by a millimetre to sink a putt, she said: 'Does it matter?'

ANDREW Not much wonder that you are shattered.

LUCAS I've been treated this afternoon, Andrew, to a God's-eye view of all ball games. I doubt whether I shall ever play one unselfconsciously again. (*Gulping sherry, and thinking it over*) Anyhow, why should hitting a ball be deplorable, and shooting at clay pigeons highly commendable?

ANDREW Oh, I see that, you know. A gun is a weapon, and therefore has dignity.

Golf, after all, is merely another form of tiddleywinks. How do you know she shoots?

LUCAS She is the belle of the village shooting-club. She goes there with Parkin.

ANDREW (*in double surprise*) Parkin! Does Parkin shoot?

LUCAS So it appears. But only inanimate objects.

ANDREW (*appreciating the fact that this is what PARKIN has proved superior at*) So. A great man, Parkin.

LUCAS (*having had another gulp of sherry and beginning to feel better*) But I must say she looked very charming this afternoon.

ANDREW That must have been a great comfort to you.

LUCAS (*without heat*) Don't be superior, Andrew. I think Milanelle has made a very good job of her.

ANDREW You talk as if she were a piece of coachwork.

LUCAS That golfing suit was the smartest thing on the course. As Milanelle himself is always pointing out, he 'makes clo's thatt *ladies* can wear'. Coming from the son of a Genoese rag-and-bone merchant, I always think that is rather nice. Excellent taste Milanelle has. He was greatly taken with her, by the way. 'Vairy indeeveedual', he said she was.

ANDREW (*coldly*) How perspicacious of him. I expect she is the first woman who ever entered his dove-grey velvet portals without falling on his neck. She seems to be providing you with the hoped-for distraction.

LUCAS Distraction in both senses.

ANDREW Oh?

LUCAS There was Barney, for instance. I objected to living with Barney.

ANDREW Oh, that is just nostalgia, the ever-present Barney.

LUCAS It wasn't the fellow's presence I objected to, but his infallibility. I have forbidden any further mention of him.

ANDREW Poor Cornelia.

LUCAS And there is her disconcerting habit of saying what she thinks.

ANDREW I thought a fresh mind was what you longed for.

LUCAS Yes. I also admire tact. A quality she has never developed.

ANDREW (*considering*) Tact is a kind of dishonesty.

LUCAS Then God give me dishonest women!

ANDREW He has, so far.

LUCAS The hall-mark of civilisation is tact. It is what distinguishes the child from the adult. (*Another mouthful of sherry*) After some close contact with the child-mind I feel incredibly aged.

ANDREW You look a great deal younger than you did a fortnight ago.

LUCAS That is just the kind of remark that makes friends so abominable. A pill you don't taste until after the swallow. Was I so palsied a fortnight ago?

ANDREW No, but there was a mummy quality——

LUCAS Mummy!

ANDREW A suggestion of preservation in a sheltered enclosure, of protection from jolts, of wrappings never exposed to a rough wind——

LUCAS Are you calling Cornelia a rough wind?

ANDREW A brisk little breeze, shall we say? Do you a world of good.

LUCAS Another of those clichés beloved by one's friends. You seem to have changed your tune. It was you who warned me against her.

ANDREW You don't deceive me in the least, you know. You are having the time of your life.

LUCAS (*unbending*) And you are going to be late for dinner.

ANDREW Yes, I suppose it is time I changed. The Binnacles are coming, I hear. Anyone else?

LUCAS No. (*Preparing to accompany him*) Come in for a moment on your way up and see the piece I bought from Southern.

[*As they go out* PARKIN *appears carrying a slender oblong parcel; a box made of thin wood.*]

PARKIN Miss Taff?

LUCAS She is still dressing, I expect. Leave it here if you are busy, and I shall see that she gets it.

[*They go out, and* PARKIN, *having inspected the parcel at leisure, leaves it on the table and begins to tidy up the newspapers.*]

[*Enter* CORNELIA *in a dressing-gown, at a rush.*]

CORNELIA I saw the postman come. Where is the——(*Seeing the parcel*) Oh, yes, that is it. (*Having looked at the label*) Yes. (*Giving it to him*) It is for you. A

present.

PARKIN For me? Oh, thank you, miss. Thank you very much indeed. (*He puts it aside*)

CORNELIA Aren't you going to open it?

PARKIN Perhaps it would be better if I opened it later.

CORNELIA No, no; go on. Open it. (*As he prises open the thin wooden lid with his knife*) You see, you introduced me to clay pigeons, which are great fun. So I thought that I ought to do something for you. There were lots of things I might have shown you, like sailing a boat, but they wouldn't have been any use for an afternoon off in the middle of England. But Sebastian has a very good little river, only a mile away. So I got you that.

PARKIN (*gazing unbelieving at the contents*) A fishing-rod! (*It is a slender trout rod in three parts*)

CORNELIA Yes. Isn't it a beauty?

PARKIN But—but I don't fish, miss.

CORNELIA No, but you will.

PARKIN (*with an effort at firmness*) It is very kind of you, miss; very kind indeed, but I don't think it is much in my line. I—I should feel very foolish dangling a worm on the end of a line.

CORNELIA It isn't a worm, it's a fly. And you'll feel like God when you get a three-ounce fish on the end of it.

PARKIN I'm afraid I should merely feel embarrassed by the unequal nature of the struggle.

CORNELIA You won't be embarrassed when you land a twelve-pound salmon.

PARKIN (*hastily*) I should never dream of such a thing.

CORNELIA By the time you have caught a few tiddlers, you'll be dreaming of landing a whale. You wait and see. We can't go fishing on Monday afternoon, because I have to go to London to be fitted and let a man look at my teeth. But we can go on Tuesday afternoon.

PARKIN I shall be happy to lend you the rod, miss, but I, of course, may not be free to go.

CORNELIA Of course you'll be free. (*Regretful*) The evening would be a better time, but I suppose by that time of day you are worrying about your dishes.

PARKIN (*smoothly; assenting*) There is dinner to see to.

CORNELIA You know, Roderick, I——

PARKIN Please. You promised, miss.

CORNELIA All right. I'm sorry. You know, Parkin——Though I really don't see why I can't call you by your—all right, all right! You know, Parkin, I can't imagine why someone like you bothers his head about *dishes*.

PARKIN What you term 'dishes', miss, is merely a facet. What I 'bother my head' about is the smooth running of one of the most beautiful houses in England.

CORNELIA But a woman could do it! Ever since the beginning of time it has been a woman's job to run a house.

PARKIN And ever since the beginning of civilisation it has been a man's privilege to show her how. (*The operative word is 'civilisation'*) Even in the matter of cooking, miss. As long as it was a case of stew for a cave-dweller, a woman stirred it; when it became sauce for a king, a man did.

CORNELIA (*amiably*) You are very conceited about it.

PARKIN It is always pleasant to beat someone at their own game.

CORNELIA But not to crow.

PARKIN (*with a faint smile*) Was I crowing, miss? I hope not. I was merely trying to convey to you why running an establishment is a satisfying occupation.

CORNELIA Well, if it is running things you like, you could run a country just as easily; like Joseph. Or you could run Sebastian's revolution for him. It certainly needs some running. You should see the kind of people he has hanging around. You could be famous, if you wanted to, Parkin. As famous as Nelson or—or Moody and Sankey.

PARKIN I would rather be happy than famous, miss.

CORNELIA You could be both.

PARKIN It is a very rare combination, I have noticed. Don't you think, miss, that it is time you——

CORNELIA (*genuinely enquiring*) Has there ever been anyone who did anything notable while he was a butler?

PARKIN One or two, I understand, have murdered their employers.

CORNELIA (*amused*) I expect you would do even that well. But there is no career in it, is there.

PARKIN (*good-humoured*) I think it is a little late to make me over, miss. I know of only two careers open to men of no qualifications. Politics and salvation. And I

have talent for neither.

CORNELIA Salvation?

PARKIN Evangelical preaching, miss.

CORNELIA Come and be saved and put sixpence in the box?

PARKIN (*surprised*) Yes. How did you know?

CORNELIA Oh, we had one of that kind. He ate all our food and charged it to the Lord. I don't think you would make a preacher, Parkin.

PARKIN No, miss. In that we are agreed.

CORNELIA And the only politician I know is Sebastian. Do they all talk nonsense?

PARKIN If necessary.

CORNELIA Oh, it isn't necessity with Sebastian; it's natural. What does one have to do to be a success in politics?

PARKIN Practically everything. It is a wide subject, miss. And I am afraid you are going to be late for dinner if you devote more time to speculation. The guests will be here any moment. (*His trained sense hearing a step outside*) I think that must be they now. (*He goes to the door*)

CORNELIA No. (*She has put the rod together and is trying its suppleness*) They come in a car. They always go everywhere in a car. (*PARKIN has gone*) In a few more generations they will have forgotten how to use their feet at all. Barney says——

(*She stops guiltily, looks round, and seeing that she is alone repeats it in good loud deliberate tones just for the pleasure of saying the forbidden words*)

Barney says that is how people lost their tails. When the Golden Age came to an end they forgot how to wag them. (*With a caress in her voice for the first time*) Dear Barney.

[SEBASTIAN *appears through the half-open door, left ajar by PARKIN in his haste to intercept the visitor. PARKIN has met him in the hall, which, of course, is open to the summer evening, and is now in the act of heading him off.*]

PARKIN In the library, if you please, my lord.

[*But SEBASTIAN is in.*]

CORNELIA (*equably*) Oh, Sebastian. You are just the person I wanted to see. (*Detaching her interest from the rod for a moment*) Did you walk?

[*PARKIN retires defeated.*]

SEBASTIAN Yes. It is a beautiful evening. And there was something I wanted to say to you before my mother and the rest came. I was going to suggest that we went into the garden. (*Looking at her doubtfully*) But you're not dressed, are you?

CORNELIA No, but that won't take me long. Sebastian, I suppose you don't mind if we fish in that little river of yours?

SEBASTIAN In the Windin? I'm afraid it's let.

CORNELIA Let? What is that?

SEBASTIAN Rented.

CORNELIA Can you hire out a *river* in England?

SEBASTIAN One lets the fishing, of course. But if Lucas wants a day now and then, I can get it for him. I didn't know he fished.

CORNELIA It isn't Lucas. Just Parkin and me.

SEBASTIAN Parkin!

CORNELIA Yes. I'm teaching him to Take Life. Can we go on Tuesday afternoon?

SEBASTIAN Perhaps you would ask my mother. She sees the tenant oftener than I do. Hadn't you better go and dress?

CORNELIA (*still fascinated by the rod*) In a minute. What did you want to say to me?

SEBASTIAN Oh, I can't tell you just now.

CORNELIA Why not?

SEBASTIAN Well, you're not dressed, for one thing.

CORNELIA Would I bear it better in a dress, do you think?

SEBASTIAN Of course not. It's just that it is nearly dinner-time——

CORNELIA And you could talk better if you were full.

SEBASTIAN No, no.

CORNELIA Oh dear, I wish I could go fishing right now. It's a beautiful rod. It would make Barney quite sick with envy. Quite sick, it would.

SEBASTIAN Listen, Cornelia.

CORNELIA (*aware that he has capitulated but not really interested*) Yes?

SEBASTIAN I have a deep admiration for your great practical qualities.

CORNELIA Yes? Do you fish, Sebastian?

SEBASTIAN I feel that your practical quality and my idealism would make an admirable combination.

CORNELIA If you are talking about revolutions again, I'm not interested. I don't really like all those through-other people you're so fashed about.

SEBASTIAN This is a personal matter, not a political one.

CORNELIA Sebastian, I suppose you have a wide experience of butlers?

SEBASTIAN Butlers! Yes. Yes, I've known a good many, I suppose.

CORNELIA What does a butler do when he needn't? I mean, supposing——

SEBASTIAN Cornelia, are you deliberately trying to prevent my coming to the point?

CORNELIA No, of course not. I really want to know about butlers. Supposing you were a butler and had enough money not to be one, what would you do?

SEBASTIAN I wouldn't be one.

CORNELIA I know. What would you be?

SEBASTIAN Almost anything else.

CORNELIA You're being very trying.

SEBASTIAN You're being very odd.

CORNELIA Do butlers—what-do-you-call-it—retire?

SEBASTIAN Certainly.

CORNELIA What do they do then?

SEBASTIAN If they haven't made much money, they live at Hove and pretend they are Colonels home from India. If they have made a lot, they buy a hotel and pretend they are landed proprietors.

CORNELIA A hotel?

SEBASTIAN Yes. It is every butler's ambition to be Mine Host. I hope that satisfies your strangely directed curiosity?

CORNELIA (*happily*) Yes, thank you, that is what I wanted to know.

SEBASTIAN And now, perhaps, you will let us get on with this marriage discussion.

CORNELIA Marriage!

SEBASTIAN Certainly. What did you think we were discussing?

CORNELIA (*returning his phrase and his tone*) Almost anything else.

SEBASTIAN I was pointing out that our separate qualities, being complementary, would result in an ideal combination.

CORNELIA (*contemplating him*) Is that what you were going to take me into the garden to say?

SEBASTIAN Yes.

CORNELIA Why a garden?

SEBASTIAN We shouldn't be interrupted there.

CORNELIA I see. Have you ever proposed to anyone before?

SEBASTIAN (*shortly*) No, I have not.

CORNELIA Well, if you do it like that, you know, you'll never get accepted.

SEBASTIAN (*stiffly*) And what is so unacceptable about my proposal?

CORNELIA Even the worst of them (*looking for a word*) coax a little.

SEBASTIAN Worst of what?

CORNELIA Proposers.

SEBASTIAN What possible experience can you have had. Have you ever been asked in marriage before? (*The implication is 'No'*)

CORNELIA Of course. I was the only girl for a thousand miles. People proposed to me on sight.

SEBASTIAN How revolting.

CORNELIA (*roused*) At least they brought a bunch of daisies.

SEBASTIAN How Victorian.

CORNELIA And they smiled once in a while.

SEBASTIAN Reflex action.

CORNELIA You would be a much nicer person, Sebastian, if you smiled sometimes. Even Parkin smiles sometimes.

SEBASTIAN Am I to take that as a pattern to be emulated?

CORNELIA (*giving him up*) I wish you didn't wrap yourself up in words. I must go and put on my frock now. Will you put away the rod for me? And be careful of it.

SEBASTIAN But you haven't answered my question.

CORNELIA What question?

SEBASTIAN About marrying me.

CORNELIA Oh. Oh, no; thank you very much, but I'm not thinking of marrying at present. I have a lot to do first. (*Remembering something on her way to the door*) Besides, you have to marry a countess, haven't you?

SEBASTIAN Good heavens, no!

CORNELIA Don't earls have to marry——

SEBASTIAN My mother was an actress.

CORNELIA Oh, yes. I forgot. She's nice, your mother. You are very lucky, Sebastian, to have a nice mother.

SEBASTIAN *All actresses are charming, didn't you know? It's an act.*

CORNELIA An act?

SEBASTIAN Play-acting.

CORNELIA Oh. And what do you call crying over the poor, with six cars in your garage? (*Since SEBASTIAN has no answer ready to this swift onslaught*) I don't believe your mother play-acts. She's real. She would look all right in Forks of Sagataw. (*The accent is on 'all right'. This is apparently her normal method of measuring people*) She and Barney would get on beautifully.

SEBASTIAN I have explained to you already that if I sold every car I have and gave away the money, that would merely be charity.

CORNELIA (*going*) It would be a miracle.

[*Exit* CORNELIA.]

[SEBASTIAN, *exasperated, flips on the wireless, and begins to put the rod away. A man's voice says:*

'It is difficult to decide at what point in their history the English ceased to be realists, and became sentimental. In the unwritten code of chivalry (unwritten, of course, because the knights were illiterate) a prisoner of war was treated like fragile china. This was not because he was a beaten enemy, but because he was an investment. Presently his family would fork out a ransom (together with a tidy sum for board, lodging, and breakages); and a prisoner in good condition naturally fetched considerably more than one in pieces. If your beaten foe did not look like being a good investment in the first place, you merely beat him a little more and went on your way.

'The present tendency to fall violently in love with an enemy merely because he is defeated is a modern development on a par with such sentimental and cosy institutions as Long-Lost-Brother Week and the People's Revolutionary Party.'

[SEBASTIAN, *furious, switches off.*

[*There is the sound of a car drawing up on the gravel outside the open*

windows, and LUCAS'S voice as he goes through the hall to the door to welcome LADY BINNACLE.

[*They come in together, both talking.*]

LUCAS Hullo, Sebastian. I hear you walked. I'm glad the blisters Cornelia raised on you were not permanent. (*To LADY B.*) Sherry or a cocktail? (*She takes sherry*) You're looking radiant this evening, Charlotte. I hope that plant died on you?

LADY B. It did not. It is flourishing, and looking odder every day. What the booksellers call 'curious', you know. I'm thinking of charging an extra tuppence on our Open Day. Grounds and hall, one shilling. South American Thingmibob, tuppence.

LUCAS Orange-juice, Sebastian?

SEBASTIAN Thank you.

LADY B. How is your Snow Maiden doing? Is she tilting at the world with the North Pole for a lance?

SEBASTIAN (*in his most maddening tones*) Labrador, my dear mother, is in the same latitude as Great Britain.

LADY B. (*comfortably*) Well, it has no right to be. It was mean of you not to let me have the fun of dressing her. Tresca would have done her beautifully—and every little rake-off counts. Besides, I never had a daughter.

LUCAS I never had a ward. Milanelle is enchanted with her.

LADY B. (*looking at him quizzically*) And you?

LUCAS I, too, am enchanted.

LADY B. You must give me a small share. Let me take her to the theatre for the first time. I shall take her to see Marguerite Lambe. For a woman who runs a dramatic school, she's not a bad actress. It's time, anyhow, that the child had a woman's shoulder to cry on.

LUCAS I doubt if she has ever wanted either a shoulder or a cry.

LADY B. How would you know? Every woman wants to let her back-hair down once in a while. Sebastian can take us up one day next week, and drop us in town.

SEBASTIAN I shall not be in town next week.

LADY B. Where will you be?

SEBASTIAN At Lydhurst Abbey.

LADY B. Abbey? What are you going there for?

SEBASTIAN For advice.

LUCAS What is wrong with Ann Temple?

SEBASTIAN I am going into a monastery.

LADY B. (*unmoved*) Not yet, my dear. You have to provide an heir first. Even monks have lapses, of course. But an heir has to be legitimate. (*As an afterthought*) And you wouldn't like the beds, you know.

LUCAS Pallets would pall.

SEBASTIAN Nevertheless, I am going to Lydhurst.

LADY B. Very well, dear. Give the old boy my love. And tell him I still haven't a grey hair in my head.

SEBASTIAN (*surprised and somehow defeated*) Do you know the Abbot?

LADY B. I did. Many a bright party we had, he and I and Greta Fayne and Bobby. His name was Smithers then. A nice creature with too much money and too much stomach. I expect he will tell you to run away and have some parties before taking to pallets. You can't repent of things you haven't committed.

SEBASTIAN I am not going in order to repent. I just don't consider that life in this world is worth living.

[*Enter* ANDREW.]

LADY B. I can never make up my mind with you, Sebastian, whether it is dyspepsia or dramatics.

ANDREW (*greeting* LADY B. *as he goes to the sherry table*) It is neither, dear lady. Your unhappy son is forever torn by the pangs of jealousy.

LADY B. Jealous? Of whom?

ANDREW His mother.

LADY B. Me!

ANDREW You, having worked for your living, are, irrevocably, his social superior. It is an intolerable situation, you must admit, to have a socially superior mother.

SEBASTIAN The fact that I cannot earn my bread without taking it from another man's mouth is hardly a fit subject for jest. If I had a club-foot you wouldn't call attention to it, would you?

LADY B. No, dear, but you would.

LUCAS If that is all that ails our Sebastian, the cure is obvious. You marry him off to the most useless and expensive baggage in the county, and settle down out of his

sight at the Dower House. That will be half a mile nearer us, and that much to the good.

[SEBASTIAN *retires to a corner and sulks.*]

LADY B. I never liked the thought of that Dower House.

LUCAS What! Clinging to power?

LADY B. A dowager on the spot is nothing but a damned nuisance. Besides, I have never really got used to watching the grass grow. Shall I tell you what my dream would be? A semi-detached in Golders Green, with a cinema round the corner.

LUCAS My good Charlotte!

LADY B. Going shopping with a basket in the morning, and with a quarter of chocolates to the pictures in the afternoon.

ANDREW And in the evenings?

LADY B. (*with almost voluptuous satisfaction*) My corsets off and my feet up.

[*Enter CORNELIA, enchanting and quite different, in her dinner frock.*]

CORNELIA (*going to LADY B. and shaking hands*) How do you do, Lady Binnacle. May we fish in your river?

LADY B. My dear, you're quite lovely. (*Indicating the frock*) Is that Milanelle? You were right, Lucas; it's perfect. Well, how is the world using you?

CORNELIA Very well, thank you. Everyone is very kind. Can we fish in your river?

LADY B. (*breaking in*) Lucas is going to let me take you to the theatre next week. Just a hen party; us girls together.

CORNELIA That will be very nice. Thank you very much. Can we fish in your river on Tuesday afternoon?

LADY B. In the Windin'? I suppose you can. I'll ask old Mr Sprott; he has the fishing. This is a new interest for you, surely, Lucas?

CORNELIA Oh, it isn't Lucas. Just Parkin and me. You don't want him for anything on Tuesday afternoon, do you, Lucas?

LUCAS I have a suspicion that it won't be any good my wanting him. I had no idea that Parkin was interested in fishing.

CORNELIA He is a little surprised himself.

LUCAS You won't seduce my perfect servant from his allegiance, I hope.

CORNELIA Oh, no. I'm not seducing, just training him.

ANDREW To what?

CORNELIA Oh, to—out-of-doors.

LADY B. She thinks your perfect servant is *too* house-broke. I don't know that she isn't right. In a few more years even Parkin will develop that tame-cat look. When I engaged our present infliction I interviewed twenty-two, and the only one who didn't look like a domestic animal was one who had done time for burglary.

ANDREW Was that the one you engaged?

LADY B. No. Our present one is too short-sighted to be able to see anything to steal. He thought he was handing me a box of matches on a tray yesterday.

LUCAS And what was it?

LADY B. A box of the parlour-maid's hairpins.

LUCAS The one with the hips?

LADY B. That one.

ANDREW So there is no vacancy for Cornelia yet?

LADY B. No. In any case, you are not going to think about the future for a long time yet, are you, Cornelia?

CORNELIA Oh, yes. I think about it all the time.

ANDREW Even when you play golf?

CORNELIA I suppose so. One has to think of *something* to pass the time at golf.

LADY B. Were you bored then? Didn't you manage to hit the ball at all?

CORNELIA (*genuinely surprised*) Hit it? Oh, yes. Does anyone not hit it?

LUCAS Cornelia has the most startling co-ordination of hand and eye.

LADY B. How did that come about? You didn't play games in What's-its-name?

CORNELIA (*considering it for the first time*) I suppose chopping wood must be good practice. And shooting. And fishing. It's hand-and-eye all the time at Forks. Even throwing a pail of water on the right cabbage.

LADY B. Well, if the worst comes to the worst, you can be a golf professional.

CORNELIA What is that?

LADY B. Teach other people to play.

CORNELIA Do people take *lessons* in games?

LADY B. Oh, yes, and pay well for them.

ANDREW (*watching her face, amused*) A daft world, isn't it, Cornelia?

CORNELIA (*bewildered*) I don't think anyone has enough to do.

LADY B. What did you do with your spare time?

CORNELIA There wasn't any. There is always something to make, or fetch, or mend, at Forks.

LUCAS Cornelia has never learned to play.

CORNELIA (*cheerfully philosophical over her lack*) Oh, well; Barn—a man I know says no one was ever hanged for anything they did in their working time.

LUCAS I am quite sure there is an answer to that if I could think of it.

ANDREW Now that you have achieved your high heels, Cornelia, is there something else you want?

CORNELIA Yes.

LADY B. (*amused at the firmness and readiness of the monosyllable*) You know what you want, don't you?

CORNELIA Oh, yes, I always know.

LUCAS And what is the new ambition?

CORNELIA I want to stay in a great many hotels.

[*Into the slight laugh that has been raised, PARKIN comes to announce dinner.*]

LUCAS Well, I think that might be managed.

PARKIN Dinner is served, sir.

[*They rise to go out as the curtain comes down.*]

CURTAIN

ACT III

The Scene is the same, on a January afternoon six months later. ANDREW is sitting in an easy-chair by the fire, with a reading-lamp switched on. The curtains are still undrawn, and the windows show a light edging of frost or snow.

PARKIN *comes in and switches on more lights.*

PARKIN Do you mind if we leave the curtains as they are for a little, sir? I thought it would be nice if they found the house lit up when they came home.

ANDREW A very pleasant thought, Parkin. It does you credit.

PARKIN I have put you in your usual room, sir. Would you like some tea, perhaps?

ANDREW I shall wait for the home-comers, I think. Did you enjoy your own holiday, Parkin?

PARKIN Very much, thank you, sir.

ANDREW What have you been doing?

PARKIN I have been salmon-fishing in Scotland, sir.

ANDREW Oh. Any luck?

PARKIN Yes, sir. One fifteen pounder, one twelve, and one eight.

ANDREW Very good!

PARKIN Yes, sir, not bad for three weeks.

ANDREW Only three weeks?

PARKIN There was the house to be cleaned.

ANDREW Have you heard from the travellers since they left?

PARKIN Yes, sir. Twice from Mr Bilke, and six times from Miss Taft; one letter each week. But I expect you heard from them yourself, sir.

ANDREW I'm afraid you have beaten me, Parkin. I had a postcard from Mr Bilke showing the Mediterranean in cobalt, and two letters from Miss Taft. Perhaps your letters weren't illustrated, though?

PARKIN Oh, yes, sir. Always.

ANDREW Did you have 'The Baron From Baden Putting on his Skis'?

PARKIN No, sir. Did you have 'A Cream Puff Goes Bathing'?

ANDREW No.

PARKIN Or 'We Go To The Fancy Dress Ball'?

ANDREW I'm afraid you have beaten me again, Parkin. Well, it will be very pleasant to have her back, won't it?

PARKIN Very pleasant indeed, sir.

ANDREW (*encouraged by the warmth of PARKIN'S voice*) You know, Parkin, I used to think this house perfection. It had beauty, and dignity, and peace—and you, Parkin.

PARKIN (*with quite a ready smile*) Thank you, sir.

ANDREW But I know now that there was something lacking.

PARKIN (*agreeing*) Yes, sir.

ANDREW What was it, Parkin?

PARKIN Life, sir. We were just going through the motions, if you know what I mean, sir.

ANDREW Yes. Just going through the motions. Well, I suppose it does everyone good to——(*The lights of a car shine on the windows*) There is the car.

PARKIN Yes, sir, that sounds like them. (*A horn sounds*) Yes, it is, sir; it is.

[*He goes hastily to the door, smoothing his hair and pulling down his waistcoat, in a state much less dignified than his usual calm.*]

ANDREW (*looking after him, amused, and passing his hand over his own hair*) Well, well. Parkin, too.

[*There are sounds of arrival in the hall, and the voices of LUCAS and CORNELIA greeting PARKIN. ANDREW makes a movement to the door, but restrains it. Enter CORNELIA, at a rush, very fashionable and furred to the eyes.*]

CORNELIA (*complete Mayfair in voice, tone, and manner*) Oh, Andrew darling, how lovely to see you again. It's been such ages. (*Embracing him*) And we had such a heavenly time, and you would have loved it! (*Dropping abruptly to her usual manner, and addressing the paralysed ANDREW in her habitual matter-of-fact tones*) That is just to show that I can do it. How are you, Andrew? You are looking thin. You've been working too hard. You should have come with us.

ANDREW What! Weeks of gallivanting?

CORNELIA If you didn't come to the South, you could have come to the mountains. We missed you.

[Enter LUCAS.]

LUCAS Yes, we missed you, Andrew. You should have come.

[PARKIN stands in the doorway watching the group for a moment before he closes the door.]

