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THE MAN WITH A LOAD OF MISCHIEF

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY ASHLEY DUKES

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TO
N. C.
REMEMBERED

PERSONS OF THE COMEDY

AN INNKEEPER

HIS WIFE

A NOBLEMAN

HIS MAN

A LADY

HER MAID

The Scene throughout is a wayside Inn.

ACT I

ACT I

SCENE: A ROOM IN AN INN. EVENING.

[Enter the INNKEEPER, lighting candles one by one.]

INNKEEPER: An empty house, and candles ninepence a pound; we are burning money. I'll bar the shutters: a man's a fool to light the road for nothing. If wayfarers were moths, ha, ha! If they came fluttering to the window panes for their pot of treacle! (*He bars the shutters.*) But there's no hope of custom, unless it be a drunken farmer or a soldier out of service; and they need no glimmer to guide them while their noses show the way. Well, God help midwives, innkeepers and sextons, who keep the world moving; and the devil take travellers who stay at home! Past eight o'clock. Heigho! A drop of comfort would not be amiss.

[*He takes a bottle from a cupboard, and is groping for a glass when his WIFE comes in, bustling, and takes him by the collar.*]

WIFE: Lighting up the parlour, were you? I know the candle you would set afire! Lord save us from a doctor that swallows his own physic! On with your coat, and give the snuffers here. Smartly there, smartly! For shame on you! With the quality on the road and expected every hour!

INNKEEPER: Every hour, indeed! 'Tis bedtime for all honest folks.

WIFE: Then you should sit up late. And so you shall, I promise you. While horses tire there's work for grooms. I have the best beds aired and the warming-pans at the kitchen hearth.

INNKEEPER: Then we have all but guests.

WIFE: Aye, clever, so we have. But what if I told you that we have guests, and guests of quality, coming this very hour?

INNKEEPER: I should say, wife, you were dreaming.

WIFE: Then stir yourself, for 'tis true.

INNKEEPER: Guests? Who are they?

WIFE: A gentleman and a lady now coming up the hill from Six Mile Bottom. The lady in her own coach, and the gentleman mounted on as nice a mare as ever Moony Dick did see. And both of them bound for this house, by the advice of Moony, for it was he that passed them on the road.

INNKEEPER: Well, well. This is good news. Did you give him a penny for himself?

WIFE: I gave him twopence and a pint of ale.

INNKEEPER: It was too much, until we see the colour of their money. (*Buttoning his jacket with importance.*) They'll look for me on the doorstep. Bring me my leather apron.

WIFE: Time enough for that. Their horses walk. They are in no hurry, says Moony, with the gentleman stooping down from his saddle to peep into the coach, and the lady smiling at him behind the windows.

INNKEEPER: Are they alone?

WIFE: She has a maid with her, and he a servant.

INNKEEPER: So. A gentleman with his servant?

WIFE: And a lady with her maid.

INNKEEPER: Are these two man and wife, does Moony think?

WIFE: Man and wife! Did man and wife ever dawdle after dark? It was the accident that brought them together.

INNKEEPER: It must have been an accident to bring custom to this house.

WIFE: And very near a funeral too, says Moony, but for the rescuers in the nick of time. O, I love bravery in a man!

INNKEEPER: Never mind your loves. What manner of accident was this?

WIFE: The coach was passing Six Mile cross-roads, at the brow of the hill where the gibbet stands; and the horsemen half a furlong behind, and Moony with his trap coming down the by-road. There was a great wind on the down, and the footpad—him that was hanged last Michaelmas—was swinging on his chain.

INNKEEPER: Aye, the crows were pecking at him a month since.

WIFE: When the coach was nearing the gibbet, comes a gust fit to blow Moony from his seat, so he says, and the footpad—or his bag of bones—swings right out above the road. The near horse shies and breaks a trace, the other rears, the driver pitches from his seat, then the coach sets off at a gallop down the hill towards the bridge in the Bottom.

INNKEEPER: God save us! With the lady inside—and the bend in the road——

WIFE: And the cliff this side of the stream! O, my heart stopped beating when I heard the tale!

INNKEEPER: What then?

WIFE: While Moony was pulling the driver to his feet the two horsemen passed them at a clatter. The coach was out of sight, the riders after it. When they came into view at the bridge there was a long stone's throw still between them.

INNKEEPER (*mopping his brow*): God save us!

WIFE: The rise should have stopped the pair, but they breasted it at a gallop, with the others gaining on them, neck and neck behind.

INNKEEPER: Good, good!

WIFE: Into the dip they went, with the coach twisting like a scotched snake across the roadway; but next they saw the gentleman's horse at the hind wheels on the off side, while his servant came through on the near side, where the rocks overhang.

INNKEEPER: Well done!

WIFE: Every minute they thought to see one of the pair crushed and thrown, but close on the bend they saw the gentleman reaching for the bridle of the off horse, and his servant reaching for the other, and both standing high in the stirrups to get a purchase on the runaways.

INNKEEPER: And then?

WIFE: Still the crazy creatures went on at a gallop, but the riders worked over to take the bit in hand, and so they brought them to a standstill, not ten paces too soon, with the lady and her woman safe but for a shaking. Ten minutes later up comes Moony, and finds the horses all of a snow lather, with the servant

looking to their shoes, and the maid in a dead faint, and the gentleman standing as cool as may be, passing compliments with her mistress. O, I love bravery in a man!

INNKEEPER: It should be a three-days' bill, with all their horses lame. Which rooms did you make ready?

WIFE: The two best bedrooms on the first landing.

INNKEEPER: Hum. I would have put them farther apart. This is what the quality call a romance.

WIFE: And why not? We have no call to meddle with the pleasures of the quality.

INNKEEPER: That's as may be, but I would have bedded them farther apart. These romances are here to-day and gone to-morrow. Set them too close for a night, and at dawn your fine gentleman is calling for his boots, while your fine lady sobs on her pillow.

WIFE: That's not the way of true love.

INNKEEPER: True love, true love! Mercy on us! 'Tis the way of gentlemen, mark my words. Lay them well apart, let them dangle, and we have them here this day week. Now the servant and the maid are another tale. Bed them as close as you please.

WIFE: Indeed I will not! I'll have no goings-on in this house.

INNKEEPER: Why, they will hold the others fast. Trust servants for that. I was in service myself—and you too, once on a time. (*Pinching her.*) We know the ways of true love, eh?

WIFE: For shame on you!

INNKEEPER: Well, well, a woman always knows best. Here they come. Quickly, my apron!

[He goes out. His WIFE busies herself in the room. Commotion in the inn courtyard. Enter the LADY and her MAID, and after them the NOBLEMAN, his MAN and the INNKEEPER bowing. The WIFE curtsies deeply.]

Good evening to your honour.

MAN (*correcting him*): Your lordship.

NOBLEMAN (*to MAN*): Let him bring the best Madeira in his cellar.

INNKEEPER: A welcome to your lordship. We heard of the accident to my lady's coach, and your lordship's bravery——

NOBLEMAN (*to MAN*): Is this the innkeeper?

MAN: It is, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Then let him bring his wine.

[Exit INNKEEPER.]

WIFE: I hope your ladyship feels no ill effects from the shaking?

LADY: I thank you, no. My maid suffered more, but is now recovered. It was a trifle, thanks to the happy arrival of these—these gentlemen.

WIFE: Happy indeed, my lady. O, I love bravery in a man (*looking at the MAN*), whoe'er he be!

LADY: And I too.

NOBLEMAN: Still, madam, the virtue becomes a woman best.

LADY: *The* virtue, my lord, or virtue?

NOBLEMAN: Courage is the only virtue, wise men tell us.

LADY (*laughing*): Then my maid is a sad rogue. But we must leave you to your Madeira, and thank our rescuers once again. You, my lord. (*To the MAN*). And you also, sir.

[*The MAN bows.*]

WIFE: This way, my lady. Ours is only a wayside inn, but your ladyship will not look for a palace.

LADY: A palace? No, indeed. Your attic will be welcome.

[*The LADY and her MAID are lighted up the stairs. The NOBLEMAN and the MAN alone—the MAN at the foot of the stairs, looking upward.*]

NOBLEMAN: Yes, Charles, they are gone for the present. Will you now stoop to mundane matters? Loosen my boots, if you please.

[*The MAN loosens his boots.*]

So there's adventure, Charles—the edge of life, the day's reward. Who would have guessed our fate this morning? Two nodding horses, two nodding horsemen, and the fortune of the road. How many milestones have I passed to-day—and each of them the grave of an hour lost in travelling! How many crazy loads of hay, and rosy farmers in their market-carts, and great full-bellied corn-stacks, and feathered elms like striding cockerels! I was sick of meadowsweet and buttercups, I was surfeited with rich acres. The world is very coarse: Nature disgusts me. And yet our poets sing of her! This strapping wench, this milkmaid of a goddess, all breasts and fruition! A clownish taste. You spoke, Charles?

MAN: My lord, I had nothing to say.

NOBLEMAN: A vain apology for silence. You compel me to continue. I fell asleep as I rode, to the music of some mill-wheel grinding cottage flour, and dreamed of the pleasures of the mind. A collector's pleasures, my Charles. Suddenly, at the fall of dusk, comes adventure. A clatter and a cry, a race that might have been the envy of Newmarket, a tussle and a halt, and Beauty smiles her thanks. The candles beckon, supper is prepared. Yes, there's adventure. But I am old in these romantic arts; they stir the mind more than the pulse. Adventure must be held in delicate fingers. It should be handled, not embraced. It should be sipped, not swallowed at a gulp.

[*The INNKEEPER returning offers wine.*]

So here's a toast to prudence—to the soldier with a pair of heels, to the mind that lives when passions die. Prudence, Charles. To that virtue I would empty a tumbler. (*He drinks and flings away his glass.*)

INNKEEPER: I hope the Madeira is to your lordship's taste?

NOBLEMAN (*to the MAN*): Is this the innkeeper?

MAN: It is, my lord.

NOBLEMAN (*considering him*): Your wine, like your person, is the soul of mediocrity.

INNKEEPER (*flattered*): Your lordship is too kind.

NOBLEMAN: It is the half-way house between physic and cordial. Still it may serve to lay the dust of travel.

INNKEEPER: I humbly thank your lordship.

NOBLEMAN: You may leave us. At supper we shall look for better things.

INNKEEPER (*bowing himself out*): Your lordship shall have the best a poor house can offer.

NOBLEMAN: Stay. My servant here is my companion. Use him well.

INNKEEPER: I will, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: None of your scullery entertainment. He will wait on me at all hours. He is the last survivor of his race—the breed of Fools. Also he is my confessor, and lends me the comfort of philosophy.

INNKEEPER: Ha, ha! Your lordship is pleased to make merry. But you will have pleasanter company this evening—a deal pleasanter, I'll be bound. Well, well, no harm in that, say I. There's a time for everything. I was young myself once. Ha, ha! Youth will be served. Ha, ha!

NOBLEMAN (*to his MAN*): Charles!

MAN: My lord?

NOBLEMAN: Remove this creature from my presence.

[*Exeunt INNKEEPER, and the MAN bundling him out. The NOBLEMAN, alone, sits in a high-backed chair. At the head of the stairs appears the MAID, carrying a pitcher. She descends without seeing him. He watches her for a moment, then moves softly.*]

MAID (*with a start, making him a curtsey*): Your pardon, sir—my lord, I mean. I was fetching warm water for my lady.

NOBLEMAN: My lady can wait awhile. Set down the pitcher. (*She does so.*) Come to me. (*She approaches.*) It was a pretty swoon—as pretty as ever I saw. A portrait of surrender, in the pose that suits a woman best. (*She drops her eyes.*) And what did you dream in that pretty swoon?

MAID: O, my lord——

NOBLEMAN: Give me your hand. (*She obeys, and he puts money in it.*) There. Are we better friends?

MAID (*with another curtsey*): Much better, indeed, my lord. But I should tell you that my lady——

NOBLEMAN: Well, pretty one?

MAID: My lord will find my lady hard to please.

NOBLEMAN: Your lady is the most unapproachable of ladies? Is that your meaning?

MAID: Indeed, yes. And many gentlemen have found her so.

NOBLEMAN (*amused*): But some gentlemen, no doubt, have found her otherwise?

MAID: Perhaps—one here and there, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: One here and there. This conquest should be tempting. But you think my chances poor?

MAID (*fingering his coin*): My lord is generous, but——

NOBLEMAN: You hold out no hopes. Honest baggage! No matter; you may keep the bribe.

MAID: Thank you, my lord.

NOBLEMAN (*beckoning her closer*): But tell me, who spoke of your mistress? Not I. We spoke of a runaway coach and a pretty swooning maid.

MAID: O, my lord——!

NOBLEMAN: For that matter, I have a servant. A monkish sort of fellow, a philosopher—but he has eyes in his head. If they should light upon you, then he and I might fall out.

MAID: O fie, my lord! (*Escaping his arms.*) I know my place.

NOBLEMAN: Good. It is the art of life to know it. (*A silence.*) But have we not all met before to-day? At Bath, I think?

MAID: Your lordship moves in the best houses.

NOBLEMAN: Like her ladyship. We have met more than once. And where, I wonder? Was it not in the best house of all, in the Royal Crescent, from which my lady has just run away as fast as her coach would carry her?

MAID: You know too much, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: I have eyes in my head, too. I know that ladies do not take the road for pleasure at two o'clock of a summer's morning.

MAID: I must go to my lady——

NOBLEMAN: Come, it is no hanging matter to run away from a man, even though he be a Prince. The woman who runs will never lack followers.

MAID: O, if my lady could hear you, she would fly into a rage!

NOBLEMAN: A woman of spirit, eh? A passionate nature. But this is for your ears only, my pretty one. I think you can keep secrets.

MAID: I am afraid of men who know too much.

NOBLEMAN: You can trust me. Tell me now—do you love your mistress?

MAID: I know my place, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: But do you love her?

MAID (*with an outburst*): I hate her! I hate her, with her pride and her spirit and her smiling ways! But for you, my lord, we should both have been lying in a ditch with the coach atop of us. And all because she fell out with her Prince. A lovers' quarrel, and she thought herself insulted. A Prince, too.

NOBLEMAN: *The* Prince, my girl. The world of difference.

MAID: As open-handed a gentleman as ever stepped.

NOBLEMAN: Not to say open-hearted.

MAID: That's as may be. A gentleman of his rank——

NOBLEMAN: Cannot be blamed for it. You should be a lady-in-waiting, if we all had our rights.

MAID: O, my lord, you understand indeed!

NOBLEMAN: And did the Prince's eyes ever light on your pretty face?

MAID (*blushing*): Perhaps, my lord. But not a word to my lady.

NOBLEMAN: I am your friend. (*Amused.*) We plumb new depths of infamy.

MAID: It was a fine life at Bath, with dinners and suppers as many as you please, and the Italian singers at the playhouse, and a servants' ball every week. And to give it all up, to flounce out of the house without so much as a farewell, and half our baggage left behind; to sit cramped in a coach to count the milestones on the road——

NOBLEMAN: Aha!

MAID: —to risk sudden death at every turning, but for the mercy of a gentleman like you to save us from it; to live in common inns and lodgings; then more coaches and more travels, and no place to call our own! But it was always so. Last year nothing would content my lady but she should visit Tuscany—to see the churches and the pictures, if you please! We jogged all the way to Florence, but for the crossing in the packet—ugh! And those foreigners and their ways!

NOBLEMAN: I know them, and their pictures.

MAID: Yes, I hate her, and yet——

NOBLEMAN: As long as she runs from men, you will run too, in the hope of capture.

MAID: Hush! I heard——

LADY'S voice (*calling*): Louise!

MAID: Coming, my lady!

NOBLEMAN (*lifting a warning forefinger*): Not a whisper!

MAID: Trust me for that, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: You and I will meet again.

[*As she mounts the stairs.*]

If my man hates me as much, we are well matched.

[*Enter the MAN.*]

Well, Charles? Fresh from the stable?

MAN: The mare has a saddle-gall, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Careless creature. And your own mount?

MAN: A jar and some bruises. Scarcely fit to ride.

NOBLEMAN: The coach-horses are lame, no doubt?

MAN: Dead lame, my lord, so they tell me.

NOBLEMAN: Then we are tethered here for some days. We have time to think. Come, Charles. You and I will make no mysteries with each other. We know who these adventurous ladies are. I will call the maid a lady in compliment to you.

[*The MAN is silent.*]

Answer me—you know them?

MAN: Your lordship knows best.

NOBLEMAN: And you have guessed that our meeting was not altogether by chance?

MAN: I think even your lordship did not foresee the accident to the coach.

NOBLEMAN: No, the gallows-bird did us a good turn. My blessing on him! He lent us the appearance of gallant rescuers. This is a world of appearance, Charles.

MAN: I know it, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Women have a weakness for a rescuer. And indeed you played your part manfully.

MAN: The least I could do was to follow your lordship's example.

NOBLEMAN: It is seldom that we can obtain so much credit for so slight a service. Let us make the most of it.

MAN: We will, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Now this coach may have other pursuers. No hue and cry, you understand, no scouring of the countryside, but it may be followed. There is one person in particular to be reckoned with—let us say a very exalted person, who cannot ride a mile, but possesses a good pair of greys. You take me?

MAN: I take your lordship's word.

NOBLEMAN: I have no mind to be disturbed in this sanctuary, which pleases me well. It is less troublesome to be passed than overtaken. This follower must be misdirected. Should he pass this way, you will command the innkeeper to deny all knowledge of a coach, or ladies, or an accident. You will post one or two stout fellows—yokels of these parts, the stupider the better—to keep watch on the road and tell the same story. Bribe them handsomely; take my purse. See to it now, and return.

MAN (*motionless*): This inn lies on a by-road, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Well, what of it?

MAN: The place to watch is the turning from the main road, three miles distant.

NOBLEMAN: True. I should have thought of that. Despatch a man to this spot immediately.

MAN: I took the liberty an hour ago of carrying out your lordship's wishes.

NOBLEMAN: The devil you did! And how, may I ask?

MAN: I sent the man they call Moony Dick, who came up in his trap after the accident. He will wait at the cross-roads—all night if need be. He will direct the traveller you speak of to follow the coach by the highway to Oxford.

NOBLEMAN: Can you trust this man?

MAN: No, my lord. He will be paid in the morning.

NOBLEMAN: Well done! You are a treasure, Charles. I could almost call you my better self.

MAN: Your lordship flatters me.

NOBLEMAN: No, no. Every thought foreseen, every wish gratified. But it seems to me that you had your own reasons for such foresight. Come, confess. You had your eye on the maid. A shapely baggage.

MAN: Your lordship is pleased to be familiar.

NOBLEMAN: A vice in masters not to be encouraged, eh? But between ourselves, Charles, she is unworthy of you. A pretty face, an empty head. Three minutes' conversation and the well is dry. You should look elsewhere.

MAN (*with gentle irony*): I am sorry your lordship would deprive a menial of his pleasures.

NOBLEMAN: Come, Charles, you know I can deny you nothing. If you are set upon her, then take her—always providing that she will have you. For we must consult their wishes, eh?

MAN: My lord is the soul of chivalry.

NOBLEMAN: I gave you the hint for your own sake.

MAN: I understood your lordship perfectly.

NOBLEMAN: For my part, you know that my thoughts are centred on her mistress.

[*The MAN watches him narrowly.*]

This woman interests me. She has a will of her own.

MAN (*with a movement to withdraw*): I should not discuss my lady with your lordship.

NOBLEMAN: My admirable Charles! I vow you have the scruples of a gentleman. That reminds me that I have a question to ask you. We are cooped in this inn, and I cannot send you packing if I would. You may answer freely.

MAN: My lord?

NOBLEMAN: How well, Charles, do you hate me?

[*A silence.*]

MAN: I have given your lordship no grounds to suppose——

NOBLEMAN: None of your quibbles. The more you hate me the better it will suit my purpose. Speak your mind.

MAN: My mind is not your lordship's to command.

NOBLEMAN: True. I am asking a favour.

MAN: Since you ask me—I think no man is good enough to be another man's servant.

NOBLEMAN: Or another man's master, you would say. I feel the sting in the tail, Charles. Then why do you remain with me? Answer! Have no fear!

MAN: I have no fear.

NOBLEMAN: Answer!

MAN: I watch the world, as my lord watches it.

NOBLEMAN: But you see it otherwise?

MAN: We see what is in ourselves. We serve what is in our nature.

NOBLEMAN: Good. You have answered well. So you spy upon this fashionable world you detest?

MAN: Spy is an ugly word, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: You observe its mummeries for your own ends. You hope that this order will one day crumble, as it has crumbled already in France. You are a leveller, Charles. You are a Jacobin. Deny it if you can.

MAN: I deny nothing, my lord. But I make bold to ask why you keep me in your service?

NOBLEMAN: I have a use for levellers, Charles. I have a use for the hatred of your betters that surges in your heart. It gives me entertainment.

MAN: Then we are both content, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: No doubt your plebeian scorn embraces all of us? I am sure it includes the lady who is at present decking herself out in her finery to sup with me?

MAN (*impassive*): Your lordship knows me too well.

NOBLEMAN: A butterfly of fashion, Charles, a gilded plaything, a pretty parasite, a Prince's mistress. Could

any creature arouse a fiercer passion in the people's breast? Well, you shall have your satisfaction. You shall see her humbled. You shall even assist at the ceremony.

MAN: I, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: All in good time, my Jacobin. Curb your frenzy for the tumbrils. I have a mind to send her back to her Prince.

MAN (*involuntarily*): That would be——

NOBLEMAN: Magnificent, would it not? A noble gesture. He has won my money; we were together at the tables on the evening when she fled. The Prince smiled and smiled when they laid her note at his elbow. He was deep in liquor—still winning at every throw. I slipped away with an empty purse, to be replenished in London. Well, the money is lost, but one can still be generous. It would please me to return him his runaway.

MAN: Then why, my lord——?