ANDREW Well, anyhow, it is nice to have you home again. You are both walking advertisements for the travel-agencies. (*They are standing side by side, radiant and happy*) You ought to be photographed just as you are, and used as a poster. I feel sadly urban.

CORNELIA Don't be sadly anything the day we are all together again. I must go and see Mrs Benson and Elsie and the rest, and give them their presents. I have something for you, too, Andrew, but it is in my big box, so you will have to wait.

[Exit CORNELIA.]

ANDREW So it was a success?

LUCAS (*with slow emphasis*) It was *wonderful*. I feel about ten years old. Tell me, Andrew, do you remember what it was like to have life so full of amusement that you didn't have to play a game to pass the time?

ANDREW (*smiling*) I do. That was youth.

LUCAS Yes, I thought it must be. I don't seem to have had any. I was always inventing ways to pass the time. However, now that I have so providentially been born again, I am going to make the most of it. I am going to take your off-given advice, and get married.

ANDREW (*pleased*) No, really?

LUCAS Yes, really.

ANDREW My congratulations. I'm very glad. To whom?

LUCAS I am going to marry Cornelia.

ANDREW Cornelia? (*A pause so long that LUCAS looks round at him*) Is that fair, Lucas?

LUCAS Fair? What do you mean?

ANDREW (*slowly, looking for the words*) Don't you think that it is taking advantage of her while she is still beglamoured? Six months is a short time for her to find her feet in a new world. You have had no rivals yet.

LUCAS (*with a reminiscent smile*) Well, I did have some bad moments. She grew very friendly with young Steiner, the architect. Very friendly indeed. I never noticed

before that those little round iron tables are only for two.

ANDREW Yes, it must have been a new sensation for you to be the odd-man-out.

LUCAS However, it was all very gay and childish. They spent hours drawing houses for each other on bits of paper. I needn't have worried.

ANDREW But Lucas, she *is* a child. You are double her age. That is not the kind of mating she should have. Aren't you playing on her undoubted gratitude, her sense of ob——

LUCAS You are not being very flattering, are you? What I bring to Cornelia surely outweighs anything she brings to me.

ANDREW Is that how you look at it?

LUCAS What is wrong with that way of looking at it?

ANDREW It has hardly a lover-like humility.

LUCAS (*equably*) I'm not a boy, as you so bluntly point out, and I can't be expected to have a boy's romanticism. Nor can I be unaware, after twenty years of eligible bachelordom, that to be my wife and the mistress of this house would be regarded even in the most exacting circles as a matrimonial achievement.

ANDREW Go on, Cophetua.

LUCAS Since you are so concerned for her future, it must be obvious to you that marriage to me will be a great deal safer for her than shouting her slender wares in the market-place.

ANDREW Safe? I wonder.

LUCAS You wonder!

ANDREW Marriage for you will be a settling down; for her it will be an adventure. That doesn't seem to me a very safe combination for matrimonial happiness. Or weren't you referring to happiness?

LUCAS I admit that when I said safe I was thinking of material——

ANDREW Of rose-marble bathrooms. She wouldn't marry you for that, you know. She thinks them, if I remember rightly, a bit daft. She will marry you for happiness, and because she imagines she is in love with you.

LUCAS Why 'imagine'?

ANDREW It's a common delusion when a girl of twenty is dazzled by the charm of a man of forty.

LUCAS Thank you.

ANDREW And are you, after all, going to risk losing your perfect butler? (*This is*

asked in genuine surprise, not as a backing to argument)

LUCAS Oh, Parkin won't go. He likes Cornelia very much. They get on beautifully. (*Incautiously*) In fact, that is one of the——(*Breaks off hastily*)

ANDREW In fact, that is one of Cornelia's attractions.

LUCAS Only one of them. She has a million. I have never known anyone so all-pervading. When we are together she may annoy me occasionally, but the moment she is with someone else I want to know what she is saying, what she is thinking, how she is looking.

ANDREW When do you plan to get married?

LUCAS In the summer, I expect. I haven't mentioned the matter yet.

ANDREW Mentioned the wedding date, you mean?

LUCAS No, marriage.

ANDREW What! You mean you're not going to marry Cornelia at all?

LUCAS I certainly am going to marry her.

ANDREW I mean, you're not engaged?

LUCAS Not yet.

ANDREW (*smiling with relief*) Oh, Lucas, your conceit is so colossal that it almost amounts to a virtue. Phew! (*In relief*) And my poor heart wrung all for nothing over the Beggar Maid's probable life with Cophetua!

LUCAS Are you suggesting, by any chance, that she won't accept me?

ANDREW (*happily*) I'm not suggesting it, my dear Lucas, I'm betting on it.

LUCAS But what—why?

ANDREW Because she is Cornelia. And young. And independent. And in love with the world.

LUCAS (*taking this as a challenge*) Very well. I shall propose to her tonight.

ANDREW (*quickly*) Oh no, Lucas. Give her time.

LUCAS For what? I say she is ready to marry me; you say she is not. Well, I ask her tonight, and settle it. (*As an afterthought*) And you can still be my best man.

ANDREW Thank you!

[*Enter* CORNELIA.]

CORNELIA Everyone is very pleased; and Mrs Benson's daughter has twins. Did you know, Lucas?

LUCAS I didn't even know that Mrs Benson had a daughter.

CORNELIA Oh, Lucas, how shocking of you. And Mrs Benson has been your housekeeper for seven years.

LUCAS (*lightly, but with a genuine stab of jealousy*) I really cannot have my servants' affections alienated under my very nose. Some counter-propaganda is clearly called for. Can I trust you not to do any alienating, Andrew, if I leave you with my ward?

ANDREW My middle-name is Bayard.

[*Exit* LUCAS.]

CORNELIA Who was he?

ANDREW A too-perfect gentleman of the Middle Ages. So you have had a very happy time?

CORNELIA Oh, yes. It was lovely.

ANDREW Nice friends?

CORNELIA Oh, yes. But they mostly yell.

ANDREW They what?

CORNELIA Yell at each other. And when they don't yell they yatter. It seems to me that an awful lot of talk goes on in this world that isn't necessary.

ANDREW True; too true. But it couldn't have been all talk?

CORNELIA Oh, no. Sometimes in the evenings Lucas and I used to sail out in a little boat to where it was quiet; or sometimes in the mornings on the mountain we would climb up to where there were no people and no marks on the snow any more. That was lovely. It was like being home.

ANDREW (*at a loss for a moment*) Home? (*Realising*) Oh! You still think of Labrador as home, do you?

CORNELIA (*matter-of-fact*) Oh, yes.

ANDREW But you and Lucas have become very good friends, haven't you?

CORNELIA (*with something like passion*) I don't know what I have done to deserve Lucas!

ANDREW (*startled*) What?

CORNELIA Think! Father's friend might have been an old professor with a beard and carpet-slippers, living in—in——

ANDREW (*happy again*) Wolverhampton.

CORNELIA I don't know what that is like, but living in a place that looks the way that sounds.

[Enter PARKIN.]

PARKIN Lord Binnacle to see you, miss.

[Enter SEBASTIAN, with an enormous bunch of roses.]

CORNELIA *(pleased to see him)* Sebastian!

SEBASTIAN Hullo, Cornelia. Welcome back. *(To ANDREW)* Hullo. *(Extending the flowers awkwardly to her)* Here you are.

CORNELIA *(admiring the roses)* Are these from Binnacles?

SEBASTIAN Oh, no. I'm not allowed to pluck anything in my own glasshouses. I had to buy them in a shop.

CORNELIA You could have bought ten people a dinner for the price of those roses.

SEBASTIAN They're not roses. They're daisies.

CORNELIA Daisies! Have you gone——*(Remembering)* Oh. *(Conversationally)* I think you might have written to me just once.

SEBASTIAN I have been very busy.

[ANDREW, feeling that the atmosphere has grown personal, makes for the door.]

ANDREW Congratulations on your deal, Sebastian. It was a very shrewd move, I think. In a few more years land will be a drug in the market.

SEBASTIAN *(coldly)* I didn't do it because it was shrewd.

[But ANDREW has gone.]

CORNELIA What deal? What is he talking about?

SEBASTIAN That is what I was saving up to tell you. It's something that has taken a long time, and I didn't want to tell you in a letter. I have disentailed the estate, and it's up for sale.

CORNELIA Sebastian! You have! Well! Was it difficult?

SEBASTIAN It was easier than you would think. My only relation, you see, is my father's uncle in Australia.

CORNELIA Did he mind?

SEBASTIAN Oh, he was very Australian about it.

CORNELIA What did he say?

SEBASTIAN He said I could do what I liked with my blasted chicken-run.

CORNELIA And your mother?

SEBASTIAN Oh, she is quite happy. (*Mournfully*) But I'm terribly unpopular. I used to be unpopular only with the County. But now the cottagers will have to mend their own fences and buy their own Christmas-trees and pay their rents promptly, and I'm unpopular with everyone.

CORNELIA Poor Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN And the horrible thing is that I'm going to be richer than ever. People are bidding against each other for the estate. Apparently it is full of Desirable Building Sites. I don't know what I can do with the money.

CORNELIA Aren't you going to give it to your Party?

SEBASTIAN Oh, I've had to resign from the Party. I'm more unpopular with them than with anyone. In fact, they're furious with me. They say that what I've done creates a dangerous precedent.

CORNELIA Precedent?

SEBASTIAN They mean: people may expect them to go and do likewise. That wouldn't do at all. Of course, I shall keep a little—just a few thousands—to get married on (*he casts a swift glance at CORNELIA*) and until I get work. But I don't know what to do with the rest.

CORNELIA Couldn't you use it to start deserving people in business?

SEBASTIAN But that would make me a capitalist.

CORNELIA Even if you didn't make any profit?

SEBASTIAN Oh, yes. Lots of capitalists never make any money at all.

CORNELIA But I thought they ground the faces of the poor?

SEBASTIAN Never mind politics just now. You would never understand them anyhow.

CORNELIA (*firmly*) Never.

SEBASTIAN Now that I have brought you the required bunch of daisies, can I ask you to marry me again?

CORNELIA You're a much nicer person than I thought you were, Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN How nice does that make me?

CORNELIA But I don't think I could ever marry you.

SEBASTIAN Is there something personal about me that you object to? I mean, something irrevocable, like the shape of my nose?

CORNELIA Oh, no.

SEBASTIAN I could give up the Revolution if that is what is stopping you?

CORNELIA Oh, no. It's not——

SEBASTIAN Or is it that you dislike poor peers? I'm going to give up the Binnacle, you know, and be plain Sebastian de Crespigny.

CORNELIA Oh, no, no; it's nothing like that. Nothing you could do——(*She breaks off*)

SEBASTIAN Is there someone else, perhaps?

CORNELIA (*A nod*)

SEBASTIAN Oh. Do I know him?

CORNELIA Yes.

SEBASTIAN Well?

CORNELIA Very well.

SEBASTIAN Is it——someone much older than you?

CORNELIA Yes, he is a lot older, but that doesn't matter when two people——(*She breaks off*)

SEBASTIAN No. No, of course not. (*Shaking hands*) I hope you will be very happy, Cornelia. He is much luckier than he has any right to be. I shall tell him so personally at the first opportunity.

CORNELIA Oh, he hasn't asked me yet. But he will. About all that money, Sebastian. I know two very nice people who want to start a hotel. Would you like to lend them the money for that?

SEBASTIAN No, I don't think I should like that at all. There are too many hotels anyhow. And I should only be unpopular with two more people because they owed me money.

CORNELIA You used not to mind being unpopular. I think it would be nice to watch people one had helped. If they are a success you have a share in it, and if they aren't you don't have the disgrace of making money out of your fellow-men. Either way you win.

SEBASTIAN (*his mind on his fortune*) I think I had better found a college.

CORNELIA I shouldn't. College didn't do you any good.

SEBASTIAN Or a hospital.

CORNELIA They get out-of-date very quickly.

SEBASTIAN Yes; and of course the State will take over the hospital services one of these days. I had thoughts of endowing a theatre, but there are no dramatists nowadays, and it seems a pity to spend a perfectly good fortune on revivals of Congreve and translations from the Latvian.

CORNELIA Well, it's a pity you don't like the hotel idea. I meant to ask Lucas for the money, but it would be so much nicer if you did it.

SEBASTIAN Would it?

CORNELIA Oh, yes. You are richer, of course; and if you are practically giving away money you wouldn't miss it.

SEBASTIAN How much is the place to cost?

CORNELIA Between twelve and fifteen thousand, the architect thought.

SEBASTIAN That is not much of a hotel!

CORNELIA Oh, it's just a fishing-place. Twelve bedrooms and no marble, except for making the pastry on.

SEBASTIAN Pastry?

CORNELIA It keeps the pastry cold.

SEBASTIAN Oh. Well, if it would really please you, Cornelia, that is a different matter. Perhaps it would be better if I *gave* them the money.

CORNELIA (*quickly*) Oh, no. That wouldn't do at all. In any case, the time may come when you will be very glad to have a little something coming in.

SEBASTIAN I should never be glad to have made money from other men's toil.

CORNELIA You may change your mind when you have made a little from your own. Anyhow, it is very kind of you, Sebastian, and I am very grateful to you.

SEBASTIAN Well, it is something to be popular with at least one person. Now I must go and fetch my mother. I promised to give her a lift over, but I wanted to see you first. (*His glance going ruefully to the flowers and the situation generally*) It didn't do me much good, did it? All I've managed to do is to lend someone I don't know money I don't want. (*Going*) I shan't be five minutes. Shall I come in again when I come back?

CORNELIA Of course.

SEBASTIAN (*answering the surprise in her tone*) Well, it's supposed to be awkward having a rejected suitor around. All right, I shall be back in a minute or

two.

[PARKIN *comes in as he goes out.*]

(*To* PARKIN) All right, Parkin, I'll let myself out.

PARKIN I had better draw the curtains, miss.

CORNELIA It seems a pity as long as there is any daylight left. It has been such a wonderful day.

PARKIN Yes, miss, it has.

[*Neither is referring to the weather.*]

CORNELIA Have you missed us, Parkin?

PARKIN Very much, miss. The house has been very—empty. It was very pleasant to have your letters. I was most grateful for them.

CORNELIA I have something more exciting than that for you. (*Going to her bag and extracting a folded paper*) Look at that.

[*She hands him the paper unfolded into a sheet the size of a small map.*]

PARKIN A house. Is this one of your drawings, miss?

CORNELIA No, that was drawn by the best young architect in Europe. It's a hotel.

PARKIN Very attractive. Did you stay there?

CORNELIA It is not built yet. That is the hotel I am going to have in Labrador.

PARKIN In Labrador?

CORNELIA Yes. At Forks of Sagataw.

PARKIN *You are?*

CORNELIA Yes.

PARKIN (*saying the first thing that comes into his head*) But who would go to stay there?

CORNELIA Fishers in the summer, and winter-sports people in the winter.

PARKIN (*his glance going back to the paper*) Oh, a fishing inn.

CORNELIA (*in exactly the tone a mother uses when she says 'nice porridge, baby eat it'*) Yes, wonderful fishing. (*Beginning to explain the picture to him*) There is the hill behind the house where one can ski, and this is the landing-field for aeroplanes at the side, and that is the stream that gives the electric light; there is the jetty, half-way to Barney's, where the sea-fishing boats lie, and that path goes to the river and the fresh-water fishing. There are twelve bedrooms for the guests and four

for the staff, and you can do practically everything but put your stockings on by pressing a button.

PARKIN (*withdrawing his gaze from the paper and looking at her*) But you are not seriously thinking of going back to Labrador, miss, are you?

CORNELIA I'm not thinking of it; I'm going. Paul and I are going out in the Spring. Paul Steiner, the man who drew it, you know. He says it will be great fun to live in the back-room at Barney's and build a hotel in a place called Forks of Sagataw. He roars with laughter every time he thinks about it. It is going to be his best holiday and his greatest advertisement, he says.

PARKIN Advertisement?

CORNELIA Yes. He talks a lot. (*Watching him from under her lashes*) He says if you stick a stave into the ground alongside others, it's just part of a fence; if you put it in the middle of a moor it's a landmark.

PARKIN And you mean to stay there and run the hotel? But you don't know anything about hotels.

CORNELIA I've been learning a lot. But of course I should need a manager. I thought perhaps you might like to come.

PARKIN Me, miss? (*His first reaction is a sort of shocked delight that she has thought of him at all*)

CORNELIA Yes. Of course you might not want to leave Lucas, and this very comfortable way of living. It wouldn't be any—any business of drawing silk curtains in the evening. But it would be adventure. It would be exciting. And out there you would be a person. People for hundreds of miles all round would know you. And once we got the inn going people all over America and Europe would know you, and talk about you when they met. You wouldn't be Parkin any more; you'd be Parkin of Sagataw. 'Oh, do *you* know Parkin?' people would say when they met at the other side of the world. 'Yes, we stayed there last year. Such good food, and the fishing was wonderful.'

PARKIN (*his eyes on the drawing*) Fishing. (*A pause*) Is Mr Bilke financing the expedition?

CORNELIA Don't talk as if it were polar exploration! Lucas doesn't know anything about it. Lord Binnacle is putting up the money. I wanted to know what you thought about it first.

PARKIN I think that Lord Binnacle is going to lose his money.

CORNELIA Listen! People go to Norway to see the fiords, don't they?

PARKIN Yes.

CORNELIA And to Scotland to fish for salmon. Don't they?

PARKIN Yes.

CORNELIA And to still other places to sail small boats up and down?

PARKIN Cowes. Yes.

CORNELIA And to still other places to ski?

PARKIN Yes.

CORNELIA And to still other places to skate? And to still other places for deep-sea fishing? And to still other places to study seals? And to still other places for rest-cures? Well, *we* have them *all* at Forks: fiords, and sailing, and salmon, and skating, and ski-ing, and seals, and rest-cures, and sea-fishing. And it's only a plane hop from anywhere—once we get our landing-field free of Barney's turnips. Do you think a man like Paul Steiner is fool enough to build a hotel—even a wooden one—where no one is ever going to see it?

PARKIN I think under the influence of your charm, miss, he might be persuaded.

CORNELIA (*in a new, small voice*) You think I am charming?

PARKIN Indeed, yes.

CORNELIA But not charming enough to go to Labrador with?

PARKIN If you go, miss, I should want to go too. But I don't know that it would be a wise thing to do.

CORNELIA Wise for you? Or for me?

PARKIN For both of us.

CORNELIA Why, Parkin?

PARKIN (*hesitating for words*) It is a very personal relationship, miss. And in a small place——It might not——work out.

CORNELIA You think we should fight? Well, I expect we shall. But would that matter? (*AS PARKIN, who has not thought of fighting, says nothing*) I can't imagine it without you, Parkin.

PARKIN (*with a glance at the room*) I find it difficult to imagine this place without you.

CORNELIA (*encouraged by his tone*) Of course, being owner and manager is rather what you say: a difficult relationship. Perhaps you had better marry me.

PARKIN Marry you!

CORNELIA Yes. (*Half-doubtful, half-confident*) You would like to, wouldn't you? (*As he says nothing*) Wouldn't you?

PARKIN (*giving up*) You know very well I would go to the world's end for you.

CORNELIA Well, Forks of Sagataw is practically there. (*With a small sigh of relief*) That is settled. (*As much to herself as to him*) But I must admit I had a bad moment. Aren't you going to kiss me?

PARKIN Do you mind waiting till tomorrow afternoon? (*It is more a command than a request*)

CORNELIA Why!

PARKIN (*indicating his clothes*) I shall not have these on then.

CORNELIA But how silly! I shouldn't care if you were wearing a green velvet monkey-jacket and pink tights. Why should I mind about these? (*She prepares herself for the kiss*)

PARKIN (*unmoving*) I do.

CORNELIA (*contemplating him*) What a life I am going to have with you! You know, if we are not going to scratch each other's eyes out in the first six months, we must have some sort of working plan.

PARKIN (*smiling a little at her*) Yes?

CORNELIA How many letters are there in the alphabet? An even number?

PARKIN Twenty-six.

CORNELIA Well, you take one half and I take the other. You decide on everything beginning with your letters, and I decide on everything beginning with mine.

PARKIN Very well.

CORNELIA Agreed?

PARKIN Agreed.

CORNELIA Will you have the first half or the second?

PARKIN Whichever you don't want.

CORNELIA In that case, I shall take the first half. All right?

PARKIN Perfectly.

CORNELIA Then kiss me.

[*After a pause of realisation, he bends to kiss her. The voices of LUCAS and ANDREW are heard approaching. PARKIN straightens himself abruptly, and begins to draw the curtains as the door opens.*]

CORNELIA (*furious*) You—you *welsher*!

[*She stalks out of the room, ignoring the newcomers.*]

LUCAS I think we might have tea, Parkin. What is wrong with Miss Taft?

PARKIN She is a little annoyed with me, sir.

LUCAS It isn't often Cornelia is annoyed. What had you done?

PARKIN It was a small matter of a letter, sir. I—omitted to seal it. The hot cakes will be a little late, perhaps, because of the excitement of your present-giving, but

LUCAS Oh, that is all right. You know, Parkin, half the joy of coming home is the joy of resuming one's household. Of ceasing to live in a hotel. Next time we go the household shall go with us, and everything will be perfect. I think that this Spring I shall take Tony Deverill's house above Cannes, and we shall all live there in peace for some months. You would like that, Parkin?

PARKIN It sounds delightful, sir. But I am afraid that I shall not be with you all in the Spring.

LUCAS (*misled by PARKIN'S idiom and unusual gravity, and by his inability to believe that anyone could leave his service other than by death*) What! What doctor told you that? Don't believe him, don't believe any of them. They are all frauds. You are as fit as I am. What did he allege was the matter with you?

PARKIN I am not going to die, sir. There are other reasons for leaving your service. I am going to be married.

LUCAS Married! (*Recovering; happily*) Oh, well, Parkin, so am I.

PARKIN My congratulations, sir.

LUCAS That is no reason for leaving my employment. I don't mind in the least. You and Mrs Parkin can have two rooms in the wing until I can build you a cottage. There is a nice place above the mill, on the slope there.

ANDREW My congratulations, Parkin.

PARKIN Thank you, sir. (*To LUCAS*) But I am afraid that, much as I shall regret it, sir, I shall have to leave you. My wife—that is, my wife-to-be—has decided that we are going to run a hotel.

LUCAS A hotel! Nonsense, Parkin. (*He dismisses it cheerfully*) Why give up a comfortable life to be harried about by miserable tourist creatures with very little money and no respect for your plumbing? You tell her that she is going to have a charming home of her own, with the best view in the county, and that she shall be as

independent as she likes.

PARKIN It is not a question of being independent, sir. She considers, I understand, that for a man tinkering with tea-cups is unseemly.

LUCAS *Unseemly?*

PARKIN The word she actually used was daft.

[ANDREW *turns his head quickly to look at him.*]

ANDREW She said that?

PARKIN She did, sir.

ANDREW (*slowly*) I think I know your fiancée, Parkin.

PARKIN (*meeting his look*) Very possibly, sir.

LUCAS Where was this hotel to be?

PARKIN In Labrador, sir.

LUCAS Labrador!

PARKIN Yes, sir. A place called Forks of Sagataw. (*There is a long silence while LUCAS stares at him, his jaw opening and shutting but no sound coming.*

Answering LUCAS'S unspoken question with a nod) Yes, sir. (*AS LUCAS feels for a chair and sits down*) Are you feeling ill, sir?

LUCAS No. Just foolish. Extremely foolish.

ANDREW You were longing for a new sensation, Lucas. Now you have it. (*To PARKIN, pleasantly*) I hope you deserve your luck, Parkin.

PARKIN I shall do my best, sir.

ANDREW So Cornelia wants to go back to her country?

PARKIN Yes, sir.

LUCAS But—but it's outrageous. How dared you in the first place propose to my ward?

PARKIN I didn't, sir.

ANDREW Of course he didn't, Lucas. Don't you know anything about Cornelia?

LUCAS And why was I not told of this before?

PARKIN I only knew myself this afternoon. In fact, the—proposition has just been put to me. Miss Taft brought home plans of the hotel drawn by Steiner, the architect.

ANDREW (*murmuring*) Drawing houses for each other on bits of paper.

LUCAS Oh, no. It's unbelievable. You can't leave me for Cornelia. The whole

affair is impossible.

PARKIN But if I was ever going to leave you, sir, now would be the time, so that your wife could begin with a new servant. Most ladies prefer it.

ANDREW A very reasonable argument, Lucas.

LUCAS Shut up! (*To PARKIN*) But Parkin, you can't possibly bury your talents in a place like that just because a chit of a girl wants you to.

PARKIN If Miss Taft decided to build a hotel on the top of Vesuvius, I don't say that I should risk my money in it, but I should certainly go with her.

ANDREW That is how a lover talks, Lucas.

LUCAS Are you putting money into this crazy scheme at Sagataw?

PARKIN All I have, sir.

LUCAS (*wailing*) But Parkin, you will hate it! Think of the china—all stoneware and chips!

PARKIN The fishing is excellent, I understand.

LUCAS Are you selling your birthright for a kettle of fish?

[*Enter CORNELIA.*]

CORNELIA Parkin, I want to speak to you for a——(*She becomes aware of the atmosphere*) You've *told* them! Oh, *you've* told them, and I wanted to do it!

LUCAS You *wanted* to do it?

CORNELIA Yes; after dinner this evening. I had it all planned!

LUCAS I think you might have told me a little earlier what you were planning.

CORNELIA But there wasn't anything to tell until it actually happened.

LUCAS Was getting a hotel out of Steiner nothing?

CORNELIA Not unless I had any use for it.

LUCAS *Use?* For a Steiner design?

CORNELIA But Parkin mightn't have accepted me. And then there would have been nothing at all. (*Exchanging a look with PARKIN*) Nothing.

LUCAS Am I to understand that the hotel was merely a bait for Parkin, so to speak?

CORNELIA (*after a pause; doubtfully*) Are you angry about something, Lucas?

LUCAS No, not angry. I am suffering from shock.

CORNELIA (*her doubt about to grow into dismay*) What are you shocked about?

ANDREW (*going to her and taking her hands, so that he interposes himself between her and LUCAS*) He doesn't mean that kind of shock. He means surprise-shock. We shall have to go into the business side of this more thoroughly one of these days, but meanwhile everyone wishes you happiness, my dear, and we are all very envious of Parkin.

CORNELIA Thank you. (*Trying to see LUCAS round him*) But, Lucas, you're not really upset about anything, are you?

[*Enter LADY BINNACLE, unannounced.*]

LADY B. Parkin, you're slipping. I rang twice. (*Scenting the atmosphere*) What is this? A row?

LUCAS My good Charlotte, you know quite well that I have never had a row in my life.

LADY B. I know. That is what has been wrong with you all those years. People who get their own way don't have rows. Why are you looking so disgruntled?

LUCAS I'm not disgruntled; only embarrassed. Cornelia has just announced her engagement.

LADY B. My dear! So you brought a fiancé home with you?

CORNELIA Oh, no. He's here.

LADY B. (*her glance going at once to LUCAS; almost accusingly*) No!

LUCAS Cornelia is going to marry Parkin.

LADY B. *Parkin!* (*Giving vent to an abrupt laugh that is a mixture of surprise, amusement, pleasure, and malice*) Hoh! So she chose the best man of you after all! (*Going quickly to PARKIN and shaking hands*) My dear Parkin, I am delighted. You know, I always had a notion for Parkin myself.

PARKIN I have always had the greatest admiration for you, my lady.

LADY B. Nice man. (*Going to CORNELIA*) And oh, wise little girl. (*She kisses her heartily*) I hear you turned Sebastian down?

[*This is a surprise to everyone, but particularly to PARKIN.*]

CORNELIA Oh, did he tell you?

LADY B. He poured it all out on the way here. He is positively human this afternoon.

CORNELIA Has he gone away again?

LADY B. No, he is putting the car round. Well, I always knew the child had sense,

but I had no idea how much. For the last two months you have paraded the gilded youth of Europe before her, and she has the mother-wit, the common sense, the gumption, to choose Parkin. Are we going to lose you, Parkin?