NOBLEMAN: Why put him on a false scent, you ask? Finesse, my Charles, finesse—a thing that your guillotine fails to appreciate. We must not move too soon. Let him run on his wild-goose chase as far as Oxford, till his blood is up. Let her rest here for a night or two. And then let me send her back to him with a card and my compliments—a trifle blown upon, just enough to make him wonder whether he is sprouting horns or no. Yes, a graceful gesture.

MAN: And if my lady will not go?

NOBLEMAN: There are ways and means of persuading her. Under a cloak of conveying her to a safe refuge we can run her slap into his arms. And you, my Charles, shall be her escort. That will lend irony to the stroke. We will despatch her like a nosegay in a lackey's hand. The prospect pleases you?

MAN: I think, my lord, you hate this lady even more than I do.

NOBLEMAN: No, Charles. Moderation in all things; I am no Jacobin, but a mild reformer. I have no great love for these women who slip the collar. Too many of them would endanger the State. They should be taught a lesson. (*Rising.*) So you will do my errand? I can rely upon you?

MAN: As on your lordship's better self.

NOBLEMAN: Then I will make ready for supper. We must preserve the semblance of gallantry with our runaways. They also have their pride, no doubt. (*Turning at the foot of the stairs.*)

MAN: As much, my lord, as we shall leave them.

NOBLEMAN (*on the stairs*): Ha, ha! As much as we shall leave them. Ha, ha! Excellent fellow!

[*Exit the NOBLEMAN. The MAN remains alone.*]

MAN: A world of appearance, says my lord—a painted mockery. Brave men, gay women—these are masks and shadows. Green trees, young shoots, high nests for crows—whispers, fancies. Bright mornings, quiver of the sunlight, falling dusk—darkness and dreams. This is an earth that men have made. Our stench corrupts the meadows, and the cattle hold their breath. This is an earth that men have made. All is appearance, says my lord, and smiles again—the smile that freezes laughter. If we are false, what can be true? And yet the folded leaf will open to the sun. The tallest tree will cast the longest shadow. (*Drawing himself up.*) The longest shadow is reality.

[*The LADY descends the stairs, and the INNKEEPER and his WIFE enter from the other side with trays and platters. They hand their dishes silently to the MAN, who sets the table. The LADY seats herself and looks on.*]

INNKEEPER (*to the MAN*): The wine is good. My father laid it down. I have kept a drop for you in the

kitchen.

MAN (*considering the table*): Something has been forgotten. Yes. Bring flowers.

WIFE: Flowers, sir?

MAN: A bowl of roses. This is June. His lordship will expect them.

INNKEEPER (*scratching his head*): And the garden all in darkness——

MAN: Take a lantern, both of you. Go!

INNKEEPER (*going out*): A lantern, wife!

[MAN and LADY alone. The LADY laughs softly.

MAN: Your ladyship laughed?

LADY: I thought of the poor creatures plucking roses by lantern light. The drollery of common things.

MAN (*setting glasses*): Your ladyship means—of common creatures.

LADY: No. We are all common, and only some of us are droll. (*A silence.*) While we are alone, I have to thank you once again for this evening's service. You are a gallant man.

MAN: It was a trifle. My master led the way.

LADY: Perhaps that is true, but one looks for gallantry in gentlemen. It is their profession, so to speak. A poor man's chivalry is a flower. Have you been a soldier?

MAN: I am a soldier out of love with wars, my lady.

LADY: You served in France?

[MAN bows.

No wonder. I will offer you no money.

MAN: Your ladyship honours me.

LADY: If the question is not impertinent, why did you choose this trade of all trades?

MAN: It is a trade like any other.

LADY: You see the world, it is true.

MAN: I have eyes and ears, my lady.

LADY: And a heart?

[*He turns to her.*

That is the first thing—to have a heart. I thought—it seemed to me that you——

MAN: My lady?

LADY: I think I need a friend in this house.

[*A silence.*

MAN: Your ladyship has friends elsewhere.

LADY: But not here?

MAN: That is not for me to say.

LADY: I am in a trap, it seems. O, not of your setting, perhaps of no one's setting, but a trap. I feel it. Will you help me out?

MAN: My lady's horses are lame. This is not a post-house.

LADY: I can ride if need be.

MAN: We have no mounts ourselves.

LADY: I can walk to the next inn.

MAN: Twelve miles, my lady. The night is dark, but the door is on the latch.

LADY (*rising*): Then you are not disposed to help me? I was mistaken in you?

[*He seems to bar her way.*

Be good enough to stand aside.

MAN: There are highwaymen in these parts. One of them swung on the gibbet across your road.

LADY: That was the unhappy occasion of our meeting. I shall not forget it—this skeleton haunts me still. That men can be so barbarous!

MAN: If my lady fears that she may be followed from Bath, I can tell her that the danger is past.

LADY (*with spirit*): You can tell me?

MAN: The Prince's coach has been directed by the high road to Oxford.

LADY: Misdirected?

MAN: As my lady pleases.

LADY: Who has done this? Who are you, sir?

MAN: I am a friend.

LADY: Have I a friend? I must take it on trust, for plainly you know me.

MAN: I know you better than I know myself.

LADY: Here are deep waters indeed. I do not remember your face.

MAN: It is five years since my lady was a singer at Covent Garden Playhouse.

LADY: And you were——?

MAN: I was one of the gallery.

LADY: The gallery to whom I sang. (*With a smile.*) So I meet with an unknown admirer?

MAN: Those are empty words.

LADY: True. Those are empty words. I think, sir, you are not an admirer.

MAN: I am a friend.

LADY: Only five years, can it be? It seems half a lifetime. I have travelled far since then. The music has run out of my horses' hoofs.

MAN: It is in the earth, where nothing is lost.

LADY: You speak my thoughts. (*Rising.*) Who are you, sir? What is this place?

MAN: It is a simple alehouse called "The Man with a Load of Mischief."

LADY: Another man! God save us, I am weary of them. O, I will not play the weak woman with you. The pretence of weakness is our hypocrisy. Frailty is a pretty word to please our masters. (*A silence.*) So the Prince takes the wrong turning—outriders, coach and all?

MAN: He will pass in the night.

LADY: Outriders, coach and all. There's a chapter closed. Put not your trust in Princes. (*A silence.*) You know that I was his mistress?

MAN: So much everyone knows.

LADY: Ask me why I chose that trade of all trades.

MAN: My lady has seen the world.

LADY: A sort of world. Too many fops and their tailors, too few men. Too many wits and too little honesty. Too many bottles and too little entertainment. A lackey's paradise.

MAN: My lady speaks to a lackey.

LADY: Then I ask your pardon. A nobleman's paradise. A dunghill sprouting sword-grass, a hedgerow rank with lords and ladies. No fruitful earth.

MAN: The world is as we make it.

LADY: Have we made that? I think that you and I are in league against our betters.

MAN: My lady must speak for herself.

LADY: O, my friend, no more of my lady! And no more talk of what is dead and done with. Our wits were given us to hide our hearts. (*A silence.*) Now I have spoken too freely. Your Man with a Load of Mischief carries a gun on his shoulder.

MAN: It will not go off unless you fear him.

LADY: I fear nothing, but I have more pride than you suppose.

MAN: I understand. Your ladyship forgot for a moment that you were speaking with a servant.

LADY: Believe me, I trust you.

MAN: Good servants are made to be trusted. Trust is less than I ask.

LADY: You are proud too. I should have known it. Listen——

MAN: My lord is coming.

LADY: That man!

[*Re-enter the NOBLEMAN, and from the other side the INNKEEPER and his WIFE, bringing their bowl of roses. The MAN assists them at the table. The NOBLEMAN crosses over to where the LADY is seated.*]

NOBLEMAN: So, madam, you will sup with me. This is an honour indeed.

LADY: Call it rather the payment of a debt, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: To a man whose debts are unpaid, your integrity is overwhelming. Such obligations are made to be forgotten.

LADY: Always excepting debts of honour?

NOBLEMAN: We pay those from necessity. The bailiffs are on the spot.

LADY: And our supper on the table. Well, hunger spells necessity. I am famished.

[During the foregoing the MAID has descended.]

NOBLEMAN: Is all ready, Charles?

MAN: My lord and my lady, supper is served.

[The NOBLEMAN and the LADY seat themselves at the table, the MAN and the MAID taking post behind their chairs.]

LADY: It was thoughtful of you, my lord, to choose these flowers.

NOBLEMAN (*indifferently*): The roses? Ah, to be sure. They are in season.

LADY: By your leave, I will take one of them.

CURTAIN.

ACT II

ACT II

[Supper is ended. The NOBLEMAN and the LADY sit at the table, with their servants behind them, as before. The dishes are removed as the scene proceeds.]

NOBLEMAN (*in the middle of a speech*): Yet, madam, there is this to be said——

[The INNKEEPER and his WIFE approach.]

What have you there?

WIFE: A dish of early strawberries, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Innocent fruit! They shall be dipped in wine. (*With a motion to place them before the LADY.*)
Madam?

LADY (*to the WIFE*): I will take cream, if you please.

NOBLEMAN: Berries and cream—a marriage of the innocents. Indeed a massacre, to any palate of distinction.

[A silence.]

LADY: I think, when we were interrupted, you were singing the praises of the dice.

NOBLEMAN: Ah, yes. There is this to be said for the passion of gaming, that it improves the loser's character out of knowledge.

LADY (*laughing*): Oh!

NOBLEMAN: A man never feels so virtuous as the morning after he has lost his money at the tables. His purse is not so light as his conscience. All manner of fine thoughts and noble sentiments come into his mind. I have known poems to be written, or at least conceived, on such an occasion. I have known confirmed cynics turn into Nature-worshippers, like my servant here, as they pulled up their window-blinds to let in the sun. I have known men resolve to give up the dice for ever, and at least one who held to the resolution for a week.

LADY: He was a hero indeed.

NOBLEMAN: I have even known men determine to end their lives forthwith at the pistol's point, which was the most honourable decision they could make, besides being the best service they could render to their fellows.

LADY (*suddenly grave*): And you have known some who carried it out, perhaps?

NOBLEMAN: One or two, madam. Their souls rest in the gamblers' paradise. The rest were the prey of human weakness. To leave the world gracefully requires spirit as well as breeding.

LADY: It is never easy to break with the past. Still harder to break with oneself.

NOBLEMAN: And so upon the whole, it is better not to try.

LADY: You think so, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: We should accept our fortunes as we wear our clothes; they are made to measure and fit us tolerably well. (*Drinking.*) But if virtue must be encouraged, give me the green tables.

LADY: Your path to reform is rough, my lord, and looks none too safe. We women must beware of it. Is there no means less drastic by which we may reach the state of contentment? I doubt if our purses are long enough to run your way.

NOBLEMAN (*drinking*): They can always be lengthened.

LADY: By our generous masters, true. But how shall we be sure of their generosity? It seems that you are not a believer in the goodness of human nature.

NOBLEMAN (*setting down his glass again*): Perhaps, madam, you have heard of the Renaissance? I would not weary you, but it may be the name has met your ears.

LADY: Do you mean the revival of learning?

NOBLEMAN: The revival of ignorance, madam. The return of black superstition.

LADY: But one had always supposed——

NOBLEMAN: The grand discovery of the Renaissance—if we are to call it a discovery—was the goodness of man. The prime delusion. The new Serpent in Eden. Since that sop was thrown to man's conceit, the creature has strutted in his garden like a peacock on holiday. Whatever may be wrong, he is right. Whatever may be bad, he is good. He has spread a tail of fine feathers that he calls his humanity, and grows insufferable. Order went out of the world when the thought of human goodness came into it.

LADY: So you would have us acknowledge our baseness, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: It is the least we can do.

LADY: For my part I am ready to make confession. But I miss the Jesuit chaplain who should run at your lordship's heels.

NOBLEMAN (*turning to the MAN*): Here is—but no. Unhappily I carry a heretic about with me.

LADY (*with a smile*): Then even your lordship lives above your principles.

NOBLEMAN: I keep him to convince me of their soundness. Eh, Charles?

MAN (*impassive*): Your lordship knows best.

NOBLEMAN: He is of the opposite camp, and a good enemy. You know, madam, that men reason to strengthen their own prejudices, and not to disturb their adversary's convictions.

LADY: I have often suspected as much in listening to an argument.

NOBLEMAN: My man has never yet agreed with me. On the day when we cease to fall out I shall dismiss him. He satisfies a craving inbred in us, the wrestler's instinct. A heart of oak, a spirit of steel.

LADY: We learn more of men every day. I blush to confess that my maid agrees with me on all occasions.

NOBLEMAN: It is no more than her duty, madam. Women——

LADY: Women are not wrestlers. No, my lord. They are the prize, as we are often told.

NOBLEMAN: A prize worth many a bout.

LADY (*rising*): O, my lords and masters! Your world of compliments, your world of artifice, your world of sense and instinct!

NOBLEMAN: It is the world we know, madam. The rest is guesswork.

LADY: The rest is dreaming. Do you never dream, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: Indeed, most pleasantly. Of such an inn as this, and such a supper-table of the wits. The painted sign swings in the wind above the eaves, the lamps are lighted, and around us flicker shadows of ourselves. (*Turning to find the MAN at his elbow.*) Something too solid, perhaps.

LADY: There stands a spinet. Shall we make music to clear the air of such philosophy?

NOBLEMAN: By all means. Charles, you shall give us a song.

MAN: My lord——

LADY (*turning to him*): Do you sing, sir?

NOBLEMAN: As the thrush warbles.

MAN: My lord, I would not——

NOBLEMAN: But you shall.

LADY: Pray do not press him, my lord. I will sing for him.

NOBLEMAN: Madam, you are too kind. The fellow is stubborn.

LADY: To sing for others is nothing new to me.

[*The MAN opens the spinet for her.*]

SONG.

LADY: I have the flaunting air, she said,
Laughing remorse away
For vanities that now are dead,
Dear follies of a day.

Like a great golden ship she rode,
Capricious at her ease,
Spreading a sail to catch the mode
Of every idle breeze.

A dancing cloak she wore above
Her pale serenity:
O lamp of faith, O light o' love,
Which was more dear to me?

NOBLEMAN: It is an excellent song, but I do not remember hearing the words before.

LADY: They were made for an occasion that your lordship has not foreseen.

NOBLEMAN: Indeed. And now we must keep our followers no longer from their supper. The kitchen yawns for them.

LADY (*to her MAID*): You may go, Louise.

NOBLEMAN (*to his MAN*): And you, Charles.

[*Exeunt MAID and MAN. The NOBLEMAN and the LADY alone.*]

LADY: I wish to be frank with you, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: I am honoured to deserve such a confidence.

LADY: I think you followed me from Bath.

NOBLEMAN: I set out on the same night as your ladyship.

LADY: In the small hours of the morning.

NOBLEMAN (*drinking*): It happened that the hour was early.

LADY: Happened!

NOBLEMAN: The road to London is open to all travellers who pay the tolls.

LADY: And some of them, it seems, must pay heavily.

NOBLEMAN: Those are the drawbacks of travel.

LADY: You are the Prince's friend, I think?

NOBLEMAN: Many friendships have been lost by being claimed. Let us say an acquaintance.

LADY: At least you are his companion at the tables, for he has spoken of you.

NOBLEMAN (*drinking*): Favourably, I trust?

LADY: He called you a good loser.

NOBLEMAN: His Highness has the best of reasons for knowing that.

LADY: You followed me unknown to him, with a purpose of your own. What was that purpose?

NOBLEMAN (*gallantly*): Need we look far for the answer?

LADY: Farther than this room, my lord, or the accident that brought us together, or your evident courage as a horseman. You and I are no friends. We need not play at love-making.

NOBLEMAN: I protest——

LADY: We need not play at love-making, my lord. Fine words and good manners, if you will. Fine thoughts and handsome sentiments, as many as you please. But there is no love lost between us.

NOBLEMAN (*in admiration*): You are a woman of spirit. I could almost——

LADY: You could almost covet the thing you do not desire, which is myself.

NOBLEMAN: Hard words.

LADY: Hard thoughts, my lord. Now why did you follow me?

NOBLEMAN: There is a code of honour that imposes silence in such affairs.

LADY: I have heard of it. A man's code. It decrees that women shall not be spoken of, but only marketed.

NOBLEMAN: Protected, madam.

LADY: Protected, if you like it better. A man's code, with one chief commandment.

NOBLEMAN: And that is?

LADY: Thou shalt not be made a laughing-stock.

NOBLEMAN: Excellent.

LADY: A runaway wife makes a fool of her husband. A runaway mistress makes her lover farcical. On such occasions men put their heads together, solemn as church owls, and mumble their precious code of honour. I know, my lord. While women curtsy to them and thank them for their chivalry.

NOBLEMAN: Is this a war of the sexes?

LADY: And what if it be? O, I am not one of the wives who sit and wait for favours! Or even one of the mistresses who aspire to be wives, with one hand on their deed of settlement and the other on the cradle. You need not trouble to protect my name. When I give, I give all for nothing. I am free of your property laws.

NOBLEMAN: Yet the fortunate man who has once pleased you has his pride to consider.

LADY: The Prince, you mean?

NOBLEMAN: I am naming no names.

LADY: Let him consider it. I will give him leisure enough and to spare.

NOBLEMAN: You parted abruptly. Even noticeably.

LADY: And how should we part? Am I to wait until I am forty, to be pensioned off and receive a lodge in a Royal park, where I shall keep spaniels and subscribe to the charities? Thank you! I leave that to your gentlewomen, who have so far forgotten their dignity as to toy with a lover. I am plain woman, and will make my own way in life.

NOBLEMAN: There are some ways that would evidently be inconvenient.

LADY: For instance?

NOBLEMAN: For instance, if you should return to the public stage.

LADY: You think I should not be popular?

NOBLEMAN (*drinking*): On the contrary, madam. Too popular.

LADY: And why, pray?

NOBLEMAN: Your affairs, I think, are common knowledge.

LADY: I have noticed that the more pains men give themselves to shield a woman's name, the more widely her affairs are known.

NOBLEMAN: For that we are indebted to your sex rather than ours.

LADY: And if I should defy the ban, and return to my profession?

NOBLEMAN: Then, madam, a means would be found of preventing you. The playhouses are not uncontrolled.

LADY: Would you rob me of a living?

NOBLEMAN: We should reluctantly deprive the public of a scandal.

LADY: "We," my lord?

NOBLEMAN: I venture to speak in the name of the Court.

LADY: So I am to consider you as an ambassador of the Prince?

NOBLEMAN: An ambassador without credentials.

LADY: Engaged on a mission that is not without risk?

NOBLEMAN: Risk, madam?

LADY: What if his Highness should overtake us here?

NOBLEMAN (*drinking*): Set your mind at rest. We shall be undisturbed.

LADY: Undisturbed? I begin to understand you. (*A silence.*) You will oblige me, my lord, by ceasing to drink in my company.

NOBLEMAN: This is a common tavern, I think.

LADY: But I am not a common woman.

NOBLEMAN (*raising his eyebrows*): Indeed?

LADY: You will oblige me, my lord, by sending for your horses and meddling no more with ladies in distress.

NOBLEMAN: You know that my horses are lame.

LADY: I had forgotten it.

NOBLEMAN: They were lamed in your service, madam.

LADY: Your chivalry is faultless.

NOBLEMAN: We must pass the night under this roof. It is better to be friends.

LADY: Friends! You dare to speak of friendship! You, of all the fops and toadies who corrupt the world! You, the philosopher of the green tables! You, the spirit of intelligence among your dicing, drinking, lecherous set! You, the pimp of fashion! You, the cold heart of debauchery! You speak of friendship! It is from you, and men like you, that I have fled. Every leaf of every tree is more companionable. We pass the night under this roof, it is true. But beware, my lord, how you seek to dispose of me. I will not return at any man's bidding. Already I am free. Search for runaway wives, if you will, but let me take my own road. Go back to your Prince and tell him what I have said.

NOBLEMAN (*coolly*): A pretty outburst, madam. I vow that indignation suits you very well. It gives complexion to your native breeding.

LADY: My breeding is not yours, my lord. Nor is my destiny. When I set out from Bath I left the comedy of manners behind me. We are strangers to each other. I am a woman you have never known.

NOBLEMAN: I believe you are still a woman of sense.

LADY: You thought me a woman of taste, and I have condescended to abuse you like a drab. You thought me a woman of heart, and I have stooped to threaten a dog with a whipping.

NOBLEMAN (*angry*): Be careful, madam. You are making an enemy.

LADY: We both know how to value an enemy. Good night to you—my lord.

[*Exit the LADY. The NOBLEMAN alone.*]

NOBLEMAN (*drinking*): Vixen! Play-actress! But a creature of spirit, worth a man's taming. Would it have been wiser to make love to her?—No, a fool's trick. These spirited women see the game too clearly, and then we are a laughing-stock. Yes, there was a thrust.—Cards on the table are better. Frankness draws them out. They speak their mind.—She stoops to threaten a dog with a whipping, does she? I'll humble her for that. My lady shall eat those words: I'll teach her to stoop. But how?—We must change our tactics. Why not—why not—? I have it! (*Clapping his hands.*) Charles! (*Going to the door and calling*) Charles!

[*Enter the MAN.*]

MAN: My lord?

NOBLEMAN: I have use for you, Charles. High diplomacy—a game after your own heart. You shall play the comedy of your life. Listen. This fine lady has had the effrontery to call me a dog.

MAN: Your lordship is surely mistaken.

NOBLEMAN: No, that very word. Dog!

MAN: Is such ingratitude possible?

NOBLEMAN: It rankles, Charles. We must prepare a revenge to meet the case. I will have proof positive of her stooping. And that is where you will help me.

MAN: I, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: You, my leveller. You, my defender of the rights of man. You shall be her lover.

MAN: I—her lover?

NOBLEMAN: Yes, you shall woo this high-stepping beauty, and bring her to her knees.

MAN: I dare not look so far above me.

NOBLEMAN: Why, man, you have a figure like the rest of us, and a hand to lay on your heart, and the wit to play at honesty. I swear I could believe in you myself.

MAN: It takes two to make love, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: If you are one of them, she will be the other.

MAN: My lady may not be so easy.