PARKIN We are planning to run a fishing inn in my wife's country, my lady.

LADY B. I must learn to fish.

CORNELIA Oh, but there are other things at our inn. Dozens of them. Even rest-cures.

LADY B. I think Lucas should have one of those.

CORNELIA (*to LADY B.*) Will you come and be our first guest?

LADY B. I will.

[*Enter* SEBASTIAN.]

CORNELIA And Sebastian must come too. It is really his hotel.

LADY B. Sebastian's?

CORNELIA Yes. He lent the money for it.

LUCAS I thought the place was to be built with your life savings, Parkin?

PARKIN Only partly, sir. I have not saved as much as that, even as your butler.

CORNELIA (*surprised and happy that he is going to share*) So you do believe in it?

PARKIN I believe in being a partner.

SEBASTIAN What is all this?

LADY B. Didn't you know that you were acting godmother to an engaged couple?

CORNELIA It is for us, the money, Sebastian. Parkin and me. You don't mind, do you?

SEBASTIAN But—but aren't you going to marry Lucas?

CORNELIA (*amused*) Oh, no. (*With a kind glance at him*) Poor Lucas! (*She means: Poor Lucas, being saddled with an engagement you never contemplated*) Besides, being married to Lucas would be like being married to one's uncle. (*Putting an arm through his*) Such a nice uncle, I haven't really done anything to upset you, have I, Lucas?

LUCAS (*with a bitterness too deep for expression*) Not a thing.

PARKIN If you will excuse me, I shall get tea.

[SEBASTIAN *shakes hands with him as he goes out.*]

CORNELIA I expect you hate losing Parkin, is that it?

ANDREW We hate losing you, Cornelia.

CORNELIA But you won't be losing me. You'll all come out and stay.

SEBASTIAN Out where, in Heaven's name?

CORNELIA Labrador.

SEBASTIAN Are you going back to that place?

CORNELIA I am. And don't call it 'that place'.

SEBASTIAN But, Cornelia, is *that* where the hotel is to be?

CORNELIA Yes. Do you want your money back?

SEBASTIAN Of course not! I shall *give* you the money; as a wedding present. If you want to throw it into Hudson Bay that is your affair.

CORNELIA I don't think *you* would make a very good guest, Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN No?

CORNELIA But I know something better.

SEBASTIAN What?

CORNELIA I know what you can do. I mean do with yourself, and with your money. At least some of it.

SEBASTIAN (*firmly*) I'm not starting a fox-fur farm, or anything like that. I hate animals.

CORNELIA No. This is something for the fellow-men you are so fond of.

SEBASTIAN What?

CORNELIA A hospital at Forks of Sagataw.

SEBASTIAN In that place? There aren't any people there.

CORNELIA No, but there are people scattered all over the territory, with no doctors or nurses. And there will be room at the other end of our landing-ground for a cottage-hospital.

SEBASTIAN And what do I do in the hospital? Make beds?

CORNELIA Oh, no. You fly the aeroplane.

SEBASTIAN What aeroplane?

CORNELIA The ambulance one.

SEBASTIAN I can't fly.

CORNELIA Six months ago Parkin couldn't fish.

ANDREW (*laughing*) Cornelia, you're incomparable.

SEBASTIAN Well, it's a proposition.

CORNELIA There aren't many people who can make history just by spending money they don't want.

SEBASTIAN *And* by flying an aeroplane over god-forsaken country.

CORNELIA You and Parkin will soon be the best-known people in the North-west.

[*Enter PARKIN with the tea trolley. He stands up-stage, arranging the things.*]

LADY B. I *am* going to enjoy that visit to Sagataw.

SEBASTIAN Are you going?

LADY B. I am going to be the first guest. Even if it means shutting up my little house in Golders Green. You know, the one with the cinema round the corner. Are you coming, Lucas?

LUCAS I don't fish.

LADY B. You could do a chore in Sebastian's hospital. It's very fashionable just now to be earthy.

PARKIN If you came, sir, I can promise you that the cups will not be stoneware. Nor chipped.

LUCAS (*dryly*) I shall take care of that. My wedding present to you both will be a tea-set.

CORNELIA I suppose we couldn't have this one, Lucas?

LUCAS Do you want it?

CORNELIA (*with her habitual understatement, which conveys so much more than the fashionable emphasis*) Yes, I should like it.

LUCAS Why?

CORNELIA The first time I ever came into this room we had tea out of it. You and Andrew and I. It is more you than anything else.

LUCAS (*trying not to be gratified*) Very well; it is yours.

CORNELIA Would it be very greedy to ask for something else? It's something you won't miss very much.

LUCAS What is it?

CORNELIA The little desk in my room.

LUCAS Parkin put that there.

CORNELIA Yes, I know.

LUCAS It has been yours ever since you came.

CORNELIA Oh, thank you.

[*Her attention goes to PARKIN.*]

LADY B. (*aware that the thaw has set in in LUCAS*) Will you hold my hand on that plane to Forks of Sagataw, Lucas?

LUCAS (*who, anyhow, hates being left out of things*) I might. I might. Come to think of it, I have some business to attend to there.

LADY B. Business?

LUCAS Yes. There is a man there I want to have the last word with.

ANDREW Everyone seems to be bound for the North-west but me.

CORNELIA (*catching this*) Oh, Andrew, but you must come. You of all people!

[*The unconscious tribute of this is too much for ANDREW, but only LADY B. is aware of his flushing face. He meets her friendly glance with the ghost of a shame-faced grin.*]

ANDREW And what is to happen to Wylie, Wylie, Jackson, and Wylie? I'm a poor man with my living to earn. You haven't a job for me, I suppose?

CORNELIA Well, we don't need a lawyer—yet awhile.

ANDREW Isn't there anything I could do to earn my keep? Night watchman? Astrologer? Shover-off at the jetty? Shovelling snow? Assistant at the local stores?

CORNELIA (*to this last*) That might do. (*Smiling at him*) I shall see what Barney says. (*With a delighted glance round at all of them*) What fun Barney is going to have!

CURTAIN

PATRIA

CHARACTERS—*in Order of Appearance*

WASTREL
SISTER
MOTHER
WIFE
LAWYER
POET (BERGEN)

OLD MAN
LABOURER
GIRL
YOUNG MOTHER

SMALL BOY

THE DUKE OF LOO AND AUTERRE
FRIEND
DAUGHTER
MERCHANT
FAIR BOY

DARK BOY
EMPEROR
CHANCELLOR
COLONEL OF HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY

COURT OFFICIAL
REPORTER

NOTE

Only two full sets are necessary for this play: the public-meeting scene in Act I, and the office scene in Act II. The rest are front scenes, and should be done with lighting and a couple of props; not ‘impressionistically’, but as a scene is done in intimate revue. Act I, Scene 2, for instance, is a long bedroom mirror and a floor-lamp; Scene 4 in the same act is two easy-chairs and the same floor-lamp with a different shade.

ACT I

SCENE 1

The Scene is the living-room of a workman's house. The furniture is conventional—the dresser, for instance, with its rows of plates, and the table and easy-chairs, might belong to almost any country in Europe. But there must be an air of wellbeing in the room, an atmosphere of security and comfort.

The WASTREL is standing by the table—he is about twenty-three, shiftless, good-looking, humourless. His sister, pleasant and matter of fact, is putting down dishes on the clean cloth with an air of protest.

WASTREL There's never a meal ready when I come home.

SISTER If you came home at meal-times there would be.

WASTREL I suppose you grudge me the food I eat now.

SISTER You needn't try to pick a quarrel here. Keep that for your street-corners, and those who have nothing better to do than argue.

WASTREL That's a nice way to treat your brother when he comes in tired and hungry.

SISTER Tired with what? Talking? Or holding up the walls of the Town Hall? It would suit you better to get a job instead of talking your head off from morning till night.

WASTREL And where am I to get a job?

SISTER Where did you ever look for one?

WASTREL You know quite well that there is no work to be had.

SISTER No work that you would take, you mean. There are roads being made, and bridges built, and the lake dammed to make power, and men are working at these. But you wouldn't think of doing that. It would be a waste of your talents, wouldn't it?

WASTREL That's right, sneer! Show your ignorance. If I were to take work on the bridges I'd be merely doing a man who was better fitted for it out of a job.

SISTER You'd be doing yourself a power of good, though. You could do with some muscle.

WASTREL I can't help it if you admire brawn in a man.

SISTER The man I'm going to marry has more than brawn. He has self-respect. And that doesn't mean being too proud to work at something you think is beneath you. It means paying your way, and being good at your job.

WASTREL It's men like that one of yours that keep this country where it is, dying in slavery.

SISTER You eat very well for a dying slave.

WASTREL I tell you, there will never be prosperity in Creeland until she takes the yoke of Tainia from her neck.

SISTER Oh, don't be silly. I don't suppose there are many countries in the world as well off as we are today. I haven't any yoke on my neck. And the only yoke you have on is your tie.

WASTREL I tell you that last year Tainia took out of Creeland two hundred and fifty thousand more than she put into it!

SISTER I don't know what that means, and I don't believe for a moment that you do either. You heard someone say it. And I expect he heard someone else say it.

WASTREL Why should thousands of Tainians come here and rob us of our bread!

SISTER Because they let tens of thousands of us go there and rob them of their bread. And they make better bread.

WASTREL Well, it won't be for long. Creeland won't stand much more. Creeland wants freedom, and she is going to have it.

SISTER What's wrong with you is too much freedom. You've had nothing to do all your life but eat meals you haven't worked for, and sleep a sleep you haven't earned. You're a shame to your family.

WASTREL A shame, am I? You just wait. You'll be walking backwards out of my presence one of these days.

SISTER It was always best to keep an eye on you.

WASTREL Yes? Well, keep on looking at me. I've joined the Patrias.

SISTER Joined the——! Joined that gang! Where did you get the entrance money?

WASTREL There isn't any entrance.

SISTER Oh, free, is it?

WASTREL Yes, free to any who love Creeland.

SISTER And did they ask you what you had done for Creeland?

WASTREL No, they asked what I was prepared to do.

SISTER And what did you say?

WASTREL I said I was willing to die for her.

SISTER Well, that wasn't a bad idea. You didn't offer to do it straight away, did you?

WASTREL That's right, my girl. Make fun of it. But you'll be singing a different tune one of these days. Creeland is going to be free. She isn't going to bow the knee any more——

SISTER Oh, you make me sick! You and your silly meaningless phrases. Who's bowing a knee? No one ever thought of such a thing. It wasn't until folks like you had time to stand round street-corners and talk that anyone mentioned knees and yokes and things. You can't do a decent day's work, and you'd like to shove the blame on someone else. You'd like to be a somebody——

[Enter the MOTHER. She is middle-aged, tallish, and dignified with all the dignity of the woman who has her own particular place in the scheme of things and has never had that place questioned.]

MOTHER Are you two quarrelling?

SISTER No, I'm just telling him what a fool he is. He's joined the Patrias.

MOTHER What's that?

SISTER Haven't you been listening to him for the last six months? The League of the Patria Liberata. That's it, isn't it?

WASTREL That's it.

MOTHER Is it a paid job?

SISTER That's a good one.

WASTREL It isn't a job. It's a mission.

MOTHER Well, I never thought a son of mine would take help from a mission.

SISTER You don't understand. He's joined the people who are going to separate Creeland from the Tainian Empire. He's going to make us all free of the Tainian yoke. Aren't you?

MOTHER It's good your father isn't here.

WASTREL It's men like father who are a drag on the wheels of national progress. Self-satisfied, comfortable, selfish men who——

MOTHER That's hardly the way to talk about the father who has given you a roof all

these years for no return.

WASTREL A man who thinks the country is happy and healthy just because he happens to have a job.

MOTHER Your father has a job because he is the best workman for fifty miles, which is something you'll never be.

WASTREL I'm going to be something much bigger than that. I'm going to do something worth while.

SISTER People who throw bombs are always caught. Think it over.

WASTREL Don't be a fool. Who's talking about throwing bombs? And I need some money for clothes.

MOTHER Clothes? What is wrong with the suit you have?

WASTREL It's shabby. Besides, from now on I'm going to wear the kotan.

MOTHER Wear the kotan! You'll do no such thing. I never heard such nonsense.

WASTREL It's the national dress of our country. What is nonsensical about wearing it?

SISTER The toga was the national dress of Rome, but Romans don't parade about in togas nowadays.

MOTHER I won't have you dressing up and making a fool of yourself round the town. I think being idle has gone to your head.

WASTREL It isn't dressing up. It's wearing our national garb, the dress of our fathers.

MOTHER It *wasn't* the dress of your father, or his father before him. Or his grandfather. They wore ordinary coats like Christians. Only peasants wore the kotan. And that was hundreds of years ago.

WASTREL Yes. You said it. Hundreds of years. For hundreds of years we have imitated Tainia. Done what they did, worn what they wore. But that is going to stop. We are going back to our own things, to our own customs. We are going to be a nation again.

MOTHER This is the first time I've heard that we weren't one. And if wearing the kotan is necessary to make folks remember they're Creelanders, it doesn't say much for the folks.

WASTREL Well, if you won't give me the money, I'll have to get it somewhere else.

MOTHER Where would you get it?

SISTER He's going to hold up a bank. Then they'll give him a real national garb.

WASTREL Shut up, you. I could borrow it from Bergen.

MOTHER Who's that?

WASTREL THE Bergen. The poet.

SISTER *You* don't know Bergen!

WASTREL I do more than know him. I had lunch with him.

MOTHER Had your dinner with him? With Bergen?

WASTREL Yes, he happened to be in the office when we joined the Patrias; four others and me joined together. And he asked us all to lunch.

MOTHER What did he want with you?

SISTER It was a sort of King's Shilling. They can't run away now because they've taken his lunch.

WASTREL No one wants to run away. It's an honour to be one of any party that Bergen commands. He's a great man.

SISTER And you're going to be a great one too?

WASTREL I'm going to follow my destiny. And if you don't give me the money I'll get it from Bergen.

MOTHER I never heard that poets had any money to lend.

SISTER Oh, but this one's rolling. He's American. He wrote a long, long poem called 'Flame among the Lilies', and because every American pictured themselves as either a flame or a lily they lapped it up.

WASTREL You seem to know a lot.

SISTER I read more than I talk, you see. There are all those free libraries that we copied from Tainia.

WASTREL Well, since you know so much about Bergen, perhaps you'll believe that he'll lend me the money to buy clothes.

SISTER Why doesn't he put you all in uniform!

WASTREL We aren't soldiers.

SISTER I meant footmen.

MOTHER Why does he come here being silly if he's an American? That's what I want to know.

SISTER Oh, he's gone all romantic over us. He thinks we're a down-trodden race.

MOTHER I never heard such nonsense.

WASTREL He's right, I tell you! We are nothing but the serfs of Tainia. Why should

all our best men leave Creeland to go to Tainia?

MOTHER If they didn't they'd go to America. There isn't much chance for them here.

WASTREL There! You've said it yourself. We don't get a chance.

MOTHER It isn't Tainia's fault that the land is half water. What can anyone do about that?

WASTREL Drain the marshes. Put the people back on the land.

MOTHER You'd be a pretty sight behind a plough.

SISTER Oh, he wouldn't be behind a plough. He'd be a big pot in an office, doling out seed to the farmers.

MOTHER I know. I know quite well what ails you. It's what ails all the rest of your good-for-nothing friends. It's what ails our race, if you want to know. You want to be a big man without working for it. You wouldn't turn your hand to a decent job, but you're quite ready to stand on platforms and let your tongue wag and imagine you're somebody. It's the curse of our race that every empty good-for-nothing that is no use to his Maker or himself gets himself up on a platform and talks, while honest worthwhile people keep the country going for him.

WASTREL So I'm a good for nothing, am I?

MOTHER Well, you haven't shown me anything you were good for yet.

SISTER He's good for two eggs and half a loaf.

MOTHER Would you be apprenticed to a trade, like the rest of your folks? No, not you. A trade wasn't good enough for you. You were going to be somebody. And look at you!

WASTREL All right. You wait! When this country has its own Government there'll be jobs for everyone. And you won't be able to sneer because I'm not bringing in a paltry weekly wage. You wait and see!

MOTHER Where are you going?

WASTREL I'm going to ask Bergen for some money. He'll give it to me. And then I'm going to play pool.

MOTHER As to the money—well, we'll see about that.

WASTREL You mean you'll let me have it?

MOTHER I won't have you borrowing from strangers. No, I haven't any just now. But tomorrow we'll see.

WASTREL All right, but don't go back on your promise.

MOTHER And don't you let your father hear you talking this Patria nonsense. I don't want murder in the house. And it's murder it would be, don't make any mistake about that. Your father's a loyal Crelander.

[*Exit* WASTREL.]

SISTER Why did you promise him the money?

MOTHER Oh, let him play dressing himself up if he wants to. It will keep him out of worse things. Isn't every day I rise a burden to me with the fear of what he may be led into? Let him play at missions and things if he likes.

SISTER (*beginning to clear away*) You think it's only play?

MOTHER What else?

SISTER I don't know. There's a lot of men just like him in the country.

MOTHER But there's a lot more just like your father. Did you get the steak for him?

SISTER Yes, I put it in the cupboard. You know, when men start dressing up there's no saying what will happen.

MOTHER What are you frightened of?

SISTER I'm not frightened of anything. I just think there are too many wastrels wearing the kotan and swaggering around.

MOTHER What harm can they do? A lot of silly children. I'd like to warm their backsides for them!

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The Scene is the bedroom of the LAWYER and his WIFE; a conventional cheerless room.

The LAWYER is arranging his kotan before a long mirror, and his wife is standing a little apart, watching him. He is on the young side of middle-age, but run-to-seed. Ambitious but self-indulgent. She is a colourless woman, tired and disillusioned.

The kotan is a garment half-tunic, half-smock, reaching almost to the knees. It is made of coarse linen or fine wool, homespun and home-dyed, and embroidered on breast, back, cuffs, and hem with coloured embroidery. Over this, for outdoor wear, there is worn a sort of tippet reaching only to

the elbow.

WIFE I've said already that I'm not going, and I'm not!

LAWYER Yes, you are. And what's more, you'll sit on that platform and look as if you liked it. I'm not going to have it said that my wife sat there looking sour. Your face is getting chronically disapproving.

WIFE That's no wonder. What have I to approve of?

LAWYER Yourself, I suppose.

WIFE You don't even allow me to do that. I tell you, I'm not going to sit on any platform in the clothes I've got. I haven't had anything new—no, not even underclothes—for two years. Do you think I'm going to sit next these well-dressed women and have them pity me? I used to be smart myself once. I know what women think of dowds.

LAWYER Will there ever be born a woman who is not absorbed by the inessentials of life! My dear girl, if we put this thing through, the country will be so prosperous that you can have new dresses every day.

WIFE Not if I have you for a husband. You could be prosperous now if you would attend to your business like the other lawyers in this town, instead of sitting drinking and talking big with men like yourself. You've had two new suits in the last year, while neither I nor the children have had anything.

LAWYER In my profession one can't afford to look shabby. I should have thought that was obvious.

WIFE Buying a kotan has nothing to do with your profession. It's sheer vanity. Women may or may not appreciate the essentials of life, but they don't buy themselves expensive garments while their children go shabby. And you couldn't even be content with ordinary embroidery on it. You had to spend a fortune on special patterns and silver thread.

LAWYER It is well to teach the Patrias how beautiful the kotan can be.

WIFE You shouldn't have chosen that colour, then. It clashes horribly with your complexion.

LAWYER (*stung*) I wish you'd go and get your things on instead of standing there being unpleasant.

WIFE I'm not going to the meeting. I have no clothes. I'm surprised that you want so shabby a wife to be there.

LAWYER The Duchess is shabby enough.

WIFE The Duchess can afford to be. And it isn't the same kind of shabbiness. I suppose a man wouldn't see that. Besides, I disapprove of the whole business.

LAWYER Yes, you've said that before. And I say again, you aren't fit to judge. Stick to judging fresh herring in the market, and leave politics to those who understand them.

WIFE I'm not sure you shouldn't be in prison for what you are doing. I think it's silly of the Government to allow the Patrias to go screaming a lot of nonsense all over Creeland.

LAWYER The Government are far too busy deciding how the rest of Europe should be run to bother itself about Creeland. Which proves my point, that what Creeland needs is to be a kingdom by itself again.

WIFE And then everything will be marvellous, I suppose. The Golden Age come again!

LAWYER There will at least be work for everyone. And plums for a few. Creeland will be an independent country, administering its own revenue, bearing its own burdens, rejoicing in its own triumphs.

WIFE Don't bother rehearsing. And if we had been an independent country three years ago, when the floods came, what would have happened to us? If we hadn't been part of Tainia we should have been ruined. You never tell your audiences that, do you? It spoils that lovely climax about what happened in 1349.

LAWYER You know nothing about political economy. Tainia had to help us in the floods for her own sake.

WIFE Because we were part of her. That doesn't answer my question as to what would have happened to us if we had been a little country on our own.

LAWYER Oh, for God's sake, stop talking. One can't explain the elements of economy in five minutes. Why isn't this damned thing lying?

WIFE You've got it on back to front.

LAWYER Then why the hell didn't you tell me that before?

WIFE It didn't seem to make much difference. And it might have been the latest way of wearing the kotan for all I knew.

LAWYER Oh, God! how you try my patience!

WIFE What is trying your patience is the kotan. I feel the same when my hair won't go right. But I have to dress my hair, and you don't have to dress up in that

thing.

LAWYER For the last time, will you go and get your things on!

WIFE For the last time, I'm not going.

LAWYER All right. You don't go to the coast next week-end.

WIFE But you can't do that!

LAWYER Oh, can't I? I provide the money, don't I?

WIFE Yes, but——Yes, but that is the children's treat, not mine. It's been promised for three months. They've been counting the days. You couldn't go back on that.

LAWYER Well, it rests with you.

WIFE You mean, if I don't go and listen to you talking tonight, you'll punish the children?

LAWYER I mean just what I said. No smiles on the platform, no money for the coast. It rests with you whether the children go or not.

[There is a pause, and then the woman begins to move slowly to the door.]

WIFE I think the saddest and most helpless human being in all the world today is a wife with children and no money of her own.

LAWYER Well, you've got the vote. Why don't you do something about it?

WIFE It's not a vote we need. It's some kind of inoculation against falling in love with men like you!

CURTAIN

SCENE 3

The Scene is a public meeting in a hall.

To the left, as one looks at the stage, is a platform with the usual small table and glass, and two rows of chairs. To the right the audience extends backwards into the wings. The hall is full, and people are sitting on the sills of two deep-set arched windows at the back, and on top of the radiator between them. Across the wall behind the platform, and between the two windows, is spread a large flag bearing a scarlet crab on a gold ground. Another drapes the table.

On the platform is the poet, BERGEN, addressing the audience. He is an authentic poet, but he has dressed the part so conscientiously that he looks like a magazine scribbler; most romantic.

The chairman is the LAWYER. On the POET'S other hand is the DUKE OF LOO AND AUTERRE. He is so perfectly the aristocrat, impeccable, immaculate, that one's subsequent discovery that His Grace's ethics are not irreproachable leaves one shaken. In the front row of the platform party is the DUCHESS OF LOO—pince-nez and mile-long shoes—and two fashionably dressed women, all doting on the POET.

Behind this front row, there is a second one of lesser fry. The first in the row is the LAWYER'S WIFE. The second is the WASTREL.

All the men on the platform, except the DUKE, are wearing the kotan.

POET (*addressing the gathering*)—what this country suffered in 1349. The whole of that history has never been written. And why? Because so cowed and broken was the country, so bleeding from her wounds, that it was years, nay centuries, before she could think beyond the present needs of food and shelter. Art and literature lay dead, and with them the glory of Creeland. But nothing can kill the spirit of the Creelandish people. Today Creelanders are known all over the inhabited globe as men of worth and character. Men whose word is their bond, men whose grit has made the desert blossom, men whose imagination has flowered into some of the loveliest things in the whole history of art. And in the distant places have they forgotten the country that bred them? No! To the third and fourth generation they are Creelanders! (*Cheers*) When my grandparents left Creeland they settled on soil in America that had never known a plough. Barren, difficult soil. Today that soil is a garden. (*Cheers*) What our grandparents did for America, we can do for Creeland. One-seventh of our country is marshland, left to the wildfowl and the wind among the reeds. Drain these marshes and you will have great stretches of the finest soil in Europe. Our people will not have to go abroad or to Tainia for prosperity. They will not have to sacrifice their heritage, they will not have to spend their years in exile, they will not have to give the strength of their youth and the glory of their youth's achievement to the foreigner. Tainia has scorned us when we pleaded that the marshes should be drained so that our sons might have bread. She has squandered money—money that we have helped to contribute—in developing other parts of her empire, and laughed, yes laughed, at us, helpless and poor in our waterlogged plains.

She would give us no money!

[*At this there rises in the body of the hall a slight, elderly little man with a white pointed beard. He is rather like a terrier, with all a terrier's pertinacity.*]

WHITE BEARD Is it not a fact that ten years ago an estimate for draining the marshes was made, and it was found that no land in the world would be valuable enough to repay the cost?

POET There was an estimate, I believe. But that is a decade ago. The machinery for grappling with Nature improves every hour. Every hour man's victory over the elements becomes more complete, more splendid. It is time that Creeland profited by that victory. It is time that she stopped contributing to distant parts of the Tainian Empire, and spent her own money on her own needs. Let us govern ourselves. Let us be a free nation again, owing allegiance to no one, accounting to no one for the spending of our gold. Tainia will not drain our waste lands for us. Very well, we shall drain them!

WHITE BEARD And where, may I ask, are you going to get the money?

[*The LAWYER rises at this as if to rebuke the interrupter, but the POET goes on, and the LAWYER resumes his seat.*]

POET The money will be forthcoming. Creeland has never failed either in patriotism or self-sacrifice. Since 1349 her history has been one of frugal living and great deeds. To recover the marshes will be as glorious a campaign as any that she has ever fought, and the prize more splendid, more worthy, than any she has shed her life-blood for. Do you think that Creeland will fail when asked for sacrifice? (*Cheers*) No! And we have proof of it here tonight. Tonight we have with us on this platform a nobleman whom it is hardly necessary to introduce to a Creelandish audience. The Duke of Loo and Auterre (*cheers*) is known to all of you as a great Creelandish landowner, and as a direct descendant of the old Creelandish kings. He is also, as you may know, the owner of many thousands of acres of marsh-lands. On these marshes are bred the finest wildfowl in Europe, and from these wildfowl the Duke of Loo obtains a very satisfactory revenue. But the Duke of Loo, as befits his ancestry, is not only a landowner, he is also a patriot. He is willing to sacrifice his personal profits in order that these marshes may be drained, and men and women may people the reclaimed land with happy homesteads. (*Loud cheers*) It is a very fine example that he has set us. We are proud of him. And proud of the country that breeds such men. It is a country second to none, a country that should be at no

foreigner's beck and call. For too long we have accepted the superiority of Tainia. We have adopted their dress, their customs, their language. We, with a language and literature of our own, a language and literature as fine as anything in Europe, have basely disowned and deserted them in order to follow Tainian fashions. In order to imitate and flatter the nation that conquered us, the nation that made us a province, the nation that ever since 1349 has kept us dependent and poor.

WHITE BEARD (*bobbing up again*) Is it not a fact that if Tainia had not annexed us in 1349 this country would have been parcelled out among the surrounding states, and that today there would be no Creeland? (*This speech is punctuated with cries of 'Sit down!'*)

LAWYER (*who has risen*) This is hardly the appropriate time to ask questions. Just make a note if you disagree with something the speaker says, and——

WHITE BEARD I disagree with everything he says. I can't write shorthand.

LAWYER Well, please restrain yourself. It is hardly good manners to keep interrupting.

WHITE BEARD It is hardly good policy to tell lies.