NOBLEMAN: I'll answer for her, if you play your hand aright. Who is she, at the best? A common singer who has climbed the back stairs of fortune! And now that I think of it, she looks favourably upon you already. Twice in my presence she has called you "Sir"—confound her insolence! Her eyes leer promises. I vow that anyone can have her for the asking.

MAN (*in spite of himself*): Your lordship speaks too freely of this lady.

NOBLEMAN: Ah! That tone is better. Chivalry, Charles—there's the note to strike. Show her your heart of gold, and she will unbend, never fear. More women are won by bluntness than by guile.

MAN: But a servant——

NOBLEMAN: True, she may have her pride. Show her that you have yours. Stand firm upon the ground of equality.

MAN: And afterwards, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: What! A lover who talks of afterwards!

MAN: I am to be a lover with a purpose.

NOBLEMAN: It will be accomplished when my fine lady eats her dish of humble-pie. Then we shall hear no more of her graces. She will be safely in our hands. I shall be free of her malice, and you—well, you shall not suffer, Charles. We will bring in a bill of indemnity on your account. Name what sum you please. Will you do my errand, or at least attempt it?

MAN: Your lordship asks much of me.

NOBLEMAN: Not more, I hope, than any man can perform.

MAN (*after a silence*): I am at your lordship's command.

NOBLEMAN: Good. Very good. And now for ways and means. Your divinity has retired to her room. We must have no forcible entry—none of your plebeian measures.

MAN (*with irony*): You disappoint me, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Prudence, Charles. These high-steppers require a pair of hands. You will contrive a message and a meeting. The hour is late, the inn is quiet, romance is in the air. The rest I leave to your invention.

MAN: Your lordship, I hope, will give me the benefit of your advice.

NOBLEMAN: Well, a gentle beginning would be best. Play the gallant rescuer—that should go well. Then the groom with a soul above your station—a sure card. Perhaps even the gentleman in disguise—if that plot is not too threadbare.

MAN: I would prefer something fresher, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: You may be right. We should avoid the rut. But sympathy, remember. Speak of me—none too kindly, for she hates me.

MAN: I will not speak ill of your lordship.

NOBLEMAN: Have no scruples. Say your worst.

MAN: Servants often speak ill of their masters. I think that is not the way to my lady's confidence.

NOBLEMAN: A nice point. Yes, you have the finer touch.

MAN: I would rather rely on my own merits than your lordship's shortcomings.

NOBLEMAN: Very shrewd! I am proud of you, Charles.

MAN: Thank you, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: But do not be too respectful. A gentlemanly ardour will do no harm.

MAN: A manly ardour.

NOBLEMAN: Manly may be better. You have it all at your finger-tips. Why should I presume to instruct you?

MAN: Your lordship's wishes are mine.

NOBLEMAN: Then press the advantage to the end. No half-measures. Do not spare her.

MAN: You will give me time enough——

NOBLEMAN: All night, if you please. I shall be otherwise occupied. While you attempt the mistress, I propose to woo the maid.

MAN: Your lordship at least is taking no risks.

NOBLEMAN: I mention the design for your encouragement.

MAN: It emboldens me to face the worst.

NOBLEMAN: The best, Charles. You will conquer, never fear. Do we understand each other?

MAN: We do, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Then study your lover's part, for you will play it in an hour.

[MAN *is about to withdraw.*

And send this baggage from the kitchen to her mistress.

[Exit MAN. The NOBLEMAN alone, then enter the MAID.

MAID (*with a curtsy, as she crosses to the stairs*): Your pardon, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: There is my runaway. Well, are you content with your lodging?

MAID: Indeed I am, my lord. If we could meet such gentlemen as you every day——

NOBLEMAN: The burden of travel would not be so troublesome. Thank you, pretty one. But there would still be your mistress to please.

MAID: O, she may please herself, for all I care!

NOBLEMAN: I have been talking with her. You are happy to have such a mistress.

MAID: So your lordship may think!

NOBLEMAN: A woman in a thousand. A woman to set men's hearts on fire.

MAID: That she does well enough!

NOBLEMAN (*deliberately*): You speak very freely of her.

MAID: O, I know my lady!

NOBLEMAN: Still your tone is saucy.

MAID (*uneasily*): I hope you did not tell my lady I spoke of her so?

NOBLEMAN: I would not betray you.

MAID: O, thank you, my lord!

NOBLEMAN (*lifting a forefinger*): Only watch that tongue of yours, my dear. It will get you into trouble.

MAID: I will be careful, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: I believe you will. (*Considering her.*) I know one pretty woman finds it hard to praise another.

MAID (*blushing*): O, your lordship!

NOBLEMAN: There, you are safe with me. So this inn pleases you?

MAID: Very well, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Even without a follower in sight?

MAID (*glancing at the door*): Only——

NOBLEMAN: Only my monkish Charles. And tell me, does he tempt you?

MAID: No, my lord, but——

NOBLEMAN: But you have a mind to be tempted. Come closer.

[*He whispers in her ear.*

MAID: O, fie, my lord, fie! What do you take me for?

NOBLEMAN: I take you for a pretty woman who knows how to be discreet. Am I right?

MAID: But——

NOBLEMAN: No buts. My door will be on the latch.

MAID: My lady is sure to guess——

NOBLEMAN: My lady spares no thoughts for you. Are we agreed?

MAID: Perhaps.

NOBLEMAN: Ah!

MAID: I said perhaps.

NOBLEMAN: The word of promise. (*Snatching a kiss from her.*) And so—presently!

[*Exit NOBLEMAN. The MAID alone, then the MAN enters, and busies himself in removing glasses from the table.*]

MAID (*scornfully*): Not so much as a look. Fine manners indeed!

MAN (*turning to her*): Forgive me. My thoughts were gone wool-gathering.

MAID: Have you been long in his service?

MAN: Five years.

MAID: I dare say you know more than you would tell.

MAN: We all know that, I hope.

MAID: And more than suits his lordship to be known?

MAN: That my lord could tell you.

MAID (*flashing out*): O, you can keep your secrets, and your gentlemanly airs! I know your sort.

MAN (*quietly*): My lord is waiting for you.

MAID (*blustering*): My lady, you mean. Let her wait!

MAN: I mean my lord.

MAID: O, for shame! You were listening.

MAN: There was no need to listen.

MAID: These men! But what if I give him the go-by? What if you should please me better?

MAN: I do not please women.

MAID: So you think, maybe. But ask the women first.

MAN: I will, when the time comes.

MAID: Not yet?

MAN: Not yet.

MAID: I like you, man.

MAN: It is good of you to tell me that.

[*As she comes closer to him, with an air of coquetry, he bends down and kisses her hand.*]

MAID: My hand was never kissed before. (*A silence.*) What sort of man are you?

MAN: This glove was left by your lady in her coach. Will you take it to her room as you pass?

MAID: I will say that you sent it.

MAN: You need not.

MAID: But I will. Good night, man.

MAN: Good night, maid.

MAID: Pleasant dreams, man.

[Exit the MAID. The MAN, alone, goes to the windows and opens them to the darkness.]

MAN: A woman wished me pleasant dreams. This echo from the stillness—this babble of a sleeping world! On every hand men whisper love. Set ears to earth and hear them murmur: "I love you," "Do you love me?" "You are mine and I am yours." Still they sleep and spin through nothingness. Shall we whisper so—we who have met in the night? Are we sleepwalkers? Shall we march at every passion's call? Shall we weave a pretty cloak of words and kisses? Shall we lift a mask or two of trickery, only to meet another mask behind? It is a mask that brings us face to face. The masks divide, the masks unite, and we are still in darkness. We grope through labyrinths of self, our fingers grasping thorns, our voices echoed by a wall. We seek for hands and not for lips. O mockery of self, give eyes to love, give hands to lovers!

[The LADY appears at the head of the stairs, carrying a lighted candle, and descends.]

LADY: I lay awake. The hours passed, and I began to fear the dawn.

MAN: To-morrow changes everything.

LADY: My maid is not in her room. This inn creaks with misgiving. It is full of stratagems and mysteries. I must know the truth.

MAN: The truth is hidden in ourselves. Go to my lord, and you will find the certainty of stratagems—the outer life. You will find a comedy in the figure of a man. Go to your maid, and ask her why she sells her kisses. You will find a tragedy in a woman's form. Is that world yours? Is that the truth you look for?

LADY: I have come to you.

MAN: Here you will find nothing but riddles buried in our nature. It is better not to dig for them.

LADY: You spoke to me as a friend. I knew that I could trust you.

MAN: Friendship is frankness. Do as I advise.

LADY: And that is?

MAN: Go to your room and sleep. Leave me to guard the buried thoughts. Then we can part to-morrow and still be friends. But if we dig and dig, we shall find corruption underground. We shall come upon your pride and mine, your vanity and mine, your desires and mine—all the scattered bones that moulder in us out of sight. Let them rest.

LADY: I am not afraid of little things.

MAN: But we are both afraid of their littleness.

LADY: I accept all that life offers. I hold out open hands to greet sincerity.

MAN: No one has spoken such words to me before.

LADY: But I speak them.

MAN: The words are yours, the thoughts are mine. (*A silence.*) You know now that I love you.

LADY: You! But my friend, my friend—that cannot be.

MAN: And why not?

LADY: That cannot be.

MAN: So friendship is one thing, and love another? We find a barrier at the outset. I warned you that it would be so.

LADY: I did not dream of love between us.

MAN: Nor did I dream. I awoke, and it was there. I was alone, and suddenly we were together.

LADY: My friend, I think you speak in earnest.

MAN: And you hold out empty hands to soothe my pride.

LADY: I hold them out to cover my poverty. You honour me too much.

MAN: Words, words! I know that to say "I love you" is only the beginning of love. Possession itself is only the beginning.

LADY: Believe me, it is often the end.

MAN: The end is in ourselves. The end is fulfillment.

LADY: Every mother fulfils herself. Is that called love?

MAN: Every spring renews the earth.

LADY: The spring may come too late. I have known too many men. Too many arms have held me. I am tired of those arms outstretched, asking much and giving little.

MAN: I am asking little and giving much.

LADY: A new lover indeed! What will you ask?

MAN: Yourself.

LADY: Is that so small a favour?

MAN: In the world where you speak of favours it may be the greatest. But that world is not mine.

LADY: What more can a woman give than herself?

MAN: Those are words again. You repeat a lesson men have taught you.

LADY: And what do you offer? A wedding ring, perhaps. Are we to marry and breed philosophers?

MAN: There are worse brats.

LADY: True, they might be gentlemen-in-waiting. Or——

MAN: Or their servants, you would say.

LADY: You are too conscious of your trade.

MAN: Because your head swims at the thought of the gulf between us.

LADY: That is no more than habit. All service is honourable.

MAN: No. It is infamous to serve luxury. It is shameful to pour wine into gouty veins, it is base to creep between borrowed sheets of quality. Lackeys do these things.

LADY: Not only lackeys, my friend. I have done them too.

MAN: We have both been waiting for this day.

LADY (*with a smile*): Come, you will not tell me that your love is of long standing?

MAN: I have loved you since the first hour.

LADY: At Covent Garden? Is it possible? And through this weary round of Bath and London you were there?