POET Our friend seems hardly in sympathy with our cause. (*Laughter and cries of 'Put him out!'*) No, no. We are working for freedom, and it shall never be said that we denied freedom of opinion to any man. (*Cheers*) I have not much more to say, my friends. It has been said of me that I am a stranger, an intruder. (*'No, no!'*) That because I was not born in Creeland her cause is not mine. But I *am* a Creelander, in blood and tradition. In my American childhood I was hushed to sleep with Creelandish folk-songs, the tales they told me were the tales of the Creelandish heroes, the land I saw in my mind was not the dark hills of my native state, but the long flats of my father's country, with the lake water shining like beaten silver and the wildfowl calling among the reeds. I have Creeland in my blood, in my heart, in my soul, and my life's dream has been to work for her.

VOICE FROM THE BACK You made your money in America, didn't you?

POET Yes, every penny of it. And I bring it all to you. (*Laughter and cheers*) That flag, my friends (*waving an arm at the flag behind him*), the Creeland crab, waved over the heads of our men on that fatal day in 1349, it waved still at nightfall over their slain bodies. For hundreds of years Tainia has quartered the Crab with her Panther as a conqueror's right, and Creeland in a base humility has floated the standard of Tainia from her topmost turret, so that the very winds that spread it must have mourned in shame. But that is over. Creeland is waking. We will make

Creeland a country where Creelanders are ruled by their countrymen for Creeland's good, and where the flag that waves from the towers will be the flag our fathers knew, the Crab of Creeland. Therefore I say to you: 'Ha ru sin kali laft!' (*Hysterical cheers*)

[*The POET sits down and the LAWYER rises.*]

LAWYER There seems to be little doubt as to the sentiments of the meeting. Before the questions are asked, perhaps the Duke of Loo would like to say a few words. (*Cheers*)

DUKE I—er—never—er—like saying—er—a few words. But I should like—er—to express—er—the great pleasure it—er—gives me—er—to appear on the same platform as—er—so distinguished—a poet and patriot—er—as Mr Bergen. (*Sits down. Loud cheers*)

LAWYER Now would anyone like to ask a question?

VOICE No, unanimous. (*Laughter*)

LAWYER (*to WHITE BEARD*) What about you, sir? Don't you want to ask questions?

WHITE BEARD I want to, but I'm not going to.

POET Why not?

WHITE BEARD Because if I asked all the questions I want to ask I should have to walk home.

LAWYER Then anyone else?

[*A large, stolid man of the labouring class lifts himself slowly and shyly to a standing position.*]

LABOURER I want to know: does all this mean any disloyalty to the Emperor? Cos if it does, count me out.

POET No, no. Creeland as a free state will, I hope, be as loyal to the Emperor as she is today.

[*The LABOURER scratches his head in a puzzled fashion and sits down slowly.*]

LAWYER Anyone else anything to say?

[*A GIRL stands up from her seat at the end of a row. She is dark and pale, earnest but not fanatical, obviously nervous and unhappy in her position, but driven by a conviction stronger than her fears.*]

GIRL Yes, I have something to say. (*The POET makes a surprised movement, as if to restrain her, and then thinks better of it*) If no one else will say it, I must. (*Addressing the POET*) What you are doing is a sin, a crime. A crime against humanity and civilisation. You are rousing hatreds that were sleeping, that would have died in their sleep. You set peaceful people at each other's throats for no other reason than to feed your own insane vanity. You rake up old injustices and weep crocodile-tears over them, you invent new ones and inflame the minds of simple people with a tale of fancied wrongs. You distort history as you please, and there is no one to stop you, because the people who know the truth don't go to your meetings. They despise you for a hypocrite and a poseur. Because they think you beneath contempt, there is no one to throw the lie in your face. To remind people that Creeland has never been a helpless province of Tainia. That she has been a partner, a partner in one of the greatest Empires the world has ever known. With all a partner's rights and privileges. That alone she would have been nothing, nothing! That everything she has, everything she is and has been, she owes to Tainia. You make the people drunk with dreams of Utopia that you know can never come true. Why don't you tell them the truth: that we are as happy and as prosperous as any country in the world today, and that we owe that to Tainia. You don't tell them that, do you? There is nothing romantic in that! It is far easier and more glorious to rouse the discontented few with cheap patriotism. (*Turning on the crowd*) Growl if you like! I love my country as much as any of you. But I'm not blinded by flag-wagging or doped by cheap sentiment. I don't cheer when some fool tells me that we are the salt of the earth. (*To the POET*) You grow eloquent on the glorious history of Creeland. Creeland! Whose history is the blackest and most disgraceful in Europe. One long tale of treachery and ingratitude! Why look back on that as if it were something to be proud of? You talk of our glorious traditions; you would revive the language and the literature of the Creelanders. There isn't any literature, and you know it. All the literature the Creelanders ever produced were folk-tales, handed down by word of mouth because they couldn't write. As for the language, there isn't a single person in this hall tonight who knows a word of it. It is so dead that it has no words for anything that came into being later than two hundred years ago. It has no connection with modern life. And yet you demand that it should be learned and talked again. And when you speak a tag of it your poor dupes cheer like maniacs. There is some excuse for them. They don't think. But there is no excuse for you. You know what you are doing, and you are doing it deliberately. You are fostering a petty nationalism so that you can be the one to stand on the hilltops and preach the word. What you are doing is the sin against the Holy Ghost! How can you do it? Wasn't your own

glory enough for you? Wasn't it enough for you that people said: 'That is Bergen, the poet?' Wasn't there enough incense? Why did you have to offer up Peace on your altar too? Why did you do it! Why did you do it! (*She drops on to her chair in tears, leaning forward on the chair in front, her head dropped on her crossed arms*)

[*The speech, which has been punctuated with hostile demonstrations, is succeeded by a moment of complete silence which threatens to become awkward. Something personal and urgent in her words has abashed them. Then the WASTREL rises from his seat in the second row.*]

WASTREL A vote of confidence in Mr Bergen!

[*A fair girl, very pretty, who has throughout been sitting in an adoring attitude in the front row of the audience springs to her feet and cries:*

Three cheers for Bergen the Liberator!

[*The cheers are given enthusiastically, the audience rising one by one until all are standing. They break spontaneously into the hymn of the Patria Liberata. This is succeeded by another cheer, and people begin to disperse, reluctantly and with many backward glances at the platform where the POET, having donned with a flourish the tippet which has during the evening adorned the back of his chair, and had a few words with the DUKE, is now signing autographs.*]

MOTHER (*to small boy*) Here. Give that to him and ask him to sign his name.
(*Gives him paper and pencil*)

SMALL BOY (*hanging back*) I can't. I'll laugh.

MOTHER What would you laugh at?

SMALL BOY He looks so funny in that thing.

MOTHER (*cuffing him*) Don't talk silly.

SMALL BOY What do you want to hit me for! He does look funny! (*Shows signs of tears*)

MOTHER Oh, come along home! (*Grabs him by the arm and goes out angrily*)

[*The DUKE as he comes down from the platform on his way to the cloakroom exit notices an acquaintance, a jolly red-faced man.*]

DUKE Hello, my friend. How is the filly doing?

FRIEND Oh, letting down well, I think.

DUKE What brought you to this affair?

FRIEND Curiosity mostly. As man to man, sir, I'm a bit surprised to see you with that gang. You can't believe in their policy!

DUKE My dear good friend, if they drain these marshes for me I shall believe anything I am told to believe.

FRIEND But they may never get to that stage.

DUKE If they don't, no harm done. (*Indicating the dark girl, who has not moved since she finished her protest*) Distressing scene, very. Who is she, do you know?

FRIEND Never seen her before, to my knowledge.

DUKE Plucky, you know. Always admire people who speak out. Can't afford it myself. Well. Go easy with that filly. Mustn't run them too hard when they're young. (*With a backward glance at the girl, reflectively*) Mustn't run them too hard.

[*Exit DUKE into ante-room left, while FRIEND goes out right.*]

[*The POET leaves the platform party gossiping and comes down to the motionless girl.*]

POET (*after a moment*) What made you do it, Margot?

GIRL (*without looking up*) I told you I should. I warned you.

POET But what good has your protest done? You've only distressed yourself for nothing.

GIRL Oh, leave me alone. Go away.

POET Margot, I wish you——

GIRL (*blindly gathering her bag and gloves and getting up*) Oh, don't speak to me! You're despicable, vain fool that you are! I'm sick with shame for you——

[*GIRL goes out hastily.*]

LAWYER (*coming down to the POET*) You were going to do me the honour of coming home to supper with me. (*As the POET does not immediately answer*) There won't be much more than bread and cheese, I'm afraid.

POET (*recovering his pose with a bang*) Creelandish bread and Creelandish cheese! What could be better, my friend?

CURTAIN

SCENE 4

The Scene is the drawing-room of the MERCHANT'S house; opulent but not devoid of taste. It is evening. There are present the MERCHANT himself a man between fifty and sixty, solid, shrewd, good-hearted; and his DAUGHTER, the pretty fair girl who called for cheers at the meeting.

DAUGHTER So you see, Father? You do see, don't you?

MERCHANT No, I don't see. I think the whole thing is high-falutin' nonsense. Who wants to be free? Aren't half the men in the Tainian Parliament Creelanders? Isn't the present Chancellor of Tainia a Creelander? And then you talk about a crusade to free Creeland! Sheer nonsense, that's what it is.

DAUGHTER It isn't. It's great, and glorious, and splendid.

MERCHANT Nonsense, I say. This poet fellow is turning the heads of all you idle women. That's all. Can't think how the fellow has the nerve to come here and adopt us without even by-your-leave. He's always jabbering about the injustice of Tainia's annexing us in thirteen-something. But that's not half as staggering as the way he has annexed us.

DAUGHTER But he is one of us, wherever he was born. His heart and soul are in Creeland.

MERCHANT If I'm any judge of a character—and I ought to be—his heart and soul are in Bergen the poet. A conceited donkey, that's what I think of your hero, my girl.

DAUGHTER But you'll be nice to him, won't you, Father?

MERCHANT Well, I've managed to put up with your modern friends, I think I can support your historical ones.

DAUGHTER And I've put up with your business ones, darling, so that makes us quits. You know, Father, for a business-man you're not enterprising.

MERCHANT Eh?

DAUGHTER I think your arteries must be hardening. A live man would join the Patrias and get in on the ground-floor. A live man would want his share of the new prosperity.

MERCHANT New Prosperity! New heaven and earth! Oh, stick to buying frocks, my dear. You do know something about that.

DAUGHTER Thank you. But you don't know what the Patrias are going to do. You don't know what they are going to make of—

MERCHANT They're going to make fools of themselves. I only hope they don't make a fool of Creeland at the same time. The Tainia papers are laughing at us already.

DAUGHTER Let them laugh! What is there to laugh at?

MERCHANT Well, there's Bergen. You can't take seriously a man who parades about in fancy-dress.

DAUGHTER But it isn't fancy-dress! It's the national costume.

MERCHANT National bunk! His ancestors wouldn't have been found dead in it. A lot of publicity-mad poseurs, that's what the Patrias are. And when they're not that they're place-seekers, like that Lawyer chap.

DAUGHTER The Duke of Loo doesn't need publicity, and he can't very well be called a place-seeker.

MERCHANT (*reflectively*) No. No. I wonder what old Loo is getting out of it.

DAUGHTER Oh, Father, you're disgusting. Big business has ruined your mind.

MERCHANT Let me tell you something I learned in business, my dear. Unity is strength; that's what I learned. As long as Creeland stays part of the Tainian Empire she can't go far wrong. Unity is strength.

[*Enter a* SERVANT.]

SERVANT (*announcing*) Mr Bergen.

[*Enter the* POET. *He is wearing the kotan with the tippet. As he enters the room he takes off the tippet with a flourish and throws it over his left arm as one carries a coat.*]

[*Exit* SERVANT.]

MERCHANT Mr Bergen. Delighted to meet you, sir.

POET Ah, my dear young lady! My very dear young lady!

DAUGHTER We're so glad to see you. Do sit down.

POET But you?

DAUGHTER No. I have a surprise for you. I meant to keep it till after dinner. Especially as I have just got this frock for your benefit—oh, but I'm telling you. (*Giggles*) You talk to Father. I shan't be long.

POET It is exceedingly kind of you and your daughter to invite me. In my busy life it is a great joy to come to a quiet home for a little.

MERCHANT Well, it was a quiet home, until you started this Patria business, Mr Bergen. Now I'm always being told that I have no imagination and precious little patriotism.

POET It must be pleasant to know that you have a daughter as perspicacious, as full of vision, in this generation as you were in the last.

MERCHANT (*a little staggered*) That's a nice way of telling me that I'm a back-number.

POET One doesn't expect the fathers to appreciate the League of the Patria Liberata. They have made their own creed, and lived their lives according to it. It is among the sons and daughters that we look for this new nationalism.

MERCHANT Well, well. So I don't count in the scheme of things at all. And all this time I've been thinking what a successful fellow I was, and what a good Creelander. Very humiliating.

POET You don't take us seriously, do you, Mr Marchant? That is where you give yourself away. Ten years ago you would have been interested in us, as you would have been interested in any new manifestation. But now you are losing grip.

MERCHANT Losing grip, am I?

POET Because something is new, and you don't understand it immediately, you dismiss it. Isn't that so?

MERCHANT I certainly don't understand this movement for so-called freedom. And all this wearing of strange garments.

POET But what have you against the kotan? It is becoming, convenient, and comfortable. You would look very well in a kotan yourself. You have just the build for it.

MERCHANT (*laughing*) No, no! You don't get round me that way! I know all about that. That is what my bagmen used to say to housewives, in the old days when I was in a small way of business. You won't win me by flattery.

POET (*pained*) I had no such thought, I assure you. One only flatters when one wants something. If you had been your daughter's brother, I might perhaps have been tempted to flatter. We need progressive men.

MERCHANT Well, I've been called many things in my time, but this is the first time

anyone has called me an old fogey.

POET (*airily*) It's inevitable. Someday even I shall have a young whipper-snapper tell me to my face that I have ceased to think for the future. It is strange, though, to see a man so young and so vigorous as you still are, so settled in mind. Does an enterprising child produce a protective conservatism in the father? It is an interesting theory.

MERCHANT My dear sir, you make me feel like a beetle on a pin.

POET That is better than feeling like a cricket on the hearth, which is how you were feeling when I came in. You are too young a man to be satisfied.

MERCHANT How old do you think I am?

POET Fifty? Fifty-two?

MERCHANT I am fifty-eight.

POET I shouldn't have thought it. But I still think you are too young to be satisfied.

MERCHANT I think I have every right to be satisfied. I started life as a barefoot boy.

POET Ah! On the plains of Creeland! A shepherd?

MERCHANT No. In the slums of Creeville. A chain-boy.

POET But you were ambitious?

MERCHANT I was ambitious all right. I got there.

POET Ah! You got there. And is your highest ambition a good home and a charming daughter?

MERCHANT Well, you can't deny that I've done well.

POET Excellently. But for a man of your calibre that is nothing. A man of your calibre should be controlling a state, not a business.

MERCHANT Tut, tut! More flattery!

POET My dear Mr Marchant, a man who has created a colossal business out of nothing, a man who runs that business as smoothly as you do yours, can run anything. I'm surprised that you are content to sit and fold your hands over your paunch.

MERCHANT My dear sir——!

POET I speak metaphorically.

MERCHANT (*feebly*) I have my duties. I'm a magistrate. And I play golf. And I'm on the local Hospital Committee.

POET You decide on the number of new sheets, I suppose. Oh, my dear sir, you

devastate me. Your sublime unconsciousness——!

MERCHANT Unconsciousness of what?

POET Your sublime unconsciousness of the latent talent, the immense potentialities, that are yours.

MERCHANT I suppose that's telling me that I'm dead from the neck up.

POET And what will you do when you haven't any Hospital Committee? When all your little voluntary busy-nesses are taken from you? Will you just play golf? Like a retired colonel? A man like you, with brains and initiative? Golf! Morning and afternoon! My God!

MERCHANT I don't know what you're talking about. There will always be voluntary busy-nesses, as you call them.

POET Oh, no, there won't. A year or two hence when the league of the Patria Liberata has made Creeland a nation again, the state will run the services. Such men as have vision and talent, men whose arteries have not grown hard (*the* MERCHANT *winces*) will be running the services from headquarters, and the amateurs will be— playing golf.

MERCHANT You have great faith in yourself, Mr Bergen.

POET Not in myself, no. But I have great faith in tides.

MERCHANT Tides?

POET Tides. You in your business must have known how a wave of desire goes through the people for this or for that. A strange, spontaneous, universal thing. That is so, isn't it?

MERCHANT Yes. Yes, I've noticed that.

POET Just now there is a wave of nationalism. It has nothing to do with me.

MERCHANT You are just riding the wave.

POET The whole youth of Creeland is rising in a flood to demand their freedom.

MERCHANT And do I understand that you are going to separate us from Tainia? To make Creeland a kingdom?

POET No, a free State.

MERCHANT You won't do it.

POET No? We have youth, we have enthusiasm, we have forty-thousand members, and more joining at the rate of a hundred a day.

MERCHANT You have reckoned without one thing.

POET The conservative element?

MERCHANT No, the popularity of the Emperor. Conservatives you might win over. They are a class, and you know where you have them. The popularity of the Emperor belongs to no class or creed. It's universal. And enormous. You won't be able to beat that down.

POET Suppose we enrolled the Emperor in the League?

MERCHANT Eh? Are you crazy?

POET Suppose we got him to give his blessing to the new State?

MERCHANT His Government might have something to say to it!

POET His Government will be forced to give us our freedom to prevent civil war. The Emperor will be free to give us his blessing if he pleases. If he does he will still be popular. And Creland will be free. I am afraid I am boring you. The subject is so near my heart. And it can have nothing to do with you.

MERCHANT Nothing to do with me! It seems that it has everything to do with me.

POET Because we shall probably nationalise your business?

MERCHANT Nationalise——!

POET But that won't worry you. You'll be well looked after. And you have your golf. It's a pity, though, that you don't take a practical interest in politics. A man like you could be very valuable to us. A man used to running Big Business. Are you really settled at the fireside? Wouldn't you like to come into the fight again? You must have had some wonderful fights in your time!

MERCHANT Ay. I've had some rare fights.

POET Doesn't fighting appeal to you any more? Not sixty yet, and great prizes to be won! And you creep out of the arena, and leave the dust and the laurels to lesser men.

MERCHANT Are you going to give laurels to that Lawyer chap?

POET Yes, if you're not there to prevent it.

MERCHANT A fine thing it would be to be ruled by that fellow!

POET He's an able man, very shrewd. Not a man to enlist in a cause he didn't believe in.

MERCHANT Oh, he'd put his hand into hell if he thought he could pull out a plum. He wants watching. You all do, it seems to me. *You* certainly want watching.

POET Why don't you watch us at closer quarters?

MERCHANT Isn't this close enough for you?

POET Come and hear the Duke of Loo speak——

MERCHANT (*laughing*) No, thank you. No, thank you! I've heard him.

POET (*smiling*) Well, perhaps not. Come and hear me speak next Tuesday.

MERCHANT And have you say that I've joined you?

POET Oh, no. Not on the platform. Sneak in at the back. Come in a mask, if you like. Just come and listen. Find out what we are going to do with all the old men when Creeland is free.

MERCHANT Upon my soul——!

POET Listen, my friend. We have a motto. Unity is strength. You believe that, don't you? If we are all pulling together there is nothing that we can't achieve. With unity there is nothing in all the world——

[*Enter the DAUGHTER, wearing a kotan.*]

DAUGHTER There! That is what I wanted to show you.

POET A kotan for women! My dear young lady, what a splendid idea!

DAUGHTER You like it?

POET I think it is charming. And most becoming.

DAUGHTER Don't you like it, Father?

MERCHANT It looks just like a sack to me.

DAUGHTER Oh, father!

MERCHANT If I asked you to wear a thing like that you'd scream with rage.

DAUGHTER Wait and see how popular they are going to be.

MERCHANT Well, no one is denying that they're good advertisement. You should have been a business-man, Mr Bergen.

POET And you should be governing a State. Join the Patrias, my friend.

DAUGHTER Come and convert him over dinner. It's a Creeland dinner. I took ages thinking it out. Every single thing is Creelandish. And all the food is in the Creelandish colours.

MERCHANT My God!

DAUGHTER And there's crab, of course.

MERCHANT I don't know that it's quite the thing to eat the national emblem.

DAUGHTER Have you been telling Father how universal the movement is?

POET Ah, yes. From the highest in the land to the poorest——

DAUGHTER And how far from the old ideas of national enmity? Because we are going to be free doesn't mean that we hate Tainians. We shall do everything in a spirit of—of—— What's the word?

POET Mutual good-will and tolerance.

DAUGHTER That's it. Mutual good-will and tolerance.

[*They go out.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 5

A street. Two small boys, one fair and one dark, are playing a form of hopscotch on the pavement. The dark boy is performing and the other watching. The DARK BOY, seeing the fair boy's attention momentarily distracted, edges farther over the line the tile he has already played. The FAIR ONE'S glance comes back a moment too soon.

FAIR BOY Hey, that's cheating!

DARK BOY Who's cheating?

FAIR BOY You are!

DARK BOY I am not.

FAIR BOY You are. I saw you.

DARK BOY Are you calling me a liar?

FAIR BOY I'm calling you a cheat.

DARK BOY Call me a cheat, would you? Bloody Tainian! Why didn't you stay in your own country?

FAIR BOY What's that got to do with it? You were cheating, and I saw you.

DARK BOY You're a liar! All Tainians are liars.

FAIR BOY What's that?

DARK BOY I said all Tainians are liars.

FAIR BOY Take that back, you rotten scabby little Crelander, or I'll maul you!

DARK BOY Try it. Just try it. Who put their prisoner's eyes out in 1349?

FAIR BOY We did not. We did not. It's a lie.

DARK BOY All Tainians are——

[*The FAIR BOY leaps on him.*]

FAIR BOY (*between blows*) You shut your mouth about Tainia. I'll teach you to tell lies about my country!

[*They are wading into each other with a will, when a PASSER-BY appears.*]

PASSER-BY Here! here! What's all this?

[*He makes an effort to part them, and after a moment does separate them, not from any failing in spirit on the part of the combatants, but because of their mutual curiosity as to the intruder.*]

PASSER-BY (*holding them both by the collar*) Now then, what's all this? What's the row about?

DARK BOY (*pointing at the fair one*) He's a Tainian!

PASSER-BY Well, what's wrong with that?

DARK BOY (*inspecting PASSER-BY in amazement*) What's——! Say, where have you been living!

[*With a simultaneous spring the boys are into each other again. The CURTAIN comes down on them fighting furiously and the man renewing his attempts to separate them.*]

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE 1

The Scene is the private apartments of the EMPEROR OF TAINIA.

The EMPEROR *is dining informally with the* CHANCELLOR OF TAINIA *and the* COLONEL OF THE HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY. *They are wearing orders, since all three are afterwards going on to a ball. Dinner is over, and they are now lingering over their port.*

EMPEROR What amazes me, my dear Chancellor, is that a people as hard-headed as your compatriots should have been roused to such hysteria.

CHANCELLOR It isn't so much hysteria, sir, as a frothing at the mouth.

EMPEROR Do you suggest that they are mad?

CHANCELLOR For the time being. You can always send a Creelander mad by telling him what a fine fellow he is. It works like a drug. I used it a lot in my election days. Tell a Creelandish audience that they are the most magnificent specimens of manhood that the world has ever known, and they'll cheer till they're hoarse. If you told a Tainian audience that, they'd shuffle their feet and look silly.

COLONEL Yes, the way to rouse a Tainian is just the opposite. Tell him you never knew such a muddle-headed crew as the Tainians, and he's your friend for life. I used to use that on my men when I was a subaltern. They used to say: 'Nice friendly-spoken chap, isn't he?'

EMPEROR So you think that Creeland is merely amusing itself according to its lights. Nevertheless, I think I see the writing on the wall.

COLONEL What does it say, sir?

EMPEROR It says 1349.

[All three laugh a little.]

CHANCELLOR Yes, you can always get a cheer out of them with 1349. I used that often too.

EMPEROR How unscrupulous of you, my dear Chancellor! You couldn't have believed in it.

CHANCELLOR Who expects a politician to be scrupulous? As for belief——!

EMPEROR What do you believe in, you old cynic? I've often wondered.

CHANCELLOR If I told you, sir, you would think that I was merely being a politician again.

EMPEROR Risk it. Tell me. What do you believe in?

CHANCELLOR I believe in the Tainian Empire, and in its power for good.

EMPEROR What! After forty years of annexation, punitive expeditions, secret treaties, and business concessions!

CHANCELLOR After all that. It's an imperfect world, sir, but one of the less imperfect things in it is the Tainian Empire.

COLONEL My dear Chancellor, I salute you.

CHANCELLOR That's that second glass of port. I knew I shouldn't have had it. What amuses Your Majesty?

EMPEROR I think it amusing that Creeland—the Creeland which so loudly hates the Empire—should have provided the best Chancellor the Empire ever had.

CHANCELLOR Creeland does not hate the Empire. You must not think that, sir. These vociferous patriots are not Creeland. I have not lived in my native country for thirty years, but I know the people I was born among. They are a slow-witted, humourless race, ungenerous in spirit and distrustful by nature. And because of that the world does not love them, and they in their hearts are conscious of the world's contempt. That is why they cheer when they are told they are fine fellows. It reassures some inner doubt in them. They can be persuaded to much by flattery, but I do not believe that they can be flattered into leaving the Empire. They may not like Tainia—she is a constant reminder of their own inferiority—but you personally, sir, and all your family, they adore, and in their minds you personify the Empire. They will go nowhere that you do not lead.

EMPEROR I wish they could hear you pleading their cause.

CHANCELLOR So do I. They don't love me.

COLONEL Aren't they proud of you?

CHANCELLOR My dear Colonel, no Creelander is ever proud of another; only envious. It is not for nothing that the national emblem of Creeland is the crab.

COLONEL A pleasing race. Why do we bother keeping them? Let's give them their freedom, and half a crown to themselves, and get rid of them.

EMPEROR What do you say, Chancellor? Shall we lose Creeland? Then I shan't have to go there any more.

COLONEL Don't you like going, sir?

EMPEROR Have you ever seen one of those wanted-dead-or-alive photographs outside a police-station, with a crowd standing round it gaping and silent? That's me in Creeland.

COLONEL But they love you.

EMPEROR As one loves sunsets—to be admired but not applauded. Besides, there's the wildfowl shooting. They always expect me to shoot, and it's damp in a punt and cramped and altogether uncomfortable. A most unholy and uncivilised business. A sort of return to the primeval slime.

COLONEL In that case our course is perfectly clear. We all three join the league for the liberation of Creeland. (*To the* CHANCELLOR) Wouldn't you like to become popular again in your native country? Now's your chance.

CHANCELLOR And what would Tainia say to me?

COLONEL Oh, the Tainians wouldn't mind. No one ever thinks of Creeland, and no one would miss her if she went. What do you say, sir?

EMPEROR A charming suggestion, Colonel. I don't deny that you tempt me. Nevertheless, my whole energies are going to be devoted to keeping the blasted country.

COLONEL Alack, sir, why?

EMPEROR In the first place Creeland hasn't the resources to make a successful Free State. It would be a mess and a failure, and I should be sorry to see that. In the second place the Chancellor says that Creeland doesn't want to leave the Empire, that she is being jockeyed into this by a few fanatics; and I have only once in all my acquaintance with him found the Chancellor wrong.

CHANCELLOR When was that, sir?

EMPEROR You said it was a bee, and it proved to be a wasp. And third, last, but by no means least, I am not going to give my professional colleagues, the King of Jordinia and the Emperor of Saxe, the satisfaction of saying that I could not hold the Tainian Empire together.

COLONEL Well, personally, I shouldn't mind how much of a mess they made of a Free State. They asked for it.

CHANCELLOR One doesn't give children green apples because they ask for them. The Creelanders are still children.

COLONEL But have you read the fellow's speeches? You'd think that we had ground them between two millstones, instead of giving them everything we had ourselves. They were savages when we took them over—less than two centuries

ago they were still sticking each other in the back for the fun of it—and we made them into God-fearing citizens. And now they want their ‘freedom’! Infernal cheek, I call it.

CHANCELLOR No, just lack of humour.

EMPEROR I wish it were cheek. Humourless people are so difficult to deal with. I’d much rather fight a knave than a fool. Don’t the Creelanders laugh at anything?

CHANCELLOR Not as other people laugh. The only joke a Creelander really appreciates is a joke against his friend.

EMPEROR My dear Chancellor! Are you just being clever, by any chance?

CHANCELLOR I have never indulged in cleverness, sir. I mean what I say. Your good Creelander never sees his friend build a tower without a secret hope that the foundations will give way.

EMPEROR But doesn’t he say: I, too, can build a tower?

CHANCELLOR No; he says: Who is he to build a tower? He’s just a Creelander like me.

EMPEROR (*reflectively*) So! (*To the COLONEL, who is scribbling on his cuff*) What are you calculating, Colonel?

COLONEL Yes, we could do it. Counting bombs and everything, we have just enough dynamite to blow the benighted country up.

CHANCELLOR If you make a mess of your cuff, you’ll disgrace us at the ball. The Countess notices everything.

EMPEROR Oh, Lord, the ball! Is it time?

COLONEL (*looking at his watch*) Very nearly, sir.

EMPEROR Some more port, Chancellor?

CHANCELLOR Thank you, sir, I have had more than enough already. I’ve been generalising, which is a mistake, and sentimentalising, which is a crime.

EMPEROR Have you looked up that poet fellow’s record, by the way?

CHANCELLOR Yes. Nothing against him, except his poetry.

COLONEL You weren’t thinking of blackmail, were you, sir?

EMPEROR No. Not blackmail. A little discrediting, perhaps. What one does to a hostile witness in a court of law. But it seems that that is not possible. What about the rank and file?

CHANCELLOR Two-thirds of them are persons who have failed to make good at anything, and are still suffering from suppressed ego. The other third are honest

enthusiasts with more zeal than judgement. All are supremely ignorant of history, economics, international relations, and world movements in general. Only four-point-five of them have ever been out of Creeland, and only half of that four-point-five for longer than a week. That is to say for the period of an excursion ticket.

EMPEROR So they learn their lesson blindly.

CHANCELLOR Quite, sir. They believe what their leaders choose to tell them.

[*A clock begins to strike ten in thin, sweet sounds.*]

EMPEROR So! Well, I suppose we go to the damned ball. (*Rising*) Who would be an Emperor? I go there in a state of dither, my hostess receives me in a dither, and we all remain in dithers until I go.

COLONEL At least you have the consolation of suffering in company.

EMPEROR Yes, but the Countess doesn't have to dither for another year at least, and I do it continually.

COLONEL (*to the* CHANCELLOR) Bet you a fiver the Countess is wearing the red velvet.

CHANCELLOR Considering the fact that she has worn it for the last four years, I don't consider that much of a bet.

EMPEROR I'll take you. The Chancellor can hold the stakes. (*To the* CHANCELLOR) You're losing your nerve, my good man.

CHANCELLOR Better than losing one's money.

EMPEROR Creelander!

COLONEL When you call him that, smile.

EMPEROR An even fiver. And don't look at me if the frock happens to be pink satin. Let us go. Oh——(*Pausing*)

COLONEL Yes, sir?

EMPEROR Why are we leaving early tonight?

COLONEL Despatches from Saxe, sir.

EMPEROR But we used that one last week.

COLONEL No, sir. It was despatches from Jordinia last week.

EMPEROR Ah. Very good. (*He still stands, looking at the floor*)

COLONEL Have you forgotten something, sir?

EMPEROR What was it you said, Chancellor? The only joke they laugh at is a—joke against a friend?

CHANCELLOR Yes, sir.

EMPEROR So! Let us go.

[*They go to the door.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The Scene is the committee room at the headquarters of the League of the Patria Liberata. The room is like most of its kind, furnished for use rather than for beauty or comfort; but on each of the three walls is stretched a large flag, gold with a scarlet crab, and the room has a much-used air, as if men had lately spent much of their days there. Various personal articles such as pipes, a raincoat, and so forth are lying about. A tray with the remains of a meal is lying on a side-table.

At the table in the middle of the room is the LAWYER, a fountain-pen in one hand and a glass in the other. At a side-table is the WASTREL, telephone at ear and pencil in hand.

WASTREL Righto! Thank you. (*Pausing as he is about to hang up*) What? Another one? (*The LAWYER begins to make notes*) All right, shoot. Middleburg. Yes? Four departments. Patria win in all four departments. First department: Patria 5480, Liberal 3620. Second Department: Patria 3552, Conservative 2348. Third department: Patria 6329, Conservative 2271. Fourth department: Patria 6399, Communist 101. Righto, thanks. (*Hangs up*) Get that? Getting quite monotonous, isn't it? Win, win, win, all along the line. That must be about the last. How many to come?

LAWYER Three.

WASTREL Isn't it wonderful! We've won! Think of it. We've won!

LAWYER All right, don't make so much noise about it. I've a headache.

WASTREL I believe you. That bottle was full this morning.

LAWYER Well, it's my bottle, isn't it?

WASTREL No, it isn't. It came out of the funds. Not that it matters. But you mightn't be so mouldy about the results. We've just won about seven-eighths of the Municipal Elections, and all you care about is a sore head. Why aren't you excited?

LAWYER Because I knew we should win—this time.

WASTREL This time? What do you mean?

LAWYER I mean that I've planned our whole campaign to this very end. A snatch vote, my boy. A snatch vote. You only get one chance in a lifetime, and it's a man's duty to snatch the vote at the proper time. You can't fool all of the people all of the time.

WASTREL Oh, you're tight. What's keeping Bergen?

LAWYER He's addressing an overflow meeting.

WASTREL Is the Mascot with him?

LAWYER How often have I told you to stop referring to the Duke of Loo as the Mascot?

WASTREL Well, that's what he is, isn't it? A stuffed doll. We'll soon put him and all his tribe in their places when we are running Creeland.

LAWYER None of your communistic talk here. That's not how Creeland is going to be run.

WASTREL We'll see about that.

LAWYER (*sharply*) What's that!

WASTREL I only meant that when people are settled all over his land he won't be any better than the rest of us.

LAWYER He'll be better by a large slice of compensation. And you take care what you say, young fellow. You're on the Council now, but there's nothing to prevent your being booted off. A gift of the gab only goes so far. You need brains too.

WASTREL Like you, I suppose.

LAWYER Like me.

[*Enter the* MERCHANT. *As he begins to speak the telephone rings and the*

WASTREL *answers it, making notes on the pad.*]

MERCHANT Well, well, well. This is marvellous, isn't it? I read the last results on the way from the meeting. You know, I wouldn't have believed it. I was sceptical up to the last. I don't deny it, I was sceptical. But you were right, you and Bergen and our friend here. You were right. Well? What's the next move?

LAWYER We ask all the Creelandish members of the Tainian parliament to leave the House of Representatives.

MERCHANT And will they leave?

LAWYER Oh, they'll leave. Suggest civil war, and they'll come running. Meanwhile we do our best to cover up the fact that only three-fifths of the people have voted.

MERCHANT What?

LAWYER Three-fifths.

MERCHANT Is that so? (*Recovering*) But there is always a large body of people who don't take politics seriously.

LAWYER What they haven't taken seriously is us. We've got to work fast before they do.

MERCHANT But you take it for granted that the whole of that two-fifths is against us. A great number may be for us.

LAWYER If they were for us they would have voted. People who don't vote are pleased with what they have. Those two-fifths will get the shock of their lives when they read the results of this Election.

MERCHANT I see. So our position isn't so rosy.

LAWYER There's nothing wrong with our position. It's according to plan. The exchequer's getting thin, though.

MERCHANT (*dryly*) So I notice. What do you suggest?

LAWYER I'm a poor man, myself.

MERCHANT I have given very liberally. You can't expect me to finance the whole campaign.

LAWYER You'd have paid much more for a mere knighthood.

MERCHANT But I've no guarantee of getting anything at all out of this.

LAWYER Don't worry. You'll get plenty. Is Bergen still talking?

MERCHANT No, he's finished. They were signing autographs when I came away, he and the Duke.

LAWYER What! Is old Loo signing now? Bergen won't like that!

MERCHANT You can't deny that Loo is very picturesque, especially now that he wears a kotan. At that country meeting last week the crowd thought that he was Bergen and cheered like mad.

LAWYER And I suppose Bergen sulked for the rest of the evening?

MERCHANT Well—he wasn't too pleased.

LAWYER What was he on today?

MERCHANT 1349.

LAWYER He'd better change the record. That one's getting worn.

MERCHANT I don't think he has another.

WASTREL (*coming over to the table and laying the pad before the* LAWYER) That's the last of them. All wins. I wish I could see my father's face tonight!

LAWYER There are quite a lot of faces that I should like to see.

[*Enter* BERGEN, *followed by the* DUKE.]

BERGEN (*still intoxicated with oratory*) Ah, my friends, my children! Victory! Victory at last! Is it not sweet on the tongue? Is the thought not balm on our—— (*With a sudden change of tone*) Where are the chrysanthemums? I told you to get chrysanthemums! Masses of them. Scarlet and gold like the flag of Creeland. And they are not here! Where are they?

WASTREL I haven't had time. I've been at the telephone all the afternoon.

BERGEN But I told you. It was an order. I'm your leader, am I not?

WASTREL Well, I'm a member of the Council, not an office-boy. Why didn't you ask the office-boy?

BERGEN Why not, indeed? He would not have forgotten. This place is a pigsty. Whose food is that? I cannot live without flowers. I told you; chrysanthemums, red and gold. Masses of them. Masses!

LAWYER Have a drink.

BERGEN I don't drink. And it would be better that you did not.

LAWYER I never get as drunk on whisky as you do on words.

BERGEN And whose words have brought us to where we are today? Mine alone! Mine!

LAWYER Oh, I don't know. (*Indicating the* WASTREL) He's got the gift of the gab too.

DUKE Oh, come, gentlemen. Let us not spoil our hour of triumph by sparring like children. Let us congratulate each other instead of criticising.

BERGEN It is not much to expect, is it? That when I ask for chrysanthemums I should have them? A reasonable request, I should have thought.

MERCHANT Well, the exchequer's getting rather low. I don't know that chrysanthemums are as reasonable as all that.

BERGEN Did I say that the chrysanthemums were to be charged to the exchequer?

MERCHANT No. But everything else has been so far. I didn't expect that the

‘masses of chrysanthemums’ were to be any exception.

BERGEN Do you insinuate that I have been making profit out of my place on the Council?

MERCHANT I don’t insinuate anything. I merely say that chrysanthemums——

DUKE Oh, come, gentlemen. We have been working hard these last few weeks, and our nerves are on edge. Let us not——

BERGEN My nerves are not on edge. And that reminds me, my dear Duke. Don’t make your speech quite so long next time. And don’t sign autographs unless you can’t help it.

DUKE I certainly wouldn’t. A silly business. I expect they throw them away next week.

BERGEN They weed them out, perhaps.

LAWYER If you’re not too elevated with oratory to listen to common sense, I have a word or two to say.

BERGEN (*sitting down*) Very well. (*To the WASTREL*) Ask them to send in a glass of hot milk. If I can’t have chrysanthemums perhaps I can have hot milk.

[WASTREL *looks rebellious, but at a second glance from BERGEN he goes, banging the door behind him.*]

BERGEN Our young friend is, in common parlance, getting too big for his boots.

LAWYER Yes. But we’ll keep him yet a while. He’s useful.

BERGEN Well?

LAWYER Of the population of Creeland only three-fifths voted yesterday.

BERGEN Never mind. The other two-fifths will vote next time.

LAWYER Yes. Against us.

BERGEN Against!

LAWYER Yes. They’re the sediment: people who only vote when they are roused. Enthusiasm hasn’t roused them, but resentment will. We’ve got to find some way of pacifying that two-fifths, some way of making them believe in us. Talking won’t do it. You, and that boy (*jerking his head at the door*), and the rest of us have talked all we know. Nothing we can do personally will bring that two-fifths into line. It’s got to be something outside us. We’ve forced Parliament’s hand: we’ve got a Patria local government in almost every town in the country. But before we declare a Free State we have to put ourselves right with that two-fifths. Otherwise there will be trouble.

I've planned the campaign to this point, and everything has panned out as I hoped. But beyond this I haven't been able to see.

BERGEN That is because you have undoubted talent, but no vision, my friend.

LAWYER And have you the vision, by any chance?

BERGEN Long ago I foresaw this. Long ago I knew what would bind the country to us in the hour of test.

LAWYER What?

BERGEN The friendship of His Majesty the Emperor.

DUKE My dear fellow! Vision is indeed the appropriate word.

BERGEN You laugh? Nevertheless, the Emperor will be our salvation. Let him give his blessing to the new State, let it be known that he approves of us and our endeavours for the good of the country, and our cause is won for ever.

LAWYER Yes, so it would be if Gabriel came down and rooted for us.

MERCHANT Yes, what argument are you going to use to the Emperor that would make him do anything so unlikely? We've rushed Parliament, but the Emperor of Tainia is a mightily different proposition.

BERGEN Not so different. We are in a position to dictate. And the argument is obvious. We say to him—— (*He breaks off as the sound of a band, audible for the last few moments, becomes distinct*) Gentlemen, our anthem. Let us greet them. (*Makes for the window*)

LAWYER You can't see them from here. They are outside the courtyard, on the street.

BERGEN (*looking at the door as if he would like to run to the music, but deciding to keep his dignity*) Ah! Then all we can do is to greet it here.

[*He stands to attention facing the audience, and the others follow suit, the LAWYER absent-mindedly, the DUKE gracefully, the MERCHANT shamefacedly.*

[*At the same moment the door opens and the WASTREL enters, ushering in an OFFICE-BOY bearing a glass of milk on a black tin tray. The boy has advanced towards the group before he realises what is passing. Then both he and the WASTREL stiffen to attention, so that the curtain comes down on a group of which the centre is the somehow ridiculous glass of milk.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 3

The Scene is an ante-room in the palace of the EMPEROR OF TAINIA.

Enter a HOUSEHOLD OFFICIAL, *showing in the* POET, *the* DUKE, *the* LAWYER, *the* WASTREL, *and the* MERCHANT.

OFFICIAL If you will be good enough to wait, gentlemen, His Majesty will see you here.

[*Exit* HOUSEHOLD OFFICIAL *at opposite side.*]

[*The* POET *sits down and begins to study a document which he is carrying. The* MERCHANT, *after a little hesitation, evidently decides to be at his ease too.*]

MERCHANT (*sitting down*) Well, I suppose it's as cheap sitting as standing.

[*The* DUKE *paces slowly to and fro, his eyes on the floor. The* LAWYER *goes to the window. The* WASTREL *moons round the room, gaping with an almost childish innocence.*]

WASTREL (*catching sight of the painted ceiling*) Whew! Hot stuff! If you want proof that royalty is degenerate, there it is for you! They even spread it all over their ceilings.

LAWYER Yes. It saves them buying postcards.

WASTREL (*aggressively*) Meaning what? (*His attention distracted as the* DUKE *passes him*) Seen the ceiling, sir?

DUKE (*still pacing with his eyes on the ground*) Ah, yes. Very fine. Very fine. Sixteenth-century.

WASTREL You been here before, I suppose?

DUKE Yes. Yes. I've been here at a levee.

WASTREL Levee? Jewish ceremony?

DUKE (*looking up at him, as if doubting his sincerity, but finding him in earnest*) Not so far.

WASTREL Well, I vote we have a room like this in our new Government House. Something to—to——(*He waves a helpless arm*)

DUKE Make the proletariat gape.

WASTREL That's it. *(After a moment a doubt crosses his mind, and he glances after the pacing figure of the DUKE, but decides that he was mistaken. Coming down to the MERCHANT and the POET)* What d'you say, let's make the new Government House a copy of the palace here! That would be a dot in the eye for the Tainians. What d'you say?

POET I say that it would be a great kindness on your part to stop talking for a little.

WASTREL All right, all right. I don't see why you should be nery just because you're going to interview the Emperor. He's just a man like anyone else.

MERCHANT If all reports are true, he isn't in the least like anyone else.

WASTREL Meaning what?

[The POET also looks at the MERCHANT.]

MERCHANT I suspect that he's a great deal cleverer than all of us put together.

WASTREL We're taking Creeland from him, aren't we? And he couldn't stop us, could he? And he gave us this interview as mild as a lamb, didn't he? That doesn't look very clever to me.

MERCHANT If he weren't clever we shouldn't be here.

WASTREL What do you mean?

MERCHANT If he hadn't been clever enough these last twenty years to make his name a power in Creeland, we shouldn't be wanting it on a document. And speaking as a business-man, I always feel at a disadvantage when the other chap has something I want, and knows how much I want it.

POET This is not a business deal. It is a State transaction. His Majesty will sign because we are in the position of dictators.

[Enter OFFICIAL.]

OFFICIAL His Majesty the Emperor.

[Enter the EMPEROR, in uniform. Exit OFFICIAL.]

EMPEROR Good-afternoon, gentlemen. I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Your time must be greatly occupied. *(Noticing the DUKE)* Ah, my dear Duke! How do you do? *(Shakes hands)* It is not often I see you out of Creeland these days. How is the shooting this year? Good? I am glad to hear it. I shall never forget those long days among the reeds, never. They are among my most vivid memories. And what will

your friends do when your colleagues have drained your lands? And all the gourmets of Europe? Ah, well! Martyrs to progress, I suppose.

DUKE (*edging him on to BERGEN*) May I present Mr Bergen, sir?

EMPEROR (*bowing*) Good-day to you, Mr Bergen. I do not read poetry, but I have a great respect for imagination.

BERGEN It is very gracious of Your Majesty to grant us this interview. We have brought with us a copy of the document which you have already studied.

EMPEROR (*taking the document*) This is the one to be signed?

BERGEN Yes, sir.

EMPEROR As a document purporting to come from those making a new Heaven and Earth for their fellows, it disappointed me.

BERGEN Yes, sir?

EMPEROR It began with Whereas. I had expected better things of you, Mr Bergen. So you want to make Creeland a Free State?

BERGEN In less than six weeks time she will be a Free State, sir.

EMPEROR And if I understand your point it is that by signing this expression of belief in the Free State I shall be reconciling the objectors, and so preventing what might be civil war.

BERGEN That is so, sir.

EMPEROR And if I do not choose to become godfather to such a doubtful child as a free Creeland?

BERGEN There will be civil war, sir.

EMPEROR You are very sure.

POET We have an Army of ninety thousand.

EMPEROR So! You add gun-running to your other activities?

POET I speak metaphorically. Our Army is merely a disciplined body, with one supreme object always in view.

EMPEROR (*bowing his congratulations*) A very decorative object.

POET (*coldly*) The object I speak of is, naturally, the freedom of Creeland.

EMPEROR So! And is the independence of Creeland all that you desire?

POET All? I don't understand, sir.

EMPEROR You have, for instance, no intention of suing Tainia for the material damage inflicted in 1349?

POET Your Majesty is pleased to be facetious.

EMPEROR (*surprised*) I had no such intention. Does the suggestion appear to you farcical? How strange! I had thought it so much in character. However! Another thing worries me. You don't think, by any chance, that Creeland is too small a country to govern itself well?

POET Too small, sir?

EMPEROR Yes. Is there not a danger of its politics degenerating to an almost municipal standard?

POET I do not follow Your Majesty, I'm afraid.

EMPEROR As a child I was brought up very simply, as perhaps you know. I was merely a royal grandson, and a second one at that. We lived outside a provincial town, and knew most of its changing rulers personally. The general method of the municipal council seemed to be: You do this for me, and I shall see that you are all right when you want something. You don't think that there is a danger of a Creelandish Parliament being run on lines like these?

POET I should be sorry to think, sir, that because Creeland is a small country the men she chooses to represent her should be lacking in principle. There is no country whose sons have a higher ideal of duty and service, whose public men have been brought up in a more highly-principled atmosphere, than Creeland.

EMPEROR So! My home was in Tainia, of course. That probably accounts for my unfortunate experience. You think, then, that Creeland has a large supply of incorruptible politicians waiting to serve her?

POET Certainly, sir.

EMPEROR And as well as being incorruptible, are they also able? It would be no satisfaction to be ruled by an incorruptible fool.

POET There is no doubt as to their ability, sir. Both Tainia and America have benefited from that. It is to keep that ability within the borders of Creeland that we are founding our Free State.

EMPEROR I am glad to hear that. It makes my course much simpler. I could never, you understand, sign my name to a belief in a Free State unless I did believe in it.

POET We understand that, sir.

EMPEROR Now I think that I can sign with something like confidence.

[There is an almost imperceptible movement of relief among his hearers; a sort of relaxing of muscles.]

EMPEROR There is one condition I should like to make. A small one, and one presenting, I think, no great difficulty to the acceptance of such patriots as yourselves. If I sign this document I make it a condition that no one of you five gentlemen shall ever in the course of your lives take office of any sort in Creeland.

[*There is a pause.*]

POET But, Your Majesty, that is quite impossible.

EMPEROR Not possible? Why?

POET The people look to us as their liberators. They depend on us to lead them.

EMPEROR But you have just assured me that Creeland is overrun with able men waiting to rule her.

POET Yes, certainly, sir. But they are not yet ready. This movement has been so centralised that if we are not there to lead the new State in the beginning there will be chaos.

EMPEROR But you gentlemen have had no more experience of ruling a State than anyone else in Creeland. Any five of your able men would take your places most satisfactorily. And I have no doubt very readily.

POET I do not think readily, sir. The country is loyal to us. We personify the cause for them.

EMPEROR Do you mean that the desire for a Free State would wilt if you were not there to stimulate it?

POET No, not that. I mean, that in the making of a great experiment it is wise not to distract the people's enthusiasm by a change of leadership.

EMPEROR I think you are making difficulties, Mr Bergen. You say that Creeland wants to rule herself. You say that she has a great number of men able and willing to rule her. If that is so, the disappearance of yourself and your four colleagues will be a matter of small importance. Perhaps you would like to think the matter over? The paper need not be signed today. (*As no one answers immediately*) I must ask you to forgive me if I leave you. It is a busy morning with me. Perhaps you have heard of Tainia's new trading agreement with Saxe? A great advantage for the Empire in these hard times. The Press will be jubilant tomorrow.

[*Exit* EMPEROR.]

WASTREL So the Press will be jubilant tomorrow, will they? And that's what we came here for, was it? To be slapped! That's what he did. Slapped us!

LAWYER Oh, shut up.

MERCHANT What are we going to do?

DUKE There doesn't seem much difficulty. I am sure none of us is greatly anxious for office. We have all interests and occupations of our own.

WASTREL Oh, don't be a fool!

MERCHANT What are we going to do?

POET We go back to Creeland at once and tell them how we have been insulted!

LAWYER And make ourselves the laughing-stock of Europe?

POET We are the representatives of Creeland, and he insulted us. Creeland will rally round us.

LAWYER No one rallies round a laughing-stock. Use your famous brains.

POET But we must rouse the people. I will not be insulted. Besides, (*from blustering to feebleness*) what else is there to do?

WASTREL What we do is keep our mouths shut. Keep our mouths shut and go on as if nothing had happened. If you hadn't had this brain-wave about asking the Emperor's blessing we'd have done without it, wouldn't we? So what's the difference?

LAWYER The difference is that every newspaper reporter in the capital is at the gates waiting for us to go out.

MERCHANT To say nothing of all those people in our own capital who knew where we were going.

POET They didn't know why we were going.

MERCHANT No. We were going to spring a lovely surprise on them, weren't we? But when we get back they'll want to know what happened.

WASTREL I suppose we could say that we asked for his blessing and he refused it. That doesn't commit anyone.

LAWYER No. It just gives the Creelandish papers a glorious laugh at our expense.

WASTREL Well, that's better than letting them find out what he really said to us! Isn't it? That he'd bless any Free State that didn't have us at the head of it.

LAWYER Oh, shut up. Are you having another brain-wave, Bergen? I hope it's a safer one than the last proved to be!

POET I think, you know, that our best plan is to be mysterious.

WASTREL Mysterious?

POET Yes. It's a well-known political device.

MERCHANT You mean that when we are asked what happened we look wise and say: Ah!

POET That's it. We say: The time is not yet; or words to that effect, and look mysterious.

LAWYER Play-acting won't get us out of this. There's one person who won't be in the least mysterious about it.

MERCHANT Who?

LAWYER The Emperor. Tomorrow the Press will know all about the interview.

POET Good God!

MERCHANT But the Emperor of Tainia doesn't give interviews to the Press.

LAWYER No, he just lets it become known. We've got to decide on a course now.

MERCHANT Let's ask the Emperor for time. Let's say that we must consider our position.

LAWYER Yes, I suppose playing for time is our only course. All agreed? (*Glances perfunctorily at the others, ignoring the DUKE altogether, and rings the bell*) I only hope he'll give us the time we want.

[*Enter* OFFICIAL.]

POET We should be most grateful if the Emperor could spare us another two minutes of his time.

OFFICIAL I shall give His Majesty the message.

[*Exit* OFFICIAL.]

LAWYER The thing is to ask him not to allow the subject of our interview to become public while we are considering our answer.

POET I think His Majesty is rather prejudiced against me. Perhaps if you talked to him, Duke. You know him. What you say will carry greater weight than any eloquence of mine.

DUKE Do I understand that you want me to ask His Majesty to keep his mouth shut?

WASTREL That's it.

DUKE I'm afraid that is something altogether beyond my talents. In any case I am hardly an appropriate spokesman for this deputation, since I am resigning tonight from the Patria party.

POET What!

MERCHANT Resigning! Why?

DUKE I have made a mistake. I think the cost of draining my marshes is too great.

WASTREL This is a sweet time to think of money! You've got cold feet, that's all.
You think you'll——

LAWYER Shut up, you. (*To the DUKE*) So you're ratting?

DUKE To acknowledge a mistake is hardly ratting.

LAWYER I thought you were merely a fool, but I begin to think you are a knave.

DUKE I've been a little of both, I'm afraid. Yes. A little of both.

[*Enter* OFFICIAL.]

OFFICIAL His Majesty regrets that he cannot see you just now. He is giving an audience to the Jordinian ambassador.

POET When will His Majesty be able to see us again?

OFFICIAL It might be possible, I think, a week tomorrow.

POET A——! What!

OFFICIAL A week tomorrow at ten o'clock in the morning. Shall I book an appointment for you?

POET But that is absurd! Surely the Emperor can see us tomorrow sometime?

OFFICIAL Every moment of His Majesty's time is invariably booked up seven or eight days ahead. That is what it is to govern an Empire. Shall I book your appointment?

POET Certainly not. Our business is urgent. I want to make it clear to the Emperor that everything that passed between His Majesty and ourselves must be treated as confidential until we are ready to give an answer.

OFFICIAL All interviews with his Majesty are confidential.

MERCHANT (*jocosely*) No keyholes in the palace?

OFFICIAL Many, sir. But no eyes.

LAWYER Oh, let's get out of this!

OFFICIAL May I suggest that you appeal to His Majesty in writing?

WASTREL We're not appealing, we're telling him.

OFFICIAL (*ignoring him*) His Majesty deals with correspondence twice a day. From seven to eight in the morning, and from seven to eight at night.

MERCHANT Would a letter written just now be dealt with tonight?

OFFICIAL I hardly think so. The secretaries take everything in rotation. But it would be dealt with certainly tomorrow morning.

MERCHANT (*to* LAWYER) I suppose that would do?

OFFICIAL There are pens and paper there.

POET Oh, not here! Not here! Not in this accursed place. I am suffocating. Never in my life, never have I——

[He goes to the door followed by the others. The OFFICIAL holds it open for them to pass. The WASTREL comes last.]

WASTREL (*pausing and jerking a thumb at the ceiling*) Emperor, indeed! He ought to be ashamed of himself!

CURTAIN

SCENE 4

The committee room at the League headquarters. There are present the POET, the LAWYER, and the WASTREL. The POET is surrounded by a mound of disordered newspapers, a mound which is every moment growing as he tears open a new one, glances at it and discards it. The LAWYER is opening letters, and the WASTREL is at the telephone.