MAN: I stood in waiting. A door was opened, and you passed. A coach drew up at a gateway, and you alighted. A lamp was lit in your window, a blind was drawn. I stood below.

LADY: Unseen.

MAN: The crowd has many faces.

LADY: Yours was one of them. This courtship touches me. But I think there was hatred in your love. Confess it—love for the woman, hatred for the plaything and the mistress.

MAN: The same wheels splashed us both. I knew that we were one.

LADY: I have turned my back on that life, and yet . . . No, no, my friend. Every meeting brings a parting. You shall keep your philosophy and leave me my illusions.

MAN: I offer more than love.

LADY: Then it is more than I deserve. Listen, my friend. You were right to hold my favours lightly. When a woman has given herself often enough, once more or less makes no matter. The house is quiet, we are alone together. You please me and I trust you. But because you offer more than I can give, I will say no. Because you are upright and I am stooping, it cannot be. Because we are friends, let us not risk falling out. I cannot give a trifle to such as you.

MAN: I do not ask for trifles. Love is everywhere. The shallows are alive with spawning lovers. This earth is peopled by them. Love is everywhere, and yet the world is sick. Love is everywhere, and yet the maggots thrive. We spring from love, we rot and wither in the name of love, while the earth renews itself in stillness. I do not ask for dregs of love. I do not ask for last year's leaves, or pebbles carried by the stream.

LADY: To promise you more would wrong us both. O, my friend, you know all that stands between us! You are ennobled by the truth of what you feel, and yet you see me falsely. But my eyes are open still, and I can see the world you ask me to forget. It is an ugly world, my friend, but it is mine and yours. We cannot leave it out of reckoning.

MAN: Your pride speaks there.

LADY: Believe me, it is the rag of pride that covers humility. Do not strip me of that; I will show you it is no more than a rag. All I have given to others is yours for the asking. Leave it untouched, my friend. Pass by and forget me.

MAN: I would strip the rags of pride from both of us. We have no more to do with them. We have met and spoken; we are two who cannot forget. I will not kneel to you, woman whom I serve. I will not beg from you, woman whom I love. You will give what is in your heart.

LADY: And if it be empty?

MAN: It is not.

LADY: Can we be sure?

MAN: You and I know the ring of emptiness. We have lived long enough without each other. Yesterday was empty, to-morrow may be empty, to-day is full. The earth is round about us. The young corn sleeps standing in the mist, and the fern-owl lies awake. The dew falls on trembling leaves, and the sheep are thick in the fold. This inn where we have met is wrapped in stillness—this house of ticking thoughts, this house of whispering passions, this house of dreams that stir the face of night. Words die in empty corridors; our natures live. You are mine already, as I am yours. We are held in one embrace.

LADY: If that were true!

MAN: Our hands are clasped unseen, our lips are parted. One image of serenity is in our minds. Ours, this solitude that blots the recollection of ourselves. Ours, this meeting that divides us from the past. Not mine alone, but ours! Already you have given all.

LADY (*in a low voice*): I think I have given much.

MAN: I have never touched you, and yet you have given all. There is no parting between us.

LADY: There is no parting. (*Holding out her arms to him.*) O, my friend—my lover!

MAN (*taking her hands*): We are set free.

LADY: Is this for ever? I have never asked a man before—is this for ever? Why should I ask you?

MAN: It is for ever and a day.

LADY (*suddenly*): I thought I heard footsteps.

MAN (*listening*): A horse moved in the stable.

LADY: Footsteps.

MAN: The outer life begins to stir again. To-morrow puts a foot upon the floor.

LADY (*breaking from his embrace*): What have I done? Who are you—my lover? Who are you, sir? (*Imperiously.*) Answer me!

MAN: Shall I tell my lady that I am a gentleman in disguise, in league with my lord? (*Bitterly.*) And if I tell you so, will you believe me?

LADY: This world of stratagem! My heart is worn away. Take what is left of it, and give me yours. I will believe your heart, my lover.

CURTAIN.

ACT III

ACT III

[*The scene as before. Morning sunlight. Enter the INNKEEPER.*]

INNKEEPER: Eight o'clock of a bright morning, and nobody astir. Well, it's not every day that we have the quality in the house. Let them sleep their fill: I wager they have earned it. We were all young once. (*At the window.*) So they drew the shutters overnight, did they? That was to let in the moonlight, I'll be bound. The moon for lovers. Here's a candle burned to the socket, and another with a nightcap on. Ha, ha! You could tell a tale if you would, my beauties. And here's my lady's kerchief; she will need that before the day is out. (*Leaning over the back of a chair.*) Here it was she sat, with my lord bending over her and whispering in her ear. And as she turned to hide her blushes the kerchief slipped from her hand. Yes, that's plain. Then one candle guttered, and the other was put out. The cap lay handy on the table. There was moon enough to light them up the stairs. This way, my lady. This way, my pretty one. And then she stops, maybe. Not so fast, my lord, not so fast. And he falls on one knee and kisses her hand—a proper nobleman. (*With a twinge.*) My joints are creaking; that means a change in the weather. I knew the morning was too bright to last. (*Resuming his pantomime.*) Then she draws her hand away, but gently, leaving a promise on his lips. She runs a step or two; this way, maybe; no, that way. And he follows after—out of the moonbeams into the dark. She gives him the slip and gains the stair. And then she turns to look at him. Not so fast, my lord—but with a smile. In one spring he is at her feet. (*With another twinge.*) Plague on my creaky knees; this is no poor man's sport. (*Resuming.*) She leaves her hand in his; the stair is wide enough for two. They mount together. And so—

[*His WIFE has entered, and stands arms akimbo watching him.*]

WIFE (*indignant*): And so! And so! What clowning is this?

INNKEEPER (*ruefully*): I said it was no poor man's sport. (*Rubbing his knees.*) 'Tis entertainment for the quality.

WIFE: I'll give you quality! Are they still a-bed?

INNKEEPER: They are indeed, and small blame to them.

WIFE: My lord and my lady can please themselves, but their servants should have been stirring an hour ago.

INNKEEPER (*broadly*): And so they were, I warrant.

WIFE: I'll have no lie-a-bed followers in this house. Let me pass; I'll rouse them sharp enough.

INNKEEPER: Not so fast, wife. They have the day before them—and we have a week of their company if we make them at home.

WIFE: A week of fiddlesticks! What of the pair of saddle-horses that Moony brought this morning?

INNKEEPER: Saddle-horses! Where did he get them?

WIFE: How should I know? At the Wheatsheaf, very likely. I found him tying them up behind the barn, and all he would say was, he had his orders.

INNKEEPER: Orders, indeed! He was sent on another errand.

WIFE: Yes, and paid a pretty sum to keep his mouth shut, if I know Moony.

INNKEEPER: His lordship's servant spoke to me last night of horses. I told him there was not a pair to be had this side of Oxford.

WIFE: And there they stand behind the barn, waiting for their riders.

INNKEEPER: That servant is too close for my liking.

WIFE: O, he's well enough. But watch his master, I say, and see your reckoning is paid before they cross the threshold.

INNKEEPER: What, woman, would you presume to cast a slur upon his lordship?

WIFE: Trust him as far as you can see him, I say. And have your reckoning made ready.

INNKEEPER: They will be here this day week, I tell you.

WIFE: Maybe. And maybe not.

INNKEEPER (*uneasily*): This is some lovers' quarrel. My lord was too brisk, perhaps. They may make it up.

WIFE: You with your lovers' quarrels! These travellers have more than love between them.

[*Enter the MAN, coming downstairs.*]

INNKEEPER: Good morning to you. We were awaiting his lordship's orders.

MAN: Presently. I have to speak with the man who was sent on an errand last evening.

INNKEEPER: You will find him in the yard.

MAN: I thank you.

[*He crosses over and goes out.*]

WIFE: I like that man better than his master.

INNKEEPER: My father said to me "My son," he said, "an innkeeper's trade is the merriest of trades, for he lights overnight the lamp of tomorrow. It is the fairest of trades, for the pleasures of sleep are never entered in the bill. It is the plainest of trades, for every customer must be taken at his word." Now I take my lord to be a nobleman, for he calls himself so; and my lady to be a woman of rank, for she has a queenly way with her; and their followers are no concern of ours. So let us keep all as long as we may, and send them satisfied on their road.

[*Enter the NOBLEMAN, coming downstairs.*]

INNKEEPER (*bowing*): Good morning to your lordship. I trust your lordship slept well?

NOBLEMAN (*with a yawn*): As well as could be expected.

INNKEEPER: Ha, ha! I understand your lordship. The comforts a poor house can offer——

NOBLEMAN: An excellent house, innkeeper. A most hospitable house. Send my servant to me.

INNKEEPER (*about to go*): I hope your lordship does not think of leaving us yet awhile?

NOBLEMAN: On no account. That reminds me—how are the horses?

INNKEEPER (*with hesitation*): Which horses, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: Why, mine and my lady's.

INNKEEPER: All dead lame, my lord. Three days will not see them on the road.

NOBLEMAN: Then we shall be in no hurry. Now send my servant.

INNKEEPER: I will, my lord. (*To his WIFE.*) What did I say?

[*Exeunt INNKEEPER and WIFE. The NOBLEMAN alone, then enter the MAID, coming downstairs. She curtsies to him, and is about to cross over to the door.*]

NOBLEMAN: No good morning for me, pretty one?

MAID (*with another curtsey*): Good morning, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Is your mistress astir?

MAID: My lady will be with your lordship presently.

NOBLEMAN: I hope she passed a good night?

MAID: Your lordship should ask her that yourself.

NOBLEMAN: Did you hear nothing as you plaited her hair?

MAID: Nothing, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Discreet baggage! It is true that nights are made to be forgotten. (*Coming close to her.*) You can forget, I think?

MAID: Perhaps, my lord.

NOBLEMAN (*slipping a coin into her hand*): We will rock your memory to sleep.

MAID (*glancing at the money*): Is that all your lordship has to say to me?

NOBLEMAN: This is the morning. What would you have me say? Still we must not be ungrateful. Thank you, my dear.

MAID: Thank you, my lord.

[*She goes out. The MAN returns.*]

NOBLEMAN: Well, Charles. What news of the conquest?

MAN: I obeyed my lord's command.

NOBLEMAN: You played the lover?

MAN: I did, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Successfully, no doubt?

MAN: That is for my lord to judge.

NOBLEMAN: At least you played with eloquence. Come, Charles, I will swear that you were eloquent—a furnace of sighs quenched in a torrent of declaration.

MAN: I spoke as the occasion moved me.

NOBLEMAN: We can none of us do more. Sincerity is the lover's cue. But you were bold, were you not?

MAN: Perhaps too bold.

NOBLEMAN: A good fault. You stood your ground as an equal? You cut the figure of the faithful friend?

MAN: Yes, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: No flattery, I hope—no fawning on her self-esteem. You were the modest adorer, but not too modest—the humble servant without the cap in hand.

MAN: Your lordship guesses rightly.

NOBLEMAN: Because I know you, Charles, and I know this woman. She is only to be won by the pretence of candour. There is one key that unlocks every heart, and you were the man to find it.

MAN: I fear your lordship rates me too highly.