WASTREL (*at the telephone*) No, Mr Bergen is not here. You saw him come in? You did nothing of the sort, my good sir. Mr Bergen is not here. (*Hangs up*)

LAWYER Don't you know enough to be polite over the telephone? You don't know whom you might be talking to.

WASTREL Oh, that wasn't anyone. He had a Creeland accent you could cut with a knife.

LAWYER Lots of perfectly good reporters have Creeland accents.

POET Where is Marchant? Why isn't he here?

LAWYER Don't worry. He'll come. He'd see that he had a good breakfast even if the heavens were falling.

BERGEN (*reading*) 'The Duke dodges reporters.' 'The Duke of Loo's disappearance.'

WASTREL He needn't have bothered disappearing. Even a reporter couldn't make that dummy talk. He was born dumb.

LAWYER I wish he were as dumb as I once thought he was!

POET (*reading*) 'Is it necessary, however, for the Duke to say anything? Is not his resignation from the Patria party all the comment that is necessary? We congratulate the noble lord on his silence, which does him credit, and on his resignation, which enhances it.' (*Crushes the paper in a fury and tears open another*)

LAWYER (*opening a letter*) Here's a bill from the florist's for twenty-three pounds, six and sevenpence. And one from the stationers: crested notepaper, as supplied, ten pounds, two shillings. Payment would oblige. I hope our dear Marchant is having breakfast, and not an attack of funk. It wouldn't do to lose our treasury at the same time as our credit.

POET (*in a sudden wail*) Here it is! It's here!

LAWYER and WASTREL No!

POET (*reading*) 'Yesterday the representatives of the Patria party of Creeland had an interview with His Majesty, and although nothing official has transpired it is understood that the object of the deputation was to obtain his Majesty's approval of the suggested independence of Creeland. The deputation returned to Creeland last night without having made a statement, but judging by their radiant faces the desired approval had been obtained.'

LAWYER He should have been a lawyer, not an emperor! What paper is that?

POET The *Tainia Times*.

LAWYER So that's what those loiterers in the courtyard mean!

POET (*to WASTREL*) And I expect that *was* a reporter you were so rude to. You have no discretion in rudeness.

[*Telephone rings.*]

WASTREL (*cooing into the telephone*) Hello? No, Mr Bergen is not here. I am so very sorry. No, he has no statement to make. It was nice of you to ring! (*Hangs up, glaring at the* POET)

[*Enter the* MERCHANT.]

MERCHANT What's this? A press-cutting agency?

POET This is not the time to be funny. Have you seen the *Tainia Times*?

MERCHANT No. Have you seen the *Creeland Courier*?

POET Yes. There's nothing in it.

MERCHANT (*giving him a paper folded back at a special paragraph*) Late edition.

POET (*looking at it*) Yes. The same as the *Times*. Damn everything!

WASTREL And so say all of us. And an extra special damn for the Emperor of Tainia.

MERCHANT I told you he was a better man than all of us.

LAWYER An expression of opinion is not evidence.

MERCHANT (*striking the paper with his hand*) There's your evidence.

LAWYER We played into his hands. We won't be such fools a second time.

MERCHANT If I read things aright, there won't be any second time.

POET You are worried, my friend?

MERCHANT Worried isn't the word for it.

POET Nevertheless, you spend hours over your breakfast while others are working. Or perhaps you have had a massage and a manicure after the all-night journey.

MERCHANT I still have a business of my own to attend to. Luckily, perhaps. I came here as quickly as I could. It took me at least ten minutes to get through the courtyard.

POET They button-holed you?

MERCHANT Button-holed me! You couldn't lift your arms to button-hole anyone in that crowd.

POET What do you mean? There are only a few dozen.

MERCHANT When did you look out last?

[*The WASTREL goes to the window and turns back with a slightly scared whistle.*]

WASTREL You could walk on their heads all the way to the street.

MERCHANT Yes, and half-way down the street.

POET (*having seen*) Haven't all those people anything to do at ten of a morning? Wait till we have a Free State. I'll give them work!

MERCHANT Well? They are waiting for you, Bergen. They think you are going to make a statement of the Emperor's approval.

POET I can't make any statement just now.

LAWYER That's certain. The point is, what are we going to do with that mob? They are all waiting to hear good news.

MERCHANT There is one way, of course. We could cut our losses, and leave the new Creeland to be run by another gang.

POET Never! Never! How can you suggest such a thing? I am Creeland. Without me she is nothing. Nothing, I tell you! It is my vision that has brought her to a glorious renaissance, it is my strength that has lifted her from the slough into which she had fallen, it is my courage that has steeled her to seek her freedom. It is with me and with no one else that she will enter that freedom. Why have we hesitated, craven wretches that we were! We have allowed ourselves to be insulted and browbeaten, we have been dismayed like children because one man sneered at us. We do not deserve to be the chosen of Creeland. Creeland whose spirit has always been quick to avenge insult. Creeland has been mocked and insulted in the person of her chosen representatives; is it likely that she will take such an insult calmly? We have not trusted Creeland; that is where we have been wrong. We have tried to hide the truth from her. I am going to tell those people the truth.

LAWYER Don't be crazy, Bergen.

POET The truth, I tell you. We have clean consciences, haven't we? What are we afraid of? The truth has never hurt an innocent person.

LAWYER On the contrary, I never knew anyone speak the truth and get away with it. Stop and think! These people out there have looked up to the Emperor all their lives. They have known us only a couple of years.

POET Yes, only a year or two. And already they are willing to leave the Empire. That is what they think of the Emperor! I shall tell them how the man they honoured has insulted us, insulted their leaders, the men who have worked for their deliverance. And you shall see what a shout for vengeance will go up! This will be the pinnacle of our triumph, the one thing necessary to make the break with Tainia complete. Tainia has treated us like a dog for centuries, and now she insults us when we asked for her friendship. Is Creeland going to take that calmly?

MERCHANT (*to* LAWYER) There may be something in it.

POET Open the window. I am going to tell them the truth.

LAWYER Not yet.

MERCHANT If we don't attend to them soon, they'll smell a rat.

LAWYER Let's think a moment. There must be another way out.

POET Way out! Way out! I have listened too long to such talk. We are not culprits!

Open the window.

LAWYER Wait a minute, Bergen. Think what you are going to say. Don't say just the first thing that comes into your head.

POET Have I ever failed the cause, either in my conduct or my speech? Whose tongue has roused the loyalty, the enthusiasm, that has brought that crowd to the courtyard this morning?

WASTREL Well, all I say is I hope your tongue's as good at getting them out of the courtyard as it was at getting them in.

POET Open the window.

LAWYER Let me talk to them first.

POET No!

MERCHANT (*to POET*) I think that is a good suggestion. Let him talk first. A sort of introduction. More dignified proceeding, you know.

POET (*mollified*) Very well. But remember I am going to tell them the truth.

[*The WASTREL opens the window for the LAWYER. The LAWYER is hailed with a friendly shout from outside.*]

LAWYER Good morning, my friends. It gratifies my colleagues and myself very much to see such a gathering to greet us. I am sure that such a guarantee of loyalty and enthusiasm——

VOICES IN THE CROWD Where's Bergen? We want Bergen!

[*The MERCHANT restrains BERGEN.*]

LAWYER Such loyalty touches us deeply. We arrived back from Tainia early this morning, and we are all a little exhausted, both with business and with travelling.

VOICE Tell Bergen to speak. We want Bergen!

LAWYER At the very first opportunity we are going to hold a public meeting where our visit to Tainia can be discussed before a greater audience than is here just now. Until that time I am not free to disclose——

VOICES Where is Bergen? Let Bergen talk!

LAWYER Mr Bergen is very tired. He has had the burden of this campaign on his shoulders for months, and I know that you would not want to add to the weight. If you will bear with me for a few moments——

[*BERGEN shoves him aside, and is received with rapturous cheering.*]

POET So you have faith in Bergen, then? (*Cheers*) I am the man whom you have chosen to represent Creeland, before Tainia, before the world. Is that not so? (*Cheers and cries of: 'What did the Emperor say? Tell us about the Emperor'*) In my mouth was put the tongue of Creeland, and the dignity of Creeland between my hands. And so, bearing Creeland's mandate, I went to the Emperor of Tainia. And to the Emperor I said: 'Creeland is free now, but she has long honoured you above men. Give her your blessing now that she is going out from your house to take her place among the nations.' That was all that we asked for. No favours; only a hand of friendship extended to Creeland in her great hour. Only a blessing. The answer, my friends, was nearly incredible in its vindictive spirit. The answer was that the royal blessing was not free but could be bought. And the price asked, the price asked, men of Creeland, was that neither I, nor those others who have borne the burden and heat of the day, should enter into the Promised Land. That we should take no part in that Free State which it was our joy to build.

[*The POET pauses, partly for effect, partly for breath. There is a moment of complete silence outside, and then, out of the stillness, comes a man's laugh, the kind of laugh, sudden and destroying, which takes a man unawares when he has unexpectedly seen a funny thing. As the man is drawing breath for his second paroxysm, a voice shouts:*

So that's what he thought of you!

[*And a gale of laughter blows up, growing stronger every moment until the whole courtyard is a swirling storm of laughter.*

[*The POET tries to overcome it, gesticulating but inaudible. He is shrieking:*

Listen to me! Listen to me!

[*The LAWYER tries to drag him away but is not successful. The WASTREL is shouting at the MERCHANT:*

Why did you let the silly fool talk!

[*The door opens to admit a YOUNG MAN in a hurry.*]

WASTREL (*trying to push him out*) Here! Who let you in here? This office is private. Get out!

YOUNG MAN I'm in now. You might as well be polite. I am from the *Creeland Courier*. (*To the MERCHANT*) You Mr Marchant? (*Producing notebook*) Anything to

say, Mr Marchant? What is your opinion on the present situation? Anything printable?

[*The POET, turning in rage and despair from the window encounters the YOUNG MAN.*]

YOUNG MAN Morning, Mr Bergen. *Creeland Courier*. What is your opinion of the present situation? Any statement you care to give will——

[*With a cry the POET pushes him away, rushes to his desk and begins to scabble through the drawers, pulling out one or two altogether in his agitation and haste.*]

WASTREL (*a little frightened, trying to stop him*) What is it? What are you looking for? Your revolver?

POET (*shrieking and scrabbling*) No! My passport!

BLACK OUT

SCENE 5

A street, evening. The noise of the laughter in the courtyard becomes the noise of a group of small boys surrounding two who are fighting. They keep up a continuous chorus of encouragement and vituperation.

Along the street comes a PASSER-BY who pushes into the ring.

PASSER-BY What's all this about? Eh? What's the trouble?

FIRST COMBATANT (*pointing to* SECOND) He's a Tainian!

PASSER-BY Well? What of it?

FIRST COMBATANT What of it! Oh, g'way home and learn some history!

CURTAIN

THE BALWHINNIE BOMB

CHARACTERS

ANNABELLA MORRISON

FINLAY MACPHAIL

RODDY ROSS

PETER THE POLIS

THE BALWHINNIE BOMB

The Scene is the interior of the Post Office at Balwhinnie. The Post Office is also the local newsagent's, and is merely the converted room of a dwelling-house. Up L. is the doorway, standing open. It leads into a passage, and thence to the front-door porch. In the back wall is the window, looking out on the village street. Parallel with the R. wall is the Post Office counter, with its usual scales and other Post Office paraphernalia, the short grille being at the window end. Behind the counter, in the middle of the R. wall, is a door to an annexe. On either side of it the wall is lined with pigeon-holing.

Against the wall between the front door and the window is a revolving stand displaying postcards, and propped in the window are a few exceedingly bright but slightly shop-soiled novels. Against the L. wall, down from the door, is a glass case containing packets of cigarettes; and down from it a long narrow table bearing newspapers and periodicals.

By the counter, up near the window and almost opposite the door is a tall office stool.

The room is empty except for the post-mistress, ANNABELLA MORRISON, who is standing behind the counter busy with those mysterious scribblings and stampings that always prevent Post Office employees from attending to mere customers. She is quite young, with pretty pink cheeks and a firm little mouth, but there is just a suggestion that by the time she is forty the pink of her cheeks will have hardened to red and the firm little mouth will be a great deal too firm. Her neat figure is trimly dressed and her nice hair fashionably done; her voice, when she speaks, not particularly provincial; her manner efficient but pleasant. She is post-mistress at Balwhinnie largely because her mother was post-mistress before her, and she has grown up in the business.

In the doorway there appears the form of FINLAY MACPHAIL. Materialises would be a better word to describe his entrance, since FINLAY'S normal rate of progress does not allow any movement of his to be abrupt. He is one of those ageless characters to be found so often in West Highland villages. He is certainly over fifty, but it is quite inconceivable that he was ever young, and he certainly shows no signs of growing older.

FINLAY (*from the doorway*) I'm hearing the train is in and away, and it only an hour late.

ANNABELLA (*looking up from her work to greet him and then resuming it*) Oh, good-morning, Mr MacPhail. (*She does not sound enthusiastic*) Yes, the mail's in. Roddy is up at the station for the bags now.

FINLAY (*crossing in leisurely fashion to the stool and propping himself up on it*) It's a scandal, that's what it is. How is anyone to catch a train only an hour late? One of these days it will be on time, and then there will be nobody there to pick up at all. (*He digs in his pocket for his pipe, and when he has slowly extracted it, proceeds during the ensuing dialogue to light the small dark solid it contains. It does not burn any more, the small dark solid; but heating it intensifies the taste of the pipe in his mouth, and the action satisfies a habit-urge*) Losing money, that's what they'll be. (*He is quite calm about it all*)

ANNABELLA (*not looking up*) Is there something I can do for you, Mr MacPhail?

FINLAY (*who, of course, has merely come in to pass the time*) Och, I'll just wait and see if there's anything for me in the mail.

ANNABELLA (*not encouraging*) Were you expecting something? (*The tone says: 'You know very well that you never get anything.'*)

FINLAY There'll maybe be something from my daughter in Canada.

ANNABELLA (*not letting him off with it*) You had your monthly letter from her ten days ago.

FINLAY (*unabashed*) She'll maybe have got a mid-month bonus. (*He begins to look for matches*) So Roddy is back from the big city. I'm hearing he didn't get that job he went after.

ANNABELLA No. He didn't.

FINLAY I suppose that means there will be no proposal.

ANNABELLA (*pausing to look up*) Proposal?

FINLAY It wouldn't be at all the thing for a mere postman to propose to a post-mistress; no, indeed.

ANNABELLA (*tartly, putting extra vigour into her work*) I can't imagine what you are talking about, Mr MacPhail.

FINLAY (*eyeing her*) You remind me greatly of your mother, Annabella. Fine good looks, she had——(*ANNABELLA spares a hand to give her hair a self-satisfied touch*) and the same bossy way with the stamps.

ANNABELLA Are there no boots waiting to be mended this morning, Mr MacPhail?

FINLAY (*estimating in his mind's eye*) There's a tidy wee pile yonder, but no leather to mend them with. The last good bit of leather I had I used on the boots that Roddy took to Glasgow with him. It's not much luck it brought him, seemingly. Poor Roddy, he was that set on——

ANNABELLA There may be someone waiting for bootlaces.

FINLAY (*comfortably*) Well, well, the door's open, and they know where the laces are.

ANNABELLA Someone may be waiting to explain what they want you to do to their boots.

FINLAY You don't need to *explain* what you want about a pair of boots. The matter is self-explanatory.

ANNABELLA They might want to say whose they are.

FINLAY There is not a pair of boots in the glen that I am not on the most *intimate* terms with. You're a great one for inventing work, Annabella. That's what comes of cutting your teeth on a date-stamp. (*He says it, as he says everything, without malice; in his amiable drawl. Going on to consider the futility of action*) Rushing around and rushing around. (*He contemplates it with disfavour*) It's enough for the earth to be twirling away so busy, without the people on it dancing about like midgies on a damp evening.

ANNABELLA (*dryly*) Someone has to do the world's work, Mr MacPhail.

FINLAY Let people be less busy and there would be a great deal less work. If people stopped running from one place to another I wouldn't have boots to mend.

ANNABELLA You wouldn't be able to eat either.

FINLAY Och, a few traps in the bracken would do me nicely. The rabbits, God bless them, don't have to wait for promotion before they get married.

ANNABELLA (*very cool*) There's more in promotion than getting married, Mr MacPhail. Any man worth his salt wants to *be* someone, to get on in the world, to make a name for himself. To——

FINLAY Maybe and maybe not, but no one was ever *prodded* into being a Napoleon. It would be much better——

ANNABELLA (*with some heat*) I am not prodding anyone. Roddy Ross doesn't need help from me, I assure you. (*But she sounds defensive rather than proud*) He has brains of his own in plenty. And ambition too.

FINLAY Man, it's an awful thing ambition. (*In a tone of simple wonder*) Believe it or not, there's people will climb *mountains* just to sit on the top and look at places they knew were there all the time.

ANNABELLA The most prevalent ambition in the village at the moment is to taste some fresh fish. You weren't thinking of taking your boat out, I suppose?

FINLAY (*in a judicial tone*) Well, her seams is not too good.

[*Enter RODDY from the outer door; the letter-bag in one hand and a well-filled sack of parcels over the other shoulder.*

[*He has heard ANNABELLA's question as he came into the passage, and FINLAY's answer as he arrives at the inner door.*]

RODDY (*making his way across the floor and round the down end of the counter with the bags*) That boat has been high and dry so long she's as open as a lobster-pot.

FINLAY There you are, Roddy. (*This phrase is a greeting; the Balwhinnie equivalent of 'How-do-you-do'*) And how was Glasgow?

RODDY Much as usual; dark and wet.

FINLAY Och, it's better here you are, Roddy, my boy. What would you be doing in a place where they put the lights on in the middle of the afternoon.

RODDY (*emptying the letters on to the counter for ANNABELLA to deal with*) As long as I didn't have to pay for them, they could have them on all day, for me. (*'For me' means 'for all I care'*) No registereds today. (*This last to ANNABELLA*)

FINLAY And to have to wash all over every day because of the dirt that's in it. What kind of money would pay you for a thing like that? (*His attention comes to the bag of parcels that RODDY is emptying on the floor*) A metropolis this place is getting to be. There has been no such traffic through this office in the memory of man.

ANNABELLA (*arranging the letters for stamping*) That's what it is to have royalty in the glen.

FINLAY (*depreciating*) Foreign royalty. (*One is sure that if it had been out of doors a spit would point the remark*)

ANNABELLA Heir to a throne, all the same. It's fine to have the Lodge let to someone important again, after all those nobodies from the Ministry of this and that. We should be very honoured that a Royal Highness should come to a quiet place like Balwhinnie.

FINLAY (*dryly*) I don't know about us being honoured, but I'm quite sure His Highness is delighted. I'm hearing they've been taking pot-shots at him ever since he was in his cradle, the poor amadan. He'll feel nice and safe and snug up there at Balwhinnie Lodge; nothing between him and America but the keeper's house.

ANNABELLA And a few islands called the Hebrides.

FINLAY We won't be mentioning them.

ANNABELLA Why ever not?

FINLAY If you call attention to them they'll be wanting a pier or a landing-ground or what not. (*Dismissing the whole island race*) A terrible discontented lot they are.

RODDY (*who is picking the parcels one by one from the heap on the floor and arranging them in a rough sort of order on the newspaper table, preparatory to putting them back in the bag in the way most convenient for subsequent delivery*) 'His Serene Highness.' 'His Imperial Highness.' They might make up their minds what to call him. 'His Royal Highness.' (*Looking at the label*) 'Gunsmiths, London.' That's going to give the birds a shock. All the Ministry did was put out crumbs for them. (*Looking with disgust at a small chemist's parcel*) Mrs MacCallum's cough mixture! (*His gay, slightly lit-up manner changing to genuine bitterness*) Every single Tuesday for five years, bar one New Year's Day, I've got off my bike, propped it against the fence, walked the hundred yards up that hill path and the hundred yards down again, all to deliver that bottle of cough mixture. It's time someone else was doing it.

FINLAY (*amending, dryly*) It's time she was changing the prescription.

RODDY U-uh (*this is a scornful sound*), she hasn't had a cough this four year. She just likes the taste of the mixture. 'His Royal Highness'; cigarettes. 'His Highness'; books. (*Picking up a longish parcel of unmistakable shape and looking at the label*) Mrs Munro, the Aird, seems to have got herself a new pair of corsets.

FINLAY Has she, indeed. Well, that is a great relief to me.

ANNABELLA (*with a hint of starch*) To you, Mr MacPhail?

FINLAY It made me that nervous, sitting behind her in church yonder, and the plackey-fasteners on her pop-popping like broom pods in the sun. She'll be more self-contained now.

ANNABELLA (*looking at the heaped parcels*) You know, Roddy, if the mail is going to be like this every day you'd better indent for a motor bicycle.

RODDY I'm not going to be here that long.

ANNABELLA As long as what?

RODDY As it would take them to give me a motor bike. (*Remarking on the packet in his hand*) Tommy Fraser's been writing for samples again.

FINLAY So you're still set on leaving us, Roddy.

RODDY One way or another. 'His *Very* Serene Highness.' What do you think of that?

FINLAY (*taking RODDY'S exclamation literally*) I think it's a wee bit excessive. Where's it from?

RODDY 'Greaves, Outfitters, Bond Street.'

FINLAY Everything of the best.

RODDY (*reading the address on a square brown-papered parcel*) 'His Highness', nice and simple. No label. (*He pauses and rubs his thumb in meditative fashion over the postmark*) No postmark either. (*He puts it down and then lifts it again, and puts it to his ear*) Something ticking.

ANNABELLA A clock, I expect.

RODDY I suppose so. (*He puts it down and reaches for the next parcel*)

FINLAY (*not questioning the contents of the parcel, but commenting on the purchase*) I don't know what he would be needing with a clock up at Balwhinnie.

ANNABELLA It's the custom among civilised peoples to be punctual, Mr MacPhail.

FINLAY Och, yes. And what do they get for it? Stomach ulcers.

ANNABELLA (*busy with her work*) Nonsense.

FINLAY It's a poor thing for a man to be living on sups of milk and running like a hare to be somewhere on the dot of the hour.

RODDY (*who has taken up the parcel again after disposing of the succeeding ones*) It's a home-made looking parcel. (*He sounds doubtful*)

ANNABELLA (*casting it a professional glance*) I wish all home-made parcels were as neat.

RODDY (*who has listened to the tick again*) I mean: it's a home-made sort of parcel to come from a clockmakers, isn't it. (*The final phrase is not a question*)

FINLAY He'll maybe have left one of his own behind, and they're sending it on to him. There's people so daft they travel round with a clock in a little leather box specially made for it. They're maybe just sending him his tame timepiece.

[RODDY *says nothing, and the silence brings annabella's attention to him where he is standing irresolute with the parcel in his hand.*

She considers him for a moment, her mind still half on her own work, and then his meaning penetrates her consciousness.]

ANNABELLA Roddy! You don't think ... (*Her voice dies away*)

RODDY It's just what I'm wondering myself

ANNABELLA Oh, but they would never ...

RODDY Who wouldn't?

ANNABELLA Something like that would never happen at Balwhinnie.

RODDY His Highness has happened, hasn't he?

ANNABELLA Yes, I know, but——Oh, it can't be, Roddy, it must be just a clock.

FINLAY What else would it be but a clock? (*He has not followed the allusive exchange between ANNABELLA and RODDY*)

RODDY I can tell you what else. And it isn't very pleasant.

FINLAY A clock isn't very pleasant. What have you in your mind that is more unpleasant than a clock?

RODDY A bomb.

FINLAY A bomb? You mean an infernal machine?

RODDY That's what I mean.

FINLAY In the Balwhinnie Post Office?

ANNABELLA It does sound unlikely, Roddy. (*But she sounds doubtful*) What's to hinder it being just a clock?

RODDY Nothing. Only—it's so different from all the rest. No label or anything. The kind of parcel your mother might send you with a cake. Paper that's been used before, and not very good string. An odd sort of parcel for a Highness to be getting, isn't it. (*He is making a statement, not questioning*)

FINLAY (*who has joined them; taking the parcel from RODDY'S hand*) Is it about the weight of a clock, would you say?

ANNABELLA (*too worried to be tactful; snatching the parcel from him*) I'll thank you not to interfere, Mr MacPhail. That parcel is Post Office property, and should not be handled by any member of the public.

FINLAY (*wickedly*) See it doesn't explode on you, Annabella.

[ANNABELLA *puts the parcel down hastily on the counter.*]

ANNABELLA (*testily*) I wish you hadn't thought of a bomb, Roddy! We're just working ourselves up over nothing. It's a perfectly innocent parcel with nothing odd about it but a ticking sound. A perfectly innocent parcel.

RODDY Famous last words!

ANNABELLA No, but what is there about it that's out of the ordinary! (*She is trying to convince herself*)

RODDY The address, for one thing.

ANNABELLA The address? You mean, because it's printed? But we're always at them to print addresses.

RODDY I didn't mean the printing. I mean the person it's addressed to. If that parcel was addressed to Mrs MacCallum it would be just an ordinary parcel, and it could tick its head off for all of me. It's because it's addressed to the Prince that it isn't ordinary.

ANNABELLA But the Prince gets clocks just like anyone else.

RODDY Yes. He also gets bombs, quite unlike anyone else. Perhaps they thought that now was a nice safe time to send him a bomb, when there would be nothing but a country Post Office between them and him. It's probably just what they're counting on: that the post-mistress will think it a 'perfectly ordinary parcel'.

ANNABELLA But Roddy, all that's just supposition. It's just a parcel like any other parcel; and we have to deliver it.

RODDY I have to deliver it, you mean.

ANNABELLA Well, what else can we do?

RODDY We could open it.

ANNABELLA (*instantly*) Oh, no, Roddy; we couldn't do that.

RODDY Why not?

ANNABELLA Why not! It's unheard of, that's why.

RODDY Maybe, but it's the sensible thing to do. If it's just a clock we tie it up again, and no one is a bit the wiser.

ANNABELLA (*firmly*) No. Certainly not.

RODDY Look, Annabella, will you forget you're a post-mistress for just five minutes and be a human being for a little.

ANNABELLA Really, Roddy!

RODDY Just let me undo that parcel while you turn your back and be busy with the letters. It won't take a minute and then we won't have to wonder what might——

ANNABELLA I won't turn my back on any malpractice in this office.

RODDY Malpractice! My God, Annabella, only you would have thought of a word like that at a moment like this.

ANNABELLA And I don't see any reason for you to swear or be rude just because I won't countenance your nefarious schemes.

RODDY Nefarious schemes. I'm trying to save someone from being blown up, and all you can think of is your own dignity.

ANNABELLA (*crisply*) What I'm thinking of is Post Office procedure. And Post Office procedure doesn't include the opening of perfectly innocent parcels in order to satisfy the curiosity of an employee.

RODDY Curiosity!

ANNABELLA Yes; curiosity. We can't take it upon ourselves to investigate the contents of a parcel just because we don't happen to like the sound of it. Our business is to deliver it as directed.

RODDY And who has to deliver it? Me! It's all very well for *you* to be official about it, Annabella. You're going to be rid of the thing in about fifteen minutes, but I have to go all the way up the glen in its company. And I don't fancy the company at all, let me tell you. (*After a second's pause, in a tone of resolution*) I'm going to open that parcel whether you like it or not.

ANNABELLA (*pleased by a possible solution*) No, wait, Roddy, wait. *I* know what we can do! I'll ring up the Lodge.

RODDY Ring up the Lodge?

ANNABELLA Yes; ring them up and ask them if they're expecting a clock.

RODDY (*after a second's pause*) And if they're not?

ANNABELLA They could authorise us to open it, perhaps.

RODDY (*in a half-grudging way*) All right.

FINLAY (*as ANNABELLA goes to the switchboard, which is behind the counter at the railed-in end*) We wouldn't like to lose you, Roddy. To say nothing of all the incidental loss.

RODDY Incidental loss? What incidental loss?

FINLAY Mrs Munro-the-Aird's corsets, and Mrs Macallum's cough mixture, and

RODDY (*his mind divided between the parcel and ANNABELLA'S activities at the switchboard*) Aah, stop havoring, you old amadan. Have you nothing better to do than watch other people at work?

FINLAY (*comfortably*) Well, I have always found it an uplifting occupation. Ve-ry uplifting. And look, now, what I would be missing today if I had been wasting my time hammering tacks into leather. All the excitements of an attempted assassination.

RODDY (*bitterly*) Don't get your blood-pressure up too soon. Annabella's no doubt right and it's only a clock. Did you ever know Annabella when she was wrong about anything?

FINLAY No, no, she has a habit of being right that she inherited from her mother. But I must say it would be a great disappointment if it turned out to be just a clock. It's a dull affair, a clock. Not a fine, *lively* thing like assassination.

RODDY (*impatiently, to ANNABELLA*) What do they say, Annabella?

ANNABELLA The line's busy.

RODDY Oh, hell!

FINLAY (*scientifically interested*) What is it that makes the ticking?

RODDY (*his mind on the telephone*) A clock.

FINLAY No, I mean if it isn't a clock. What makes the ticking in a bomb?

RODDY (*impatient*) A *clock*! They set the alarm clock to the hour they want the bomb to go off, and attach it to the explosive.

FINLAY Do they now. (*Contemplative*) I wonder what hour they set it for?

RODDY How should I know!

FINLAY Do you think they would know about the trains in this part of the world always being hours late?

RODDY Oh, stop it, will you! Annabella!

ANNABELLA Still engaged.

FINLAY (*equably*) People who talk on the telephone like to get their tuppence-worth. A man that wouldn't say more to you than 'Fine day the day!' if he was to meet you on the road will be telling you all about himself if he gets one of these things in his hand. Ay. (*This is a monosyllable made by an indrawn breath*) You'll get more out of a man at the end of a telephone than you'll get out of him drunk. (*He looks at RODDY'S re-examination of the postmark*) Could a mere member of the public (*this with an additional drawl, since he is quoting from ANNABELLA*) ask if you can't make head or tail of the postmark?

RODDY (*shortly*) No. It's just a smudge.

FINLAY It's time Post Office procedure (*the drawl again, since this is another quotation*) included a way of stamping their parcels so that a man would know where they came from.

RODDY (*resentful*) If you had five hundred parcels to stamp in fifteen minutes, you mightn't be so good at it either.

FINLAY They shouldn't be in such a *hur-ry* about it. Everyone is always in a *terrible hurry* about everything nowadays.

RODDY (*tartly*) Next time you get a parcel we'll arrange for you to get it two days late with a fine legible date-stamp on it. Haven't you got them, Annabella? (*As ANNABELLA shakes her head*) Can't you break in on them?

ANNABELLA Oh, I couldn't do that. It might be important.

RODDY *This* is important.

FINLAY Why don't you get Peter the Polis to look at it. The polis could give you permission to open it, couldn't they?

RODDY (*instantly antagonistic*) We don't need *Peter's* permission for what we do in this office.

[*But ANNABELLA has heard, and considers the proposition.*]

ANNABELLA It's Peter's day off, but he'll be in any minute for his *Crime Weekly*. (*She considers a moment longer, and then hangs up*) It might be all right if Peter was to——

RODDY (*interrupting*) I don't see why Peter should get the glory!

ANNABELLA (*at a loss*) The glory?

RODDY I mean, get the credit of intercepting the thing. This is Post Office business.

ANNABELLA Yes, I know, but Post Office business does not include opening parcels. (*She comes and listens to the ticking again*) Still ticking.

RODDY Mercifully!

ANNABELLA How do you mean: mercifully?

RODDY If it weren't still ticking you and I and the office—and Finlay MacPhail—would be coming down in pieces by now.

ANNABELLA Oh, Roddy.

RODDY Look, Annabella: there's nothing to hinder me opening that parcel and tying it up again the way it was. It's just an ordinary knot, and no one would know

the difference. You can't possibly object to that.

ANNABELLA Of course I object to it. It's against all Post Office practice. It's against common honesty, if it comes to that.

RODDY It's a fine time to talk about honesty with the minutes ticking away. And the train late as it is!

ANNABELLA (*who has not heard FINLAY'S contribution to the general comfort*) Train? What has the train to do with it?

RODDY As our friend Mr MacPhail has just pointed out, whoever set that affair set it for so many minutes after the train's arrival, but they wouldn't know that the time they read in the time-table had no connection at all with the time the train arrives here.

ANNABELLA Oh, Roddy. (*Overcome at the prospect of imminent chaos*) Yes, Roddy, you'd better see what's in it. Perhaps——(*her official mind struggling with her fainting spirit*) perhaps it would be more official if I did it. (*But it is a feeble and terrified suggestion*)

RODDY (*beginning to unfasten the parcel*) It might be more official, but it wouldn't be so appropriate. I'm the chap who said it should be opened, and I'm the chap who does the opening. (*His bad temper seems to have disappeared*) They won't print addresses to oblige us, but they'll print all right when it suits their own convenience.

ANNABELLA (*by his side; once more considering the postmark*) It looks as if the next-to-last letter was O. O, N, I think.

RODDY A poor idea of knots anarchists seem to have.

ANNABELLA (*still thinking of the source of origin*) TON, probably. Do these things give any warning before they blow up, Roddy?

RODDY Why ask me? (*This means: 'How should I know!'*) I've never taken a course in assassination.

ANNABELLA No, but you're clever with gadgets.

RODDY I hope I'm going to be as clever with this one. (*He has parted the paper to either side, flat on the counter, and revealed a square box of thick, rigid cardboard with a lid of its own material that overlaps a little all round. They stand for a moment in silence, looking at it*) Well, there it is.

ANNABELLA (*fearfully*) Roddy, you don't think it is the kind that goes off when you try to lift the lid?

RODDY If it is, one of us is going to be unlucky.

ANNABELLA (*giving the whole thing up*) No, Roddy, don't touch it. We were fools to open it at all. We have no idea what we are getting into. Let's tie it up again, and just——

RODDY Tie it up and leave it ticking the minutes away! You get under the counter, Annabella. Go on, now. And you too, Finlay MacPhail.

ANNABELLA But we can put it outside, Roddy, until we can ask the Lodge——

RODDY (*his eyes on the box*) Get down, Annabella. I'm going to take the lid off.

ANNABELLA Oh, no, Roddy, don't. Don't, Roddy! (*But she cowers into the shelter of the counter as his arms go out to the box*)

[*There is a moment's pause. RODDY stands as if making up his mind. He puts out a tentative hand and touches the lid, but lets his hand fall again. There is another pause of gathering resolution, and then with a determined air both arms come up and go out to the box and FINLAY dives for the shelter of the counter on his side, RODDY puts both hands on the lid of the box, waits a moment, and then takes off the lid. He holds it in his two hands, as he has taken it off, staring at the contents of the box. Then he lays the lid down on the counter and removes what seems to be a sheet of packing. He holds this as he has held the lid, while he looks at what lay under it.*]

ANNABELLA (*from her crouching position*) Can you see, Roddy? What is it? What's inside? (*As no answer comes from RODDY*) Roddy!

RODDY (*in a small voice*) It's a bomb, all right.

[*At this both ANNABELLA and FINLAY come to the surface and look in awed curiosity at the contents of the box.*]

ANNABELLA Goodness! Oh, my goodness!

FINLAY Well, well. So that is an infernal machine.

ANNABELLA Do you know how to stop it, Roddy?

RODDY I suppose you just cut the connection to the clock, but I'm not sure. If I pulled it, it might go off.

ANNABELLA But it may go off any minute without any pulling.

RODDY Ay, it might that. If only the clock wasn't face down we'd know what time it was set for.

FINLAY Why not drown it?

ANNABELLA Drown it?

FINLAY Put it in a bucket of water.

RODDY There's things that explode on touching water, I've heard.

ANNABELLA Let's do something quickly, anyhow. Let's take it outside, out of this place.

RODDY If I was to cut the connection with a pair of scissors it wouldn't pull it much. I mean, I could do it without——

ANNABELLA No, Roddy, no. You've taken enough risks. I won't have you——

[*Enter PETER THE POLIS, in his uniform trousers and a tweed jacket. He comes in looking at the money in his palm, while he runs it through with his other hand looking for the right coin to pay for his Crime Weekly, so that they see him before he is aware of them. Only FINLAY does not look up to greet him immediately. FINLAY is staring at the wrapping paper on the counter.*]

PETER Morning, Annabella. My *Crime Weekly* come? Morning, Mr MacPhail. Busy, as usual, I see.

ANNABELLA Peter. Look!

[*But PETER'S eye has already lighted on the box.*]

PETER Mercybehere! What's that you've got?

ANNABELLA It came through the post, for His Highness. And Roddy heard it ticking and said we should open it.

PETER (*calmly*) Roddy seems to have been right for once. And it seems to me that the sooner we cut that connection the better. (*He takes a folding scissors out of his trousers pocket and unfolds it*) The worst of those cheap alarm clocks is that you can never depend on them. I mind I had one when I was in Oban that went off regularly two hours and twenty minutes before the time it was set for. So I had to do mental arithmetic every night of my life before I could set the thing. But there's some that'll go off without any plan at all. (*He stretches out his hand with the scissors in it to cut the connection*)

ANNABELLA Oh, take care, Peter. It may go off when you touch it.

PETER (*comfortably*) Not it. A very primitive little job, this is. In fact, I didn't know they were still making them on this pattern. (*Cutting the connection*) There

you are.

ANNABELLA It's safe now, Peter, is it?

PETER Oh, ay, it's safe as long as no one plays chuckie-stones with it. Man, Roddy, that was a good stroke of work you did. They'll be giving you promotion for this.

RODDY I don't know what promotion there would be in my job.

PETER They'll maybe give you a shift to Oban.

RODDY Carrying somebody's corsets and cough mixture round Oban wouldn't be much of a promotion.

PETER Maybe they'll give you a medal.

RODDY The only thing they're likely to give me is a reprimand for opening a parcel that wasn't addressed to me.

PETER They could hardly do that when you've probably saved His Highness's life. Which reminds me: get me the Lodge on the telephone, Annabella. I've got to report this.

ANNABELLA (*going to the switchboard*) All right, Peter. Your *Crime Weekly* is on the table there, ready for you.

RODDY He won't need his *Crime Weekly* this week. He has some real crime for a change.

[*PETER is examining the address on the parcel. He does this without moving the box: merely turning up the paper to examine the address and letting it fall back again, so that the paper is still spread out under the box, inside up.*]

PETER The usual printed address and no help from the postmark. (*He has another look at the contents of the box*) Made in Britain, anyhow.

RODDY What makes you think that?

PETER That packet of explosive looks to me very like the stuff they use for quarries. If that's what it is the fellow that made it was being a bit optimistic. It would take more than this contraption to detonate that stuff.

ANNABELLA (*at the telephone*) Balwhinnie Lodge? Would you just hold on a minute, please. Peter.

FINLAY (*as PETER takes the receiver*) See you break it gently to him, Peter boy. No one likes to have been nearly blown up.

PETER (*having, for all his placid self-confidence, automatically pulled down his jacket and settled his collar on the way to the switchboard*) Balwhinnie Lodge? This is the police-officer at Balwhinnie speaking. Could I speak to His Highness, please? ... Yes, it's official.... Oh, no, not about speeding.... No, not about gun licences.... Oh, no, His Highness is not in any trouble of any kind.... In that case, you'll speak to me? *You'll speak to me!* Oh—oh, I beg your pardon, Your Highness. I didn't expect that you would ... Yes, of course, sir—Your Highness; a democratic age. Yes, indeed, sir, yes.... No, sir, it's not a subscription. I wanted to report that the Post Office at Balwhinnie have opened a suspicious parcel addressed to Your Highness and have found a bomb inside.... They heard it ticking, Your Highness.... Yes, sir, *very* smart work.... The postman, Your Highness.... Roderick Ross, Your Highness.... (*He covers the mouthpiece and speaks to RODDY in an excited whisper*) He's going to give you the Order of the Yellow Elephant, Third Class....

ANNABELLA (*in RODDY'S defence*) Only third class——

PETER (*having listened further, and again covering the mouthpiece*) He says there are six classes altogether, so it's a very high decoration.

FINLAY Ask him is there any money with it?

PETER (*still listening*) Yes, Your Highness, he's here.... Yes, certainly, Your Highness. (*To RODDY*) He wants to speak to you.

RODDY To me!

FINLAY My, Roddy, you're going up in the world. Maybe he'll give you a job.

RODDY (*throwing back the teasing defiantly*) Maybe he will for all *you* know. (*He takes the receiver from PETER*) Your Highness.... Yes, sir, this is Roderick Ross.... It's very kind of Your Highness to say so.... Oh, I don't know: anyone would have.... Yes, I belong to the glen, Your Highness.... Travel?... Oh, yes, Your Highness; yes, indeed. I've always wanted.... Yes, I'm coming up the glen with the post now, sir—Your Highness.... *Ask* for you? Yes, sir, I will.... Yes, certainly, sir. It's very kind of Your Highness. I haven't really done ... Thank you, sir. Thank you very much indeed. Yes, sir, I'll be very pleased. Of course, I will, sir. Thank you, sir. Thank you very much. (*He hangs up and turns to the others*)

ANNABELLA What did he say, Roddy? Are you going to see him?

RODDY He asked me if I lived in the glen and if I'd like to travel, and he said when I went up the glen with the post I was to ask for him, and we would talk about it.

ANNABELLA (*admiring*) 'We' would talk about it. My goodness, Roddy.

RODDY I'd better be getting on my way. (*He begins to put the parcels he has*

arranged into the mail-bag in their proper order) Will I take that up the glen to show him?

PETER (*equably*) You will not. The police are taking charge of this not very expert little arrangement.

RODDY (*with a slight return of his resentful attitude*) I suppose it's expert enough to be dangerous!

PETER (*friendly*) Oh, ay, it's dangerous enough. Don't think I'm running down your discovery, Roddy. It was a very good bit of work. A very smart piece of work indeed, and I only hope the police will do as smart a job of detection.

ANNABELLA Are you going to take it away and finger-print it, Peter?

PETER Och, that's not the half of it. They'll do practically everything with that parcel but play football with it. By the time they've finished with it they'll be able to tell you where the string was made, and what was wrapped in the paper, and what was originally in the box, and what places got consignments of that kind of alarm clock in the last ten years, and I've no doubt when they've had a go at that postmark they'll be able to tell where the parcel was posted.

FINLAY (*silky*) And will they be able to tell who posted it?

PETER Sooner or later, Mr MacPhail, sooner or later.

RODDY (*mocking, but with more good nature now that he is triumphant*) Get-your-man Peter, the perfect polis!

FINLAY It seems an awful lot of trouble to go to. (*In a tone of simple wonder*) Everyone is always making work for themselves.

ANNABELLA Mr MacPhail thinks no one should have anything to do but prop themselves up on somebody else's office stool. (*She is going on with her work again*) If every one did that there would be no letter from his daughter in Canada.

PETER If everyone did that no crime would ever be solved. It takes good hard work to solve crime these days. Believe me, the criminal that made that thing will be run to earth by the combined efforts of maybe fifty men. Men in offices, and men in the streets, and men in science laboratories. (*Seeing FINLAY'S face*) You don't believe that, Mr MacPhail?

FINLAY The man that made that thing will be run to earth because someone couldn't do sums in his head.

PETER (*staring*) Sums! What are you talking about? *Who* couldn't do sums in his head?

FINLAY (*demurely*) Me.

PETER (*at a loss*) You?

[FINLAY *leans forward and indicates with a forefinger faint pencil marks on the inner surface of the wrapping paper where it is lying open on the counter under the box.*]

FINLAY (*reading out the small sum*) Ninepence ha'penny, and fourpence ha'penny, and eight and tuppence. Nine and fourpence. Ninepence ha'penny for laces, and fourpence ha'penny for tacks, and eight and tuppence for new soles. Nine and fourpence.

PETER You mean *you* wrote those figures.

FINLAY I wrote them.

PETER And whose bill were you adding up?

FINLAY Soles and tacks and laces—it would be the shoes for Hughie Rankin, the keeper's son.

PETER And did you wrap them up in this sheet of paper?

FINLAY Och, no. He put them in his game bag. What would I be wasting a good sheet of paper for!

PETER Then what did you do with the paper?

FINLAY I used it to wrap up the boots that Roddy took to Glasgow with him.

ANNABELLA (*into the silence that succeeds this piece of information*) Roddy's boots?

RODDY It's a lie! (*Passing from defence to attack*) How can you remember what you did with any special bit of paper; even allowing the paper was ever in your shop?

FINLAY Och, I don't have to remember. It was the only new sheet of paper I had in it. It's an awful price nowadays, new paper.

PETER (*challenging*) Roddy.

RODDY All right, maybe it *was* the sheet of paper he wrapped my boots in. I unwrapped them in Glasgow, and how should *I* know what became of the paper!

PETER Whereabouts in Glasgow did you unwrap them?

RODDY In the hotel room.

PETER And you left the paper there?

RODDY How do *I* know what I did with the paper! Put it in the waste-paper

basket, I suppose.

PETER And it just happens that along comes a man who wants to post a bomb to Balwhinnie and finds a piece of paper that has just come from Balwhinnie.

ANNABELLA Stop bullying him, Peter!

PETER It couldn't be, could it, Roddy, that all this is just a neat way of getting yourself a little glory?

ANNABELLA (*AS* RODDY, *dismayed by* PETER'S *accurate summing-up of the situation, does not answer immediately*) Answer him, Roddy!

[*Her clear crisp voice, even though she is on his side, flicks him on the raw. He is filled with wild rage and frustration at this coming-to-pieces of the plan that had worked so well. Even if they can never pin the thing on to him, it is obvious that the kudos he aspired to will not now be his.*]

RODDY (*turning on her with a snarl*) Aah, it's you that's the bully, not Peter! I'm sick to death of the lot of you. All right, it *was* a plant! And I don't care who knows it. I wanted to get a little credit for once, and not be just Roddy Ross the Post. I'm sick and tired of carrying little bits of paper round the landscape, and meeting the same faces every day and having to smile and pretend I like them. I'm sick of this office, and stamps, and parcels, and silly stirks of policemen that have to buy *Crime Weekly* to find out what crime's like, and bossy post-mistresses that are about as human as a date-stamp. I'm fed to the back teeth with the lot of you, and I'm off out of this! (*He drops the parcels bag which he has been holding up in his left hand, and kicks the bag towards* PETER *before diving for the door and out into the countryside*)

PETER Hey, you! (*He begins to go after him*)

ANNABELLA (*calling*) No, Roddy, wait! It'll be all right! You don't have to run away. (*She comes round from behind the counter and follows* PETER) Roddy! Wait, Roddy! Roddy, wait! Roddy!

[*She disappears after the two men, still calling, and* FINLAY *is left in possession.*]

[*He looks after them in silence without moving from where he was, gives that sideways jerk of the head which is silent comment on a mad world, and relaxes into peaceful occupation of the Post Office.*]

FINLAY (*as he feels for matches to relight his pipe*) Man, man; it's an awful thing, Ambition! (*He calls this 'ambeetion'*)

[The curtain begins to come down.

[With the wild frantic yelling of its kind the alarm clock on the counter goes off.

[It shoots the smug form of MR MACPHAIL off the office stool in a great bound, and his pipe goes scudding across the floor. Before he has realised properly what it is the curtain is down.]

CURTAIN

NOTE

It will be obvious that not all Roddy's agitation is acting. His impatience over the telephone call, for instance, comes from fear that he may not be allowed to open the parcel after all. He has not reckoned with Annabella's idea of ringing up the Lodge, and is consumed with fear that this brain-wave may put an end to his plan.

It is possible to act the play without the final clock-alarm, but this will not only detract from the rhythm of the final moments but will deprive the play of a valuable point. To wit, the taking-down-a-peg of the superior Mr MacPhail. No mortal in fact is free of the gods' laughter, however free he may be of worldly failings.

THE PEN OF MY AUNT

CHARACTERS

MADAME
SIMONE
STRANGER
CORPORAL

THE PEN OF MY AUNT

The Scene is a French country house during the Occupation. The lady of the house is seated in her drawing-room.

SIMONE (*approaching*) Madame! Oh, madame! Madame, have you——

MADAME Simone.

SIMONE Madame, have you seen what——

MADAME Simone!

SIMONE But madame——

MADAME Simone, this may be an age of barbarism, but I will have none of it inside the walls of this house.

SIMONE But madame, there is a—there is a——

MADAME (*silencing her*) Simone. France may be an occupied country, a ruined nation, and a conquered race, but we will keep, if you please, the usages of civilisation.

SIMONE Yes, madame.

MADAME One thing we still possess, thank God; and that is good manners. The enemy never had it; and it is not something they can take from *us*.

SIMONE No, madame.

MADAME Go out of the room again. Open the door——

SIMONE Oh, *madame!* I wanted to tell you——

MADAME ——open the door, shut it behind you——quietly——take two paces into the room, and say what you came to say. (*SIMONE goes hastily out, shutting the door. She reappears, shuts the door behind her, takes two paces into the room, and waits*) Yes, Simone?

SIMONE I expect it is too late now; they will be here.

MADAME Who will?

SIMONE The soldiers who were coming up the avenue.

MADAME After the last few months I should not have thought that soldiers coming up the avenue was a remarkable fact. It is no doubt a party with a billeting order.

SIMONE (*crossing to the window*) No, madame, it is two soldiers in one of their little cars, with a civilian between them.

MADAME Which civilian?

SIMONE A stranger, madame.

MADAME A stranger? Are the soldiers from the Combatant branch?

SIMONE No, they are those beasts of Administration. Look, they have stopped. They are getting out.

MADAME (*at the window*) Yes, it is a stranger. Do you know him, Simone?

SIMONE I have never set eyes on him before, madame.

MADAME You would know if he belonged to the district?

SIMONE Oh, madame, I know every man between here and St Estèphe.

MADAME (*dryly*) No doubt.

SIMONE Oh, merciful God, they are coming up the steps.

MADAME My good Simone, that is what the steps were put there for.

SIMONE But they will ring the bell and I shall have to——

MADAME And you will answer it and behave as if you had been trained by a butler and ten upper servants instead of being the charcoal-burner's daughter from over at Les Chênes. (*This is said encouragingly, not in unkindness*) You will be very calm and correct——

SIMONE Calm! Madame! With my inside turning over and over like a wheel at a fair!

MADAME A good servant does not have an inside, merely an exterior. (*Comforting*) Be assured, my child. You have your place here; that is more than those creatures on our doorstep have. Let that hearten you——

SIMONE Madame! They are not going to ring. They are coming straight in.

MADAME (*bitterly*) Yes. They have forgotten long ago what bells are for. [*Door opens.*]

STRANGER (*in a bright, confident, casual tone*) Ah, there you are, my dear aunt. I am so glad. Come in, my friend, come in. My dear aunt, this gentleman wants you to identify me.

MADAME Identify you?

CORPORAL We found this man wandering in the woods——

STRANGER The corporal found it inexplicable that anyone should wander in a wood.

CORPORAL And he had no papers on him——

STRANGER And I rightly pointed out that if I carry all the papers one is supposed to these days, I am no good to God or man. If I put them in a hip pocket, I can't bend forward; if I put them in a front pocket, I can't bend at all.

CORPORAL He said that he was your nephew, madame, but that did not seem to us very likely, so we brought him here.

[*There is the slightest pause; just one moment of silence.*]

MADAME But of course this is my nephew.

CORPORAL He is?

MADAME Certainly.

CORPORAL He lives here?

MADAME (*assenting*) My nephew lives here.

CORPORAL So! (*Recovering*) My apologies, madame. But you will admit that appearances were against the young gentleman.

MADAME Alas, Corporal, my nephew belongs to a generation who delight in flouting appearances. It is what they call 'expressing their personality', I understand.

CORPORAL (*with contempt*) No doubt, madame.

MADAME Convention is anathema to them, and there is no sin like conformity. Even a collar is an offence against their liberty, and a discipline not to be borne by free necks.

CORPORAL Ah yes, madame. A little more discipline among your nephew's generation, and we might not be occupying your country today.

STRANGER You think it was that collar of yours that conquered my country? You flatter yourself, Corporal. The only result of wearing a collar like that is varicose veins in the head.

MADAME (*repressive*) Please! My dear boy. Let us not descend to personalities.

STRANGER The matter is not personal, my good aunt, but scientific. Wearing a collar like that retards the flow of fresh blood to the head, with the most disastrous consequences to the grey matter of the brain. The hypothetical grey matter. In fact, I have a theory——

CORPORAL Monsieur, your theories do not interest me.

STRANGER No? You do not find speculation interesting?

CORPORAL In this world one judges by results.

STRANGER (*after a slight pause of reflection*) I see. The collared conqueror sits

in the high places, while the collarless conquered lies about in the woods. And who comes best out of that, would you say? Tell me, Corporal, as man to man, do you never have a mad, secret desire to lie unbuttoned in a wood?

CORPORAL I have only one desire, monsieur, and that is to see your papers.

STRANGER (*taken off-guard and filling in time*) My papers?

MADAME But is that necessary, Corporal? I have already told you that——

CORPORAL I know that madame is a very good collaborator and in good standing

MADAME In that case——

CORPORAL But when we begin an affair we like to finish it. I have asked to see monsieur's papers, and the matter will not be finished until I have seen them.

MADAME You acknowledge that I am in 'good standing', Corporal?

CORPORAL So I have heard, madame.

MADAME Then I must consider it a discourtesy on your part to demand my nephew's credentials.

CORPORAL It is no reflection on madame. It is a matter of routine, nothing more.

STRANGER (*murmuring*) The great god Routine.

MADAME To ask for his papers was routine; to insist on their production is discourtesy. I shall say so to your Commanding Officer.

CORPORAL Very good, madame. In the meantime, I shall inspect your nephew's papers.

MADAME And what if I——

STRANGER (*quietly*) You may as well give it up, my dear. You could as easily turn a steamroller. They have only one idea at a time. If the Corporal's heart is set on seeing my papers, he shall see them. (*Moving towards the door*) I left them in the pocket of my coat.

SIMONE (*unexpectedly, from the background*) Not in your *linen* coat?

STRANGER (*pausing*) Yes. Why?

SIMONE (*with apparently growing anxiety*) Your *cream* linen coat? The one you were wearing yesterday?

STRANGER Certainly.

SIMONE Merciful Heaven! I sent it to the laundry!

STRANGER To the laundry!

SIMONE Yes, monsieur; this morning; in the basket.

STRANGER (*in incredulous anger*) You sent my coat, *with my papers in the pocket*, to the laundry!

SIMONE (*defensive and combatant*) I didn't know monsieur's papers were in the pocket.

STRANGER You didn't know! You didn't know that a packet of documents weighing half a ton were in the pocket. An identity card, a *laisser passer*, a food card, a drink card, an army discharge, a permission to wear civilian clothes, a permission to go farther than ten miles to the east, a permission to go more than ten miles to the west, a permission to——

SIMONE (*breaking in with spirit*) How was I to know the coat was heavy! I picked it up with the rest of the bundle that was lying on the floor.

STRANGER (*snapping her head off*) My coat was on the back of the chair.

SIMONE It was on the floor.

STRANGER On the back of the chair!

SIMONE It was on the floor with your dirty shirt and your pyjamas, and a towel and what not. I put my arms round the whole thing and then—woof! into the basket with them.

STRANGER I tell you that coat was on the back of the chair. It was quite clean and was not going to the laundry for two weeks yet—if then. I hung it there myself, and——

MADAME My dear boy, what does it matter? The damage is done now. In any case, they will find the papers when they unpack the basket, and return them tomorrow.

STRANGER If someone doesn't steal them. There are a lot of people who would like to lay hold of a complete set of papers, believe me.

MADAME (*reassuring*) Oh, no. Old Fleureau is the soul of honesty. You have no need to worry about them. They will be back first thing tomorrow, you shall see; and then we shall have much pleasure in sending them to the Administration Office for the Corporal's inspection. Unless, of course, the Corporal insists on your personal appearance at the office.