NOBLEMAN: You are a pearl among men.

MAN: Still your lordship may not be satisfied with the result.

NOBLEMAN: What! You will not tell me that you failed with her?

MAN: My lady—but I dare not confess it to your lordship——

NOBLEMAN: Speak, man!

MAN: My lady perceived the truth behind my make-believe.

NOBLEMAN: The truth! Is it possible?

MAN: Certain, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Curse her cunning! These clever women are the plague. So my plan has miscarried?

MAN: It has, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Strange. I would have staked a fortune on your success. I would have taken oath that she was at heart a sentimentalist—one of the creatures moved by words. (*Yawning.*) And so you passed a lonely night? My luckless Charles! I will confess that I was more fortunate.

MAN: I congratulate your lordship.

NOBLEMAN: You need not envy me, Charles. The tender passion is much overrated by the poets. They have their living to earn, poor fellows. The only lasting pleasures are those of the mind. Now I am breaking an excellent rule, which is not to be philosophical after supper or before breakfast. But you need have no regrets. You failed nobly, you failed gloriously, and perhaps it was better so. One of us at least upholds the banner of chastity.

MAN: Your lordship thinks that my success would have been short-lived?

NOBLEMAN: The morning brings reflection. Even had you succeeded, we should still have had her pride to reckon with. Sooner or later she would have found you out. And then a woman tricked, a woman humbled—such cattle are dangerous.

MAN: You may be right, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: These midnight romances are always repented. They can even be denied when the proof is lacking. I have denied them myself on occasion.

MAN: A man of honour must often do as much.

NOBLEMAN: Precisely, Charles. And where a man lies from chivalry, a woman will lie in self-defence. Come, do not take your failure to heart. My scheme was too ambitious. It was too much to hope that my lady would stoop in one flight from the bedchamber to the kitchen.

MAN: Your lordship is outspoken.

NOBLEMAN: Believe me, Charles, I know how to value your qualities. You are more than the most excellent of servants. But as a lover—ha, ha, ha! I must have drunk a glass of wine too much last evening. I trusted an impulse when I incited you to play the gallant. Be content with your philosophy, and order me my coffee.

MAN: I will, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Until it is ready, I will walk in the garden and pay your respects to the goddess of nature. She will not scorn you—ha, ha, ha!

[Exit the NOBLEMAN, in good humour. The MAN remains.]

MAN: My lord shoots at random, and poisoned barbs fly home. If words are death, can words be life? May be that she was moved by words—enraptured by love's litany, as women are, they say. May be that I saw manhood mirrored in some cloudy pool of self-deception. May be that we are sentimentalists—that bitter word! May be that love itself was deepened by the stream of utterance. No, that is false: the depth was in ourselves from the beginning. That river sprang from living rock. Still, no more words. I will not plead a second time. The wooing hour is past. I will not flatter, or persuade, or supplicate. I will not ape the chivalrous gentleman whose memory is short for ladies' favours. I will remember. But if words are death, let life be silence.

[Exit the MAN. The LADY descends the stairs, and a little after her the MAID enters from the other side.]

MAID (*in astonishment*): O, my lady——!

LADY (*turning to her*): Well?

MAID: I ask pardon, my lady, but your dress——

LADY: The riding-habit surprises you? (*With a smile.*) I found it in the trunk you had so thoughtfully packed. It will be needed for the rest of my journey.

MAID: But your ladyship knows I cannot ride.

LADY: I know that, Louise. You and I are about to part.

MAID: To part! O my lady, my lady, do not leave me here.

LADY: You will be safe enough. Indeed I think you may be handsomely rewarded, for you will have a tale to tell or leave untold. Our masters are liberal on such occasions.

MAID: Let me follow you! do not leave me with——

LADY: With whom, my child? Has any man done you an injury?

MAID: My lady, I meant no harm! Overlook it for this once!

LADY: Last night your room was empty.

MAID: My lord was pressing—— I was weak—— I meant no harm——

LADY: My lord? I understand you now. This inn brings happiness and misery together—deepest delight and emptiest desolation.

MAID: O, my lady, forgive me! I promise you it is for the last time!

LADY: Can any of us promise so much?

MAID: I swear it!

LADY: Poor child! Commit no perjuries on my account. My fortune, not your folly, is the reason of our parting. We have no more to say to one another. Bring me my cloak when I call. And now leave me to your noble lover, for I have to speak with him alone.

[Exit the MAID. The LADY seats herself at the spinet and plays.]

SONG.

LADY: Go, all pursue the dreams of night,
Grey shadows of the moon;
My love and I make our delight
The golden hour of noon.

Let nightingales enchant the breeze
Within a leafy lair;
Our song the murmur of the bees,
The quiver of the air.

In silences of starry hours
Let sleepers take their pleasure:
But sweeter is the breath of flowers
Where hearts will dance a measure.

[The NOBLEMAN returns from the garden.]

NOBLEMAN (*gallantly*): You have brought the sunshine with you, madam.

LADY: It is a lovely morning, my lord, but I would gladly exchange it for the night.

NOBLEMAN: We can put the clock forward to please you.

LADY: But I would put it back.

NOBLEMAN: Indeed?

LADY: I dread these mornings, when men who have been gallant are so no longer, and women who have been rash must nurse their pride alone. Perhaps I have seen too many of them. Our moods are dangerous, my lord. Our hearts are our greatest enemies. At night we yield to falsehood, but in this pitiless sunlight we see the truth too plainly.

NOBLEMAN: I confess that I am still groping in the dark.

LADY: O, my lord, you are fortunate! But I think your eyes are as good as mine.

NOBLEMAN (*gallantly*): Indeed I wish they were.

LADY: No compliments, I beg of you. (*With a sigh.*) I am too conscious of their insincerity. Your tone to me is cold this morning.

NOBLEMAN: I fear it was none too warm last night.

LADY: There you do yourself an injustice. O, we had words, I know; there was a misunderstanding between us. At first I was mistaken in you. You were harsh, my lord, and I was unfeeling. But you will not deny the generosity with which you made amends.

NOBLEMAN (*uneasily*): I do not remember——

LADY: Must I remind you? That is not the woman's part. Spare my pride.

NOBLEMAN: Am I dreaming, or was I——?

LADY: Must I remind you of your courtesy, your delicacy, your ardour—of all the true nobility, so far removed from the false nobility of rank, that streamed from your nature?

NOBLEMAN: I am at a loss to understand——

LADY: O, my lord, you may forget, but I shall not! As I listened to those passionate words, I knew that here at last was your better self.

NOBLEMAN: My better—— (*With an outburst.*) This is a trap, madam!

LADY: Do not be cruel. Do not deny your own chivalry. I cannot bear that. I am only a woman, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: You are a vixen!

LADY: Those words from you! O, what is this fatal circle into which I have stepped? Once a mistress, always a mistress. A plaything tossed from man to man. One day the Prince's, and the next—yours.

NOBLEMAN: I deny it! Shameless creature! Will you have the insolence to claim me as your lover?

LADY (*turning from him*): O poor, poor women! And cruel, cruel men!

NOBLEMAN: You lie, and you know it. I hated you from the first. Not a word of love has passed between us.

LADY (*with mock despair*): Have I been deceived in you, my lord? Are you like all the rest, who win a woman's heart only to betray her weakness? Will you not even boast of the conquest you have made?

NOBLEMAN: Enough of this mummery! I have never so much as approached you.

LADY: All men are alike. Our reputation is nothing to them.

NOBLEMAN: Yours, madam, can look after itself.

LADY: Be careful, my lord, how you drive a desperate woman. If we should be overtaken here, whose reputation will suffer—yours or mine?

NOBLEMAN: You would never dare to charge me with——

LADY: With abusing your position as the gallant rescuer? And why not?

NOBLEMAN: I can prove it false.

LADY: How, my lord? We passed the night under this roof. Will any one believe you passed it alone?

NOBLEMAN: I will prove——

LADY: An alibi, my lord? It may be difficult.

NOBLEMAN: I will swear my innocence.

LADY: That would indeed be chivalrous. But what if I confessed? Who would imagine you in the part of Joseph?

NOBLEMAN: The Prince would never believe you.

LADY: Is a confession ever disbelieved by a lover?

NOBLEMAN: All who know me will accept my word.

LADY: Your word of honour, my lord, against a woman's avowal of her guilt? We shall see.

NOBLEMAN (*blustering*): Such a tale is on the face of it ridiculous.

LADY: But not so ridiculous as your denials. Come, my lord, you underrate your success as a cavalier. You

cut a very presentable figure, I assure you. You have broken scores of hearts in your time.

NOBLEMAN: O, this is monstrous!

LADY: A handsome face, an elegant figure. I might very well be tempted in earnest.

NOBLEMAN (*retreating*): I beg you to consider——

LADY: Calm yourself, my lord. We will not proceed to extremes; your virtue is safe in my keeping. But remember, one word in the Prince's ear, and I am rid of you both. I leave you to order pistols for daybreak, as great gentlemen do on such occasions.

NOBLEMAN: And if he should fall?

LADY: Have no fear, my lord; I will not claim you. You shall kick your heels in the Tower alone.

NOBLEMAN: So this is a woman's honour!

LADY: We fight with the weapons that come to hand.

[*A silence.*]

NOBLEMAN: Very well, madam. If I own myself beaten—what are your terms?

LADY: Terms, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: Come, we understand each other. We can conclude a bargain.

LADY: I do not traffic with my lovers.

NOBLEMAN: I am not your lover!

LADY: So you declare, my lord. But can you prove it?

NOBLEMAN: I will make an offer. You shall be safely escorted to London.

LADY: Indeed? And safely hidden there, no doubt?

NOBLEMAN: Willingly.

LADY: And housed and fed? And carried to Dover, and put aboard the packet?

NOBLEMAN: As you please.

LADY: And all from dread of a word I may whisper in the Prince's ear?

NOBLEMAN: A word, remember, that would harm you as well as me.

LADY: These are miracles of kindness indeed. And who, pray, will be my escort?

NOBLEMAN: My servant can be trusted.

LADY: Your servant? Are you sure of that?

NOBLEMAN: He is a plain fellow, but honest. I would rely on him as on——

LADY: AS on yourself, my lord? Shall I not ask for more security?

NOBLEMAN: Let us be reasonable. I have had occasion to confide in him before now.

LADY: You have entrusted him with delicate missions, no doubt?

NOBLEMAN: Often.

LADY: And he has never failed you?

NOBLEMAN: I assure you, madam, that he is the man for your purpose.

LADY: Then I suppose I must believe you. But this man of yours has a romantic character, I think. He has honoured me by particular attentions.

NOBLEMAN: You astonish me.

LADY: And even by a sort of declaration.

NOBLEMAN: Is it possible? As you say, there may be a strain of romance in his nature. No doubt you put him in his place?

LADY: Yes, my lord. I was able to judge his sentiments at their true value.

NOBLEMAN: Ha, ha! My luckless Charles! Forgive my laughter, madam, but the fellow's presumption tickles me. My Charles a wooer! Ha, ha! I only wish I could have heard his protestations.

LADY: Your lordship would have found them vastly amusing.

NOBLEMAN: I should have split my sides.