CORPORAL (*cold and indignant*) I have seen monsieur. All that I want now is to see his papers.

STRANGER You shall see them, Corporal, you shall see them. The whole half-ton of

them. You may inspect them at your leisure. Provided, that is, that they come back from the laundry to which this idiot has consigned them.

MADAME (*again reassuring*) They will come back, never fear. And you must not blame Simone. She is a good child, and does her best.

SIMONE (*with an air of belated virtue*) I am not one to pry into pockets.

MADAME Simone, show the Corporal out, if you please.

SIMONE (*natural feeling overcoming her for a moment*) He knows the way out. (*Recovering*) Yes, madame.

MADAME And Corporal, try to take your duties a little less literally in future. My countrymen appreciate the spirit rather than the letter.

CORPORAL I have my instructions, madame, and I obey them. Good day, madame. Monsieur.

[*He goes, followed by SIMONE—door closes. There is a moment of silence.*]

STRANGER For a good collaborator, that was a remarkably quick adoption.

MADAME Sit down, young man. I will give you something to drink. I expect your knees are none too well.

STRANGER My knees, madame, are pure gelatine. As for my stomach, it seems to have disappeared.

MADAME (*offering him the drink she has poured out*) This will recall it, I hope.

STRANGER You are not drinking, madame?

MADAME Thank you, no.

STRANGER Not with strangers. It is certainly no time to drink with strangers. Nevertheless, I drink the health of a collaborator. (*He drinks*) Tell me, madame, what will happen tomorrow when they find that you have no nephew?

MADAME (*surprised*) But of course I have a nephew. I tell lies, my friend; but not *silly* lies. My charming nephew has gone to Bonneval for the day. He finds country life dull.

STRANGER Dull? This—this heaven?

MADAME (*dryly*) He likes to talk and here there is no audience. At Headquarters in Bonneval he finds the audience sympathetic.

STRANGER (*understanding the implication*) Ah.

MADAME He believes in the Brotherhood of Man—if you can credit it.

STRANGER After the last six months?

MADAME His mother was American, so he has half the Balkans in his blood. To say nothing of Italy, Russia, and the Levant.

STRANGER (*half-amused*) I see.

MADAME A silly and worthless creature, but useful.

STRANGER Useful?

MADAME I—borrow his cloak.

STRANGER I see.

MADAME Tonight I shall borrow his identity papers, and tomorrow they will go to the office in St Estèphe.

STRANGER But—he will have to know.

MADAME (*placidly*) Oh, yes, he will know, of course.

STRANGER And how will you persuade such an enthusiastic collaborator to deceive his friends?

MADAME Oh, that is easy. He is my heir.

STRANGER (*amused*) Ah.

MADAME He is, also, by the mercy of God, not too unlike you, so that his photograph will not startle the Corporal too much tomorrow. Now tell me what you were doing in my wood.

STRANGER Resting my feet—I am practically walking on my bones. And waiting for tonight.

MADAME Where are you making for? (*As he does not answer immediately*) The coast? (*He nods*) That is four days away—five if your feet are bad.

STRANGER I know it.

MADAME Have you friends on the way?

STRANGER I have friends at the coast, who will get me a boat. But no one between here and the sea.

MADAME (*rising*) I must consult my list of addresses. (*Pausing*) What was your service?

STRANGER Army.

MADAME Which Regiment?

STRANGER The 79th.

MADAME (*after the faintest pause*) And your Colonel's name?

STRANGER Delavault was killed in the first week, and Martin took over.

MADAME (*going to her desk*) A 'good collaborator' cannot be too careful. Now I can consult my notebook. A charming colour, is it not? A lovely shade of red.

STRANGER Yes—but what has a red quill pen to do with your notebook?—Ah, you write with it of course—stupid of me.

MADAME Certainly I write with it—but it is also my notebook—look—I only need a hairpin—and then—so—out of my quill pen comes my notebook—a tiny piece of paper—but enough for a list of names.

STRANGER You mean that you keep that list on your desk? (*He sounds disapproving*)

MADAME Where did you expect me to keep it, young man? In my corset? Did you ever try to get something out of your corset in a hurry? What would you advise as the ideal quality in a hiding-place for a list of names?

STRANGER That the thing should be difficult to find, of course.

MADAME Not at all. That it should be easily destroyed in emergency. It is too big for me to swallow—I suspect they do that only in books—and we have no fires to consume it, so I had to think of some other way. I did try to memorise the list, but what I could not be sure of remembering were those that—that had to be scored off. It would be fatal to send someone to an address that—that was no longer available. So I had to keep a written record.

STRANGER And if you neither eat it nor burn it when the moment comes, how do you get rid of it?

MADAME I could, of course, put a match to it, but scraps of freshly-burned paper on a desk take a great deal of explaining. If I ceased to be looked on with approval my usefulness would end. It is important therefore that there should be no sign of anxiety on my part: no burned paper, no excuses to leave the room, no nods and becks and winks. I just sit here at my desk and go on with my letters. I tilt my nice big inkwell sideways for a moment and dip the pen into the deep ink at the side. The ink flows into the hollow of the quill, and all is blotted out. (*Consulting the list*) Let me see. It would be good if you could rest your feet for a day or so.

STRANGER (*ruefully*) It would.

MADAME There is a farm just beyond the Marnay cross-roads on the way to St Estèphe—(*She pauses to consider*)

STRANGER St Estèphe is the home of the single-minded Corporal. I don't want to run into him again.

MADAME No, that might be awkward; but that farm of the Cherfils would be ideal.

A good hiding-place, and food to spare, and fine people——

STRANGER If your nephew is so friendly with the invader, how is it that the Corporal doesn't know him by sight?

MADAME (*absently*) The unit at St Estèphe is a non-commissioned one.

STRANGER Does the Brotherhood of Man exclude sergeants, then?

MADAME Oh, definitely. Brotherhood does not really begin under field rank, I understand.

STRANGER But the Corporal may still meet your nephew somewhere.

MADAME That is a risk one must take. It is not a very grave one. They change the personnel every few weeks, to prevent them becoming too acclimatised. And even if he met my nephew, he is unlikely to ask for the papers of so obviously well-to-do a citizen. If you could bear to go *back* a little——

STRANGER Not a step! It would be like——like denying God. I have got so far, against all the odds, and I am not going a yard back. Not even to rest my feet!

MADAME I understand; but it is a pity. It is a long way to the Cherfils farm——two miles east of the Marnay cross-roads it is, on a little hill.

STRANGER I'll get there; don't worry. If not tonight then tomorrow night. I am used to sleeping in the open by now.

MADAME I wish we could have you here, but it is too dangerous. We are liable to be billeted on at any moment, without notice. However, we can give you a good meal, and a bath. We have no coal, so it will be one of those flat-tin-saucer baths. And if you want to be very kind to Simone you might have it somewhere in the kitchen regions and so save her carrying water upstairs.

STRANGER But of course.

MADAME Before the war I had a staff of twelve. Now I have Simone. I dust and Simone sweeps, and between us we keep the dirt at bay. She has no manners but a great heart, the child.

STRANGER The heart of a lion.

MADAME Before I put this back you might memorise these: Forty Avenue Foch, in Crest, the back entrance.

STRANGER Forty Avenue Foch, the back entrance.

MADAME You may find it difficult to get into Crest, by the way. It is a closed area. The pot boy at the Red Lion in Mans.

STRANGER The pot boy.

MADAME Denis the blacksmith at Laloupe. And the next night should take you to the sea and your friends. Are they safely in your mind?

STRANGER Forty Avenue Foch in Crest: the pot boy at the Red Lion in Mans: and Denis the blacksmith at Laloupe. And to be careful getting into Crest.

MADAME Good. Then I can close my notebook—or roll it up, I should say—then—it fits neatly, does it not? Now let us see about some food for you. Perhaps I could find you other clothes. Are these all you——

[*The CORPORAL'S voice is heard mingled in fury with the still more furious tones of SIMONE. She is yelling: 'Nothing of the sort, I tell you, nothing of the sort', but no words are clearly distinguishable in the angry row.*

[*The door is flung open, and the CORPORAL bursts in dragging a struggling SIMONE by the arm.*]

SIMONE (*screaming with rage and terror*) Let me go, you foul fiend, you murdering foreign bastard, let me go. (*She tries to kick him*)

CORPORAL (*at the same time*) Stop struggling, you lying deceitful little bit of no-good.

MADAME Will someone explain this extraordinary——

CORPORAL This creature——

MADAME Take your hand from my servant's arm, Corporal. She is not going to run away.

CORPORAL (*reacting to the voice of authority and automatically complying*) Your precious servant was overheard telling the gardener that she had never set eyes on this man.

SIMONE I did not! Why should I say anything like that?

CORPORAL With my own ears I heard her, my own two ears. Will you kindly explain that to me if you can.

MADAME You speak our language very well, Corporal, but perhaps you are not so quick to understand.

CORPORAL I understand perfectly.

MADAME What Simone was saying to the gardener was no doubt what she was announcing to all and sundry at the pitch of her voice this morning.

CORPORAL (*unbelieving*) And what was that?

MADAME That she *wished* she had never set eyes on my nephew.

CORPORAL And why should she say that?

MADAME My nephew, Corporal, has many charms, but tidiness is not one of them. As you may have deduced from the episode of the coat. He is apt to leave his room

SIMONE (*on her cue; in a burst of scornful rage*) Cigarette ends, pyjamas, towels, bedclothes, books, papers—all over the floor like a *flood*. Every morning I tidy up, and in two hours it is as if a bomb had burst in the room.

STRANGER (*testily*) I told you already that I was sor——

SIMONE (*interrupting*) As if I had nothing else to do in this enormous house but wait on you.

STRANGER Haven't I said that I——

SIMONE And when I have climbed all the way up from the kitchen with your shaving water, you let it get cold; but will you shave in cold? Oh, no! I have to bring up another——

STRANGER I didn't ask you to climb the damned stairs, did I?

SIMONE And do I get a word of thanks for bringing it? Do I indeed? You say: 'Must you bring it in that hideous jug; it offends my eyes.'

STRANGER So it does offend my eyes!

MADAME Enough, enough! We had enough of that this morning. You see, Corporal?

CORPORAL I could have sworn——

MADAME A natural mistake, perhaps. But I think you might have used a little more common sense in the matter. (*Coldly*) And a great deal more dignity. I don't like having my servants manhandled.

CORPORAL She refused to come.

SIMONE Accusing me of things I never said!

MADAME However, now that you are here again you can make yourself useful. My nephew wants to go into Crest the day after tomorrow, and that requires a special pass. Perhaps you would make one out for him.

CORPORAL But I——

MADAME You have a little book of permits in your pocket, haven't you?

CORPORAL Yes. I——

MADAME Very well. Better make it valid for two days. He is always changing his mind.

CORPORAL But it is not for me to grant a pass.

MADAME You sign them, don't you?

CORPORAL Yes, but only when someone tells me to.

MADAME Very well, if it will help you, I tell you to.

CORPORAL I mean, permission must be granted before a pass is issued.

MADAME And have you any doubt that a permission will be granted to my nephew?

CORPORAL No, of course not, madame.

MADAME Then don't be absurd, Corporal. To be absurd twice in five minutes is too often. You may use my desk—and my own special pen. Isn't it a beautiful quill, Corporal?

CORPORAL Thank you, madame, no. *We* Germans have come a long way from the geese.

MADAME Yes?

CORPORAL I prefer my fountain-pen. It is a more efficient implement. (*He writes*) For the 15th and the 16th. 'Holder of identity card number'—What is the number of your identity, monsieur?

STRANGER I have not the faintest idea.

CORPORAL You do not know?

STRANGER No. The only numbers I take an interest in are lottery numbers.

SIMONE I know the number of monsieur's card.

MADAME (*afraid that she is going to invent one*) I don't think that likely, Simone.

SIMONE (*aware of what is in her mistress's mind, and reassuring her*) But I really *do* know, madame. It is the year I was born, with two 'ones' after it. Many a time I have seen it on the outside of the card.

CORPORAL It is good that someone knows.

SIMONE It is—192411.

CORPORAL 192411. (*He fills in the dates*)

MADAME (*as he nears the end*) Are you going back to St Estèphe now, Corporal?

CORPORAL Yes, madame.

MADAME Then perhaps you will give my nephew a lift as far as the Marnay cross-

roads.

CORPORAL It is not permitted to take civilians as passengers.

STRANGER But you took me here as a passenger.

CORPORAL That was different.

MADAME You mean that when you thought he was a miscreant you took him in your car, but now that you know he is my nephew you refuse?

CORPORAL When I brought him here it was on service business.

MADAME (*gently reasonable*) Corporal, I think you owe me something for your general lack of tact this afternoon. Would it be too much to ask you to consider my nephew a miscreant for the next hour while you drive him as far as the Marnay cross-roads?

CORPORAL But——

MADAME Take him to the cross-roads with you and I shall agree to forget your—your lack of efficiency. I am sure you are actually a very efficient person, and likely to be a sergeant any day now. We won't let a blunder or two stand in your way.

CORPORAL If I am caught giving a lift to a civilian, I shall never be a sergeant.

MADAME (*still gentle*) If I report on your conduct this afternoon, tomorrow you will be a private.

CORPORAL (*after a long pause*) Is monsieur ready to come now?

STRANGER Quite ready.

CORPORAL You will need a coat.

MADAME Simone, get monsieur's coat from the cupboard in the hall. And when you have seen him off, come back here.

SIMONE Yes, madame.

[*Exit* SIMONE.]

CORPORAL Madame.

MADAME Good day to you, Corporal.

[*Exit* CORPORAL.]

STRANGER Your talent for blackmail is remarkable.

MADAME The place has a yellow barn. You had better wait somewhere till evening, when the dogs are chained up.

STRANGER I wish I had an aunt of your calibre. All mine are authorities on crochet.

MADAME I could wish you were my nephew. Good luck, and be careful. Perhaps one day you will come back, and dine with me, and tell me the rest of the tale.

[*The sound of a running engine comes from outside.*]

STRANGER Two years today, perhaps?

MADAME One year today.

STRANGER (*softly*) Who knows? (*He lifts her hand to his lips*) Thank you, and *au revoir*. (*Turning at the door*) Being sped on my way by the enemy is a happiness I had not anticipated. I shall never be able to repay you for that. (*He goes out*) (*Off*) Ah, my coat—thank you, Simone.

[*Sound of car driving off.*]

[MADAME *pours out two glasses. As she finishes, SIMONE comes in, shutting the door correctly behind her and taking two paces into the room.*]

SIMONE You wanted me, madame?

MADAME You will drink a glass of wine with me, Simone.

SIMONE With you, madame!

MADAME You are a good daughter of France and a good servant to me. We shall drink a toast together.

SIMONE Yes, madame.

MADAME (*quietly*) To Freedom.

SIMONE (*repeating*) To Freedom. May I add a bit of my own, madame?

MADAME Certainly.

SIMONE (*with immense satisfaction*) And a very bad end to that Corporal!

CURTAIN

THE PRINCESS WHO LIKED CHERRY PIE

CHARACTERS

FIRST LADY IN WAITING

SECOND LADY IN WAITING

LORD CHAMBERLAIN

THE KING

THE QUEEN

PRINCESS GREENSLEEVES

PRINCE LUDO

PRINCE TIDDLEWINKS

PRINCE SNAKES-AND-LADDERS

PRINCE PING-PONG

THE KING'S PAGE

COURTIERS

THE PRINCESS WHO LIKED CHERRY PIE

The Scene is the Court of the PRINCESS'S father. Diagonally across the right-hand back corner of the stage is a group of three thrones on a small platform. At the moment they are empty, but sitting on stools round the stage are the members of the Court, very excited and very gossipy. The women have Edward the Fourth head-dresses, as in all the best fairy-tales (foolscaps with a wisp of veil tacked to the end), and long, high-waisted dresses. The men in brightly coloured tunics and contrasting hose.

FIRST LADY IN WAITING *And I said to her: 'Why should I if I don't feel like it?'*

SECOND LADY *in waiting And what did she say?*

FIRST LADY IN WAITING *She said: 'Well, why shouldn't you?'*

SECOND LADY IN WAITING *And what did you say?*

LORD CHAMBERLAIN *(entering upstage left) Silence! Silence! Make way for His Majesty! Make way for His Majesty! (He sings this out in a high, loud voice which is quite different from his real voice, which is quite humble and ordinary)*

[The COURTIERS jump to their feet and stand in silence (the men) or curtsy (the women) while the KING comes in very pompously, followed by a PAGE, and seats himself on the middle throne. The page takes up his stand slightly behind the throne and between it and the one to the KING'S left.]

KING *Humph! Where are the Queen and the Princess?*

LORD CHAMBERLAIN *I am afraid they have not yet arrived, Your Majesty.*

KING *I can see that for myself. What I asked was where are they? This affair was fixed for ten o'clock, and it is now (he produces an enormous watch and holds it up in front of his face and then at a greater distance) a minute and a half past the hour.*

A PAGE AT THE DOOR *(calling) Her Majesty the Queen!*

[The QUEEN hurries in and the COURTIERS again salute as they did at the KING'S entrance. She has grey hair tied in a bun at the back of her neck, wears spectacles half-way down her nose, and her crown is not quite straight.]

KING *Your Majesty is late!*

QUEEN (*seating herself on his right*) I know, my dear, I know. I was checking the laundry list.

KING Then you should have checked yourself when you observed the hour.

A COURTIER (*heartily, with his head back and letting it come*) Ha, ha!

LORD CHAMBERLAIN (*putting on his official face and looking with a glazed eye at the roof*) Silence! Silence!

KING (*testily*) My dear Lord Chamberlain, healthy laughter is not a crime!

PAGE AT THE DOOR (*calling*) Her Serene Highness the Princess Greensleeves!

[*Enter the PRINCESS slowly, licking her fingers, or rather putting them one at a time into her mouth up to the knuckles and slowly withdrawing them. There are red stains on the front of her frock.*]

KING Your Highness is late! Even if the occasion was not important, I should expect a daughter of mine——

QUEEN (*interrupting*) What's that on the front of your dress?

PRINCESS I think it must be cherry juice.

QUEEN Oh dear, I did think you would manage to stay tidy for an occasion like this! And that frock won't wash. It will have to be sent to the cleaners. Seven and six, at the very least.

PRINCESS (*seating herself on the KING'S left*) You don't see it when I sit. (*She hides the stains in the folds on her lap*)

KING My Lord Chamberlain, make the announcement.

[*While the LORD CHAMBERLAIN is unrolling a scroll and clearing his throat the PRINCESS looks round for something to wipe her fingers on. She is just about to wipe them on her frock in default of anything better, when the PAGE behind the KING'S throne, without moving forward or otherwise calling attention to himself, thrusts forward an arm and offers his own handkerchief. The PRINCESS wipes each finger and lets the handkerchief drop on the floor. A moment or two later the PAGE picks it up quietly, kisses it, and replaces it in the bosom of his tunic.*]

LORD CHAMBERLAIN (*reading from the scroll in his official voice*) Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! No-ta benay! Viz! The King will give his daughter the Princess Greensleeves to the Prince who first answers a riddle correctly. Only three guesses allowed and no prompting. Call the first suitor!

PAGE AT THE DOOR (*calling*) Suitor number one! Prince Ludo!

[PRINCE LUDO *strides boldly in—he is a very hearty person—bows to the KING, to the QUEEN, and to the PRINCESS, and then blows his nose with a flourish and a loud snort on an enormous handkerchief.*]

KING How do turnips grow?

LUDO (*immediately*) With the tops up.

COURTIER Ha ha!

[*The KING glares at the COURTIER and then at the LORD C., who having been told that healthy laughter is no crime, is taking no steps. The LORD C. becomes aware of the KING'S glare, hastily assumes his official manner and with his eyes on the roof calls, 'Silence! Silence!'*]

KING (*to LUDO*) Quite wrong!

LUDO But it is a very good answer.

KING *Quite* wrong!

LUDO Do I get another shot?

KING You may have three guesses.

LUDO I forget the question now.

KING (*who has also forgotten the question, to the LORD C.*) What was the question?

LORD C. How do turnips grow?

LUDO (*tapping his forehead*) Oh, yes. Let me see, now, let me see!

PRINCESS Do you like cherry pie?

KING Be quiet. Don't interrupt.

PRINCESS But I want to know.

KING It is a frivolous question.

PRINCESS It isn't. It's most important.

KING How can it be important?

PRINCESS When a princess marries she lives happily ever after, doesn't she?

KING Certainly.

PRINCESS Well, I wouldn't be happy if he didn't like cherry pie.

KING Nonsense! (*To LUDO*) Have you thought of the answer? How do turnips grow?

LUDO (*who during the KING'S conversation with the PRINCESS has unsuccessfully been trying to catch the prompting whispers of the COURTIERS*) Singly!

KING Quite wrong!

LUDO I give it up. What is the answer?

KING I don't know!

LUDO Don't know! But that's not fair! How could you tell that I was wrong, then?

KING You don't have to know the right answer to know an answer's wrong. Next suitor!

[LUDO goes out in high dudgeon, blowing his nose with a flourish in his large handkerchief.]

PAGE AT THE DOOR (*calling*) Suitor number two! Prince Tiddleywinks!

[TIDDLEYWINKS is a very timid little person, who comes in reluctantly and bows jerkily once.]

PRINCESS (*before anyone can say anything and in a loud voice*) Do you like cherry pie?

TIDDLEYWINKS (*thinking that this is the riddle*) I'm afraid I don't know that one.

KING That's not the riddle!

TIDDLEYWINKS Then I give it up.

KING But I haven't asked you the riddle yet!

TIDDLEYWINKS No, but I give it up, please Your Majesty. Your Majesty will excuse me. (*He backs out hastily, right, with many bows, all very jerky*)

[*The COURTIER lets out the first Ha of a laugh, but recollects himself in time and pretends that it is not he who has made the sound. The LORD C. glares and the KING pretends that he has not heard.*]

KING Call the next suitor. And if Your Highness cannot be quiet you must leave the court.

PAGE AT THE DOOR (*calling*) Suitor number three. Prince Snakes-and-Ladders!

[PRINCE SNAKES-AND-LADDERS is a cautious person. He bows slightly and then examines the court from floor to ceiling. Not at all a nice man, one feels.]

KING How do turnips grow?

SNAKES-AND-LADDERS May I write the answer?

[*The KING consults in a whisper with the LORD C.*]

KING You may.

[*SNAKES-AND-LADDERS takes a tablet from his tunic and scribbles something on it. The KING'S PAGE comes from behind the throne and takes the tablet to the KING. The KING and the CHAMBERLAIN bend over the tablet in an effort to read what is written. The PRINCESS says with her lips to SNAKES-AND-LADDERS, 'Do you like cherry pie?' He puts a hand to his ear and leans forward slightly. She repeats her grimaces. He nods vigorously. The PAGE hands back the tablet.*]

KING We can't read it.

SNAKES-AND-LADDERS That's your fault, then, isn't it? The answer is right, but you can't read it.

KING Nonsense! You'll have to say it out loud.

SNAKES-AND-LADDERS But you said that I might write it!

KING That is cancelled. Answer the riddle.

SNAKES-AND-LADDERS (*after a pause*) My brain is not working very well today. May I think it over and come back tomorrow?

KING No. You may think it over and *not* come back tomorrow!

COURTIER Ha ha!

[*Exit SNAKES-AND-LADDERS.*]

KING Next suitor!

PAGE AT THE DOOR Fourth suitor! Prince Ping-Pong!

[*Everyone knows at a glance that PING-PONG is the right one. Even the KING signifies his approval. He nudges the QUEEN, who has been dozing gently ever since the middle of LUDO'S turn. Observing for the first time how she has been passing the time he says severely: 'Your Majesty!'*]

QUEEN I beg your pardon, my dear. I had a very busy morning. You didn't have eight collars last week, did you? There was one too many.

KING (*impressively*) This is Prince Ping-Pong. (*To the PRINCE*) How do turnips grow?

PING-PONG (*doubtfully*) In rows, I should think.

KING Quite right! Quite right, my dear boy!

COURTIER (*audibly*) What a silly answer!

[*The KING pretends he has not heard and the LORD C. frowns.*]

KING *Quite* right and *very* clever! You have won the Princess. There will be mashed turnips at the wedding. I like mashed turnips.

PRINCESS Do you like cherry pie?

PING-PONG (*emphatically*) No! (*There is a dismayed silence. Then the COURTIERs begin to whisper to each other in distress: 'He doesn't like cherry pie! He doesn't like cherry pie!'*) There are too many stones in it.

PRINCESS Then I won't marry you. I couldn't be happy with someone who didn't like cherry pie.

QUEEN (*helpfully*) You could stone the cherries before you made the pie, dear, couldn't you? He would like it then.

PRINCESS (*disdainfully*) Stoning cherries is very messy.

QUEEN (*kindly, looking at PING-PONG*) Perhaps Prince Ping-Pong would help you on the days you had cherries.

PING-PONG (*stiffly*) The kitchen is hardly my department, is it?

KING This is all nonsense. What difference does it make whether he likes cherry pie or not!

[*The PRINCESS covers her face with her hands and begins to cry.*]

PRINCESS (*in a high tearful wail*) I won't marry anyone who doesn't like cherry pie.

KING This *is* awkward. And *very* ridiculous! (*To PING-PONG*) You wouldn't consent to be magicked into liking cherry pie, I suppose? We have a very reliable Court Magician.

PING-PONG I would not! Why *should* I like cherry pie?

KING Well, you want to marry my daughter, don't you, and—I'm afraid she has rather queer ideas.

PING-PONG (*coldly*) *Very* queer ideas!

[*The PRINCESS is now looking in vain for a handkerchief. The KING'S PAGE gives her his exactly as before. She mops her eyes, drops the handkerchief, and the PAGE picks it up, kisses it, and puts it away in his tunic.*]

PRINCESS (*to PING-PONG*) Do you like marzipan?

PING-PONG Yes.

PRINCESS And banana with orange squeezed over it?

PING-PONG Rather!

PRINCESS (*beginning to cry again*) Oh, I do wish you liked cherry pie!

[*At that the KING'S PAGE comes forward and kneels to the KING.*]

PAGE Your Majesty, may a page speak?

KING If he speaks sense.

PAGE Your Majesty, if it would make the Princess happy I can tell Prince Ping-Pong how to grow cherries that have no stones. My grandfather was gardener to a magician.

KING There we are! That settles it! You can both have cherry pie every day of your lives now. (*The PRINCE kisses the PRINCESS'S hand and stands beside her*) Bless you, my children.

QUEEN An egg helps to make the pastry light, dear. Keep that in mind.

KING As for you, Page, you shall be made a knight, and your arms shall be a cherry tree on a gold ground. I shall also make you Controller of the Household. You have more brains than all my staff put together. (*He looks viciously at the LORD C.*)

PAGE May it please Your Majesty, I am very grateful, but may I be allowed to choose my own reward?

KING What more do you want, greedy youth?

PAGE Not more, Your Majesty, but less. I would choose to be handkerchief-bearer to the Princess for the rest of my life.

[*The KING is not quite sure of himself, but the PRINCE has no doubts.*]

PING-PONG I think that is quite a good idea. It would be awkward if she sniffed at court.

KING Your request is granted. (*The PAGE goes back to his place*) My Lord Chamberlain, make the announcement.

LORD C. Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! No-ta ben-nay! Viz! The Princess Greensleeves is this day betrothed to Prince Ping-Pong, who has guessed the King's riddle. The King's page is appointed Lord High Handkerchief-bearer to the Princess for ever!

[*Music begins off.*]

KING We will now have luncheon. (*To the QUEEN*) Did you remember the mashed turnips?

QUEEN Yes, dear, oh yes, dear.

KING (*leading her from the platform*) Ha! Good! (*To the PRINCE*) Nothing like mashed turnips for keeping you fit, my boy!

[*They go out in procession to the music, the LORD CHAMBERLAIN first, calling 'Make way for His Majesty!', then the KING and QUEEN, the PRINCESS with the PRINCE, the PAGE behind them, alone, clutching a handkerchief to his heart, and the rest in couples, all laughing and talking.*]

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Plays vol. 2* by Gordon Daviot]