LADY: Of course you regret this affront that has been offered to me?

NOBLEMAN: Naturally, madam, I regret it. But remember, a spice of devotion in a servant does no harm. He will be all the safer as an escort.

LADY: You think so?

NOBLEMAN: I am sure of it.

LADY: It seems that your lordship is bent upon throwing us together at all costs.

NOBLEMAN: Come, I vow on my honour that you can trust him.

LADY: Your honour should be good enough for me. But can I trust myself, my lord?

NOBLEMAN (*suspicious*): Madam?

LADY: When my heart is once given, there is no turning back.

[*Enter the MAN, hastily.*]

NOBLEMAN: Well, Charles?

MAN (*breathless*): My lord, may I speak with you alone?

NOBLEMAN: Speak, man. My lady and I are agreed.

MAN: My lord, the Prince's coach—

NOBLEMAN (*turning pale*): Not—not at the door?

MAN: Not yet, my lord. But it comes this way.

NOBLEMAN: Impossible! He should be in Oxford.

MAN: The coach turned back to the cross-roads. By now it has reached the foot of the long hill. It will be here in an hour.

NOBLEMAN: An hour, and all our horses lame! We are lost!

LADY: My lord, I demand your protection.

NOBLEMAN: We are lost!

LADY: I demand the protection you have promised me.

NOBLEMAN: I am powerless to help you.

LADY: Then I must speak.

NOBLEMAN: No, no! Listen to me. Are you prepared to fly on foot?

LADY: If need be, yes.

NOBLEMAN: The need is desperate. The Prince must not find you here. (*To the MAN.*) Charles, you will prepare to convey this lady safely to London. I will give you a letter to my cousin, who will keep her hidden in her house. Travel by what means you can discover; I will join you in three days. You understand me?

MAN: I understand, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: Pen and paper. I will write instantly.

[*Exit the NOBLEMAN, hastily. The LADY and the MAN remain.*]

LADY: Is this a dream? I played a comedy while I slept. My lord stood there, I here. We matched our wits against each other. Far away, as if in a playhouse, I heard the words we spoke. I lied to him, he lied to me. I pressed him and he weakened. I breathed a tainted, stifling air. My hands were soiled. (*She looks at them.*) And then you came. A sudden brightness. I heard the song of birds again. I felt the buds that opened to the sun. O, my friend and my lover, take my hand in yours and let us go together!

MAN (*motionless*): The Prince's coach comes up the hill.

LADY: Was that tale true? I thought it was a line of the comedy—an echo of our make-believe.

MAN: His coach comes nearer, step by step.

LADY: I can hear no sound of grinding wheels; that world is silent. I can see no gouty figure propped among the cushions. My lids are closed; I see you only.

MAN: He is there. Your world is there. Wake! Wake! I take no dreamer with me. I take no mistress from cloudland. This is morning. Wake, woman, wake!

LADY: Do you call me woman?

MAN: I make so bold, madam.

LADY: Madam? What tone is this?

MAN: The tone of a man who knows that you are woman. The tone of a lover who will have all or nothing.

LADY: Have I not given all?

MAN: No, madam. You have given such favours as a woman grants to a man who pleases her—such tributes as are paid by sentiment to passion.

LADY: Sentiment! Passion! Will you deny the reality of my—of what I thought was love for you?

MAN: I deny nothing, but I claim more than favours. Are you ready to venture your life—yourself?

LADY: Yes, I believe that I am.

MAN: But I am not!

LADY: You——?

MAN: I am not! O, it should be easy! The plot is laid for us; the web is spun that sets us free. The doors are opened. Smooth words are all that we need say to one another—words as smooth as kisses. I cannot speak them. I cannot play your comedy of love. I cannot trust your faith in me. You think that in this tangle of falsehood I am true. You take my hand—blindly. But I too am false. When I made love to you, it was at my lord's command.

LADY: You!

MAN: It was a trick to humble you. It was a revenge of my lord's planning. You were to stoop to a servant, and put yourself in his power.

LADY: O, monstrous! I have put myself in yours!

MAN: I played you false when I consented to the stratagem. I will make no excuse. I will not say it was because I loved you——

LADY (*proudly*): No, sir, do not say that! Leave me some pride, I beg of you! O, infamous! Falsehood on falsehood—maze within maze of lying!

MAN: So now you are awakened. The dream is over. You need have no fear of me. I have as much honour as a gentleman—neither more nor less. Your secret is safe. There is no one who need ever guess it.

LADY: You have not betrayed me to——

MAN: To my master? No, madam.

LADY: But why not? Is it possible that you are——?

MAN: My lord is not in my confidence.

LADY: O, why did you speak? There would have been time enough to tell me. I was ready to go with you! I was ready to trust you!

MAN: You were ready to deceive yourself—to follow where fortune beckoned—to listen to midnight whispers of romance. You were prepared to take a risk, madam. I was for certainty. You were for hope, I was for knowledge. You have given me a trifle, I have given you something more. Return to Bath in the royal coach that pursues you. In a little while, perhaps, you will smile at the adventure. I will follow my lord to London, and leave him there. We shall not meet again.

LADY: You are bitter. You are unjust.

MAN: I see the line of ladies from whom you are descended. You see the line of serving-men that stretches out behind me. But which of us can see the day when they will meet and take each other's hands? Go back to your own world.

LADY: You know that I shall not go back. This coach that climbs the hill is nothing to me. Within it sits a life that is already dead. My life began again in you. My friend, for a moment I doubted you; I beg your forgiveness. Your voice was cold; I thought you unfaithful. Now I see that you spoke from an open heart. I throw myself on your mercy. Take me as I am and make me yours.

MAN: It may be too late.

[*Re-enter the NOBLEMAN, with a letter in his hand.*]

NOBLEMAN: Here is the letter, Charles. Now lose no time. Are you both ready?

LADY: Presently, my lord. A cloak is all I need.

NOBLEMAN (*impatient*): For God's sake hasten, madam. This is no time for ceremony. I will speak with the innkeeper. It may be he knows of a hiding-place.

[*Exit the NOBLEMAN.*]

LADY (*turning to the MAN with a smile*): You see they are resolved that we shall fly together. Will you come, my friend, or shall I forget my sex and kneel to you?

MAN: At this moment my lord finds the pair of horses I have placed behind the inn. He takes them for his own discovery. He will urge us to mount and ride away.

LADY: I am ready.

MAN: What is this flight but one more stratagem, one more betrayal of ourselves?

LADY: What would you do?

MAN: Remain here and declare the truth that we are lovers. Then you shall come with me if you will.

LADY: No, not that, I beg of you!

MAN: Are we criminals? Must we be hypocrites?

LADY: My friend, let the past sleep. You and I together are awakened. I will not see you slighted by these men whom we despise. Leave them to their dreams; leave them their world to play with. What are they to us?

MAN: And if I tell you I am resolved to meet them now?

LADY: My lover, I have asked nothing for my own sake. I will ask one thing only. Spare my weakness; do not try to make a heroine of a woman. I have lived in a servitude baser than yours. These gentlemen are my masters too. I have given them my youth, I have lent myself to their intrigues, I have sold my honour for their rank and fashion. They have left me nothing but my heart, which you possess. I humble myself before you. Do not ask me to stoop to them again.

MAN: The coach comes nearer. Our horses are saddled. We can only ride together as free lovers who have left falsehood behind. Are you ready to meet your Prince's sneers and my lord's triumphant mockery? Will you take the step that is decisive? I am no longer a servant; you have released me. I do not obey, and I will not command. I ask all, but I plead for nothing. Choose for yourself.

LADY (*after a silence*): It shall be—as you resolve.

MAN: Then you are willing to remain?

LADY: I trust myself, since I trust you.

MAN: You will do this—for our love?

LADY: I obey—my lord and master.

MAN: Take back your freedom. The will is enough.

[*The MAID comes down the stairs, carrying a cloak.*]

MAID: My lady's cloak.

MAN (*taking it, and putting it over the LADY'S shoulders*): Come! We are ready.

LADY: Are we to go now?

MAN: Now.

LADY (*turning to him with a smile*): But tell me—did you mean to remain? Are you indeed a hero?

MAN: What are they to us?

LADY: So that was the last stratagem! Laughter comes back again. My friend, give me your hand before the world—our world! We have no more to fear.

[*The MAN takes her hand.*]

MAID (*falling on her knees*): O, my lady, my lady!

LADY (*turning to her*): So you are left behind. This is good-bye. Take my trinkets, and remember me kindly.

MAID: My lady, I have understood!

[*Re-enter the NOBLEMAN, breathless.*]

NOBLEMAN: Charles, Charles! The coach is in sight, not half a mile away. By good fortune I have found a pair of horses for you; they stand saddled at the door. Mount and ride for your lives. Are you prepared?

MAN (*drawing himself up*): Stand aside, my lord, for my lady!

[*The NOBLEMAN obeys mechanically. The MAN and the LADY, ignoring him, go out hand in hand. The NOBLEMAN, in astonishment, turns to the MAID.*]

NOBLEMAN: Am I in my senses? What was that?

MAID (*sobbing*): O, my lady! She has found the way!

NOBLEMAN (*shaking her*): Speak, you hussy! What—was—that?

MAID: They have gone!

NOBLEMAN: Fool! So much I can see!

MAID: They have gone to each other.

NOBLEMAN: To each other! My Charles and that woman! Am I tricked? (*Calling*) Innkeeper! Innkeeper! Stop those runaways! Stop them, I say!

[*The INNKEEPER appears in the doorway.*]

INNKEEPER: They are gone, my lord.

NOBLEMAN: By which road?

INNKEEPER: My lord, they took to the downs at a gallop. They are over the brow of the hill by this time.

NOBLEMAN: Did they speak?

INNKEEPER: They said nothing, my lord, but I think they laughed together.

[*Exit the INNKEEPER.*]

NOBLEMAN: They laughed—these fools in love! We can laugh too. Ha, ha, ha! (*Checking himself suddenly.*) But the Prince! I must have proof when he arrives. (*To the MAID.*) Listen to me, pretty one.

MAID: I am listening.

NOBLEMAN: This tale may not be believed. The Prince may suspect that I have conveyed her away.

MAID: And so, my lord?

NOBLEMAN: You will tell his Highness what passed between us last night.

MAID: I—tell him?

NOBLEMAN: It shall be made worth your while. Here is my purse, girl. Can I depend upon you?

MAID (*striking him a blow in the face*): No, my lord! You cannot!

NOBLEMAN: Hell-cat!

[*The MAID runs out. Re-enter the INNKEEPER with a bill in his hand.*

INNKEEPER: My lord, a coach with outriders has just turned the corner. It comes this way.

NOBLEMAN: What is that in your hand?

INNKEEPER: Your lordship's reckoning.

NOBLEMAN (*taking it, reads*): What! Am I to foot the bill for these runaways, these vagabonds?

INNKEEPER: My lord, it is the privilege of a man of quality.

[*The NOBLEMAN tears the reckoning across, and stamps upon it in a fury.*

THE END

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(Continued from page 2)

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TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

Other than the addition of two missing periods and one missing single quote, variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *The Man with a Load of Mischief*, by Ashley Dukes]