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Seven Modern Comedies

By

Lord Dunsany

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CONTENTS

ATALANTA IN WIMBLEDON
THE RAFFLE
THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL
IN HOLY RUSSIA
HIS SAINTED GRANDMOTHER
THE HOPELESS PASSION OF
MR. BUNYON
THE JEST OF HAHALABA

ATALANTA IN WIMBLEDON

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MR. DAWK.
MARJORIE DAWK.
MR. JINKS.

CONSTABLE SPELKINS.
BILL.
MR. LEONARD.

ATALANTA IN WIMBLEDON

SCENE: A room in a villa, The Elms, at Wimbledon; a door opening on the street.

[*Marjorie Dawk reading.*

Enter her father.

DAWK. Hullo, Marjorie! Reading?

MARJORIE. Yes, father.

DAWK. Well, I never. What are you reading?

MARJORIE. Morris, father.

DAWK. Morris? Morris. It conveys nothing to me, of course.

MARJORIE. Oh, I thought you knew all about him.

DAWK. You can't mean William Morris?

MARJORIE. Yes.

DAWK. Good Lord! You might as well read Tennyson.

MARJORIE. I've been reading him too.

DAWK. You reading Tennyson? Good Lord! Since when?

MARJORIE. Since yesterday. I was reading poetry most of last night.

DAWK. Poetry? What ever for?

MARJORIE. Well, you advised me to.

DAWK. Yes. But you don't take my advice, Marjorie. No, that's not the reason. You can't get away with that.

MARJORIE. Can't I?

DAWK. What's it really?

MARJORIE. Well, why did you advise me to read poetry?

DAWK. Exactly for the reason I told you. Here you are just on twenty-six, and quite presentable, and with plenty of friends. But they don't know that there's a pretty girl going about amongst them. For the simple reason that you don't convey

the idea of being a girl.

MARJORIE. What then?

DAWK. A young man.

MARJORIE. I a young man?

DAWK. Yes, you smoke when they smoke, you drive their cars, you play all their games, you talk their talk, you ... there's nothing apparently different between you and them. Of course they know you're a girl when they stop to think. Only, well, that's not the moment that a man falls in love. As I told you, you want to convey the idea that their cigarettes and motors and games are common everyday things that they can't help, but that you in your lonely tower, guarded by a dragon....

MARJORIE. I say, Daddy, you don't look very like a dragon.

DAWK. I don't say I do. I don't say I do. You keep me in the background. But that's the *idea*. Then they'd come tumbling over themselves to liberate you.

MARJORIE. Are you sure, Daddy?

DAWK. Well, they used to in Queen Victoria's time.

MARJORIE. Did they have dragons then?

DAWK. Well, not exactly, not exactly. But I believe they used to in King Arthur's time. And Tennyson dished it all up again for them, sort of rehashed it, as it were. You see, he sort of made the Prince Consort into King Arthur, and then of course the effect spread right downwards. Nowadays ... but it's no use; you won't take my advice.

MARJORIE. I have taken it. I've been reading poetry for two days.

DAWK. Well, I'm glad to see it. After all, you're twenty-six now; and the motoring and the cigarettes don't seem to have led to anything. I should try the poetry.

MARJORIE. I have. And what is more, I have acted on it.

DAWK. You've acted on it?

MARJORIE. Yes, Daddy, I was desperate.

DAWK. What do you mean?

MARJORIE. Well, I may as well tell you, Daddy. After all, we don't hush it all up nowadays like yon embalméd rose, or whatever it is that holds the world's record for silence. I may as well tell you. It's like this.

DAWK. Yes?

MARJORIE. Well, Bill, you know. I've seen a good deal more of Bill than the rest. More motors and cigarettes, as you'd put it. And we were pals. I liked the way he drove, and the things he said. I liked his point of view. Of course it would only sound silly to you, but I liked it. And we like the same movie-shows. Of course I know they're a depraving influence, Daddy. But they used to deprave Bill and me in just the same way. And, oh, there were a lot of things I liked about him. And, well, that's all.

DAWK. That's all?

MARJORIE. Yes.

DAWK. You mean it went no further.

MARJORIE. It means I was a mug, Daddy, in ever thinking it would. And everything you've said about me was right. And I'm going to chuck it all, cigarettes, motors, and everything, and I've taken to poetry as you said.

DAWK. Well, er, perhaps you are right.

MARJORIE. And I've acted on it.

DAWK. Acted on it? On what?

MARJORIE. On William Morris.

[Dawk, brooding, has turned to walk about the room thoughtfully. He comes upon the great sword with point on floor, resting against the wall and wreathed with dandelions.]

DAWK. Hullo! What did you take this old thing out of my study for?

MARJORIE. That's part of it.

DAWK. Part of what?

MARJORIE. Part of what I got out of William Morris.

DAWK. Good Lord. Well, you mustn't hurt it. It's a fine old sword.

MARJORIE. I've only been sharpening it.

DAWK. Sharpening it?

MARJORIE. Yes, all the morning.

DAWK. What ever for?

MARJORIE. Well, I told you I've been reading poetry, and that I've acted on it. It doesn't seem much good if you can't.

DAWK. But how?

MARJORIE. And I told you I was desperate, Daddy. Well, I put an advertisement in the *Morning Post*.

DAWK. In the *Morning Post*?

MARJORIE. Yes. I 'phoned it up to them yesterday. The idea's out of William Morris.

DAWK. The *Morning Post*? Let me see. *(She hands it to him.)* Let me see.

MARJORIE. The front page.

DAWK. The *front* page, did you say? What's it all about?

MARJORIE *(very, very miserably)*. It's time I was married now.

DAWK. Why, Marjorie, cheer up. What's this advertisement about?

MARJORIE. You've got it there. (*Knock on door. Sadly.*) Come in.

Enter Jinks, a young man.

JINKS. Oh, how do you do?

MARJORIE. How do you do?

JINKS. Very nice weather for the time of year, isn't it?

MARJORIE. Yes.

JINKS. Very nice.

MARJORIE. You've come about an advertisement in the *Morning Post*?

JINKS. Yes.

DAWK. The advertisement? What is it?

MARJORIE. All right, Daddy. Let me just.... You've got it there.

DAWK. Well, really, I don't know. The front page, you said. Let me see.

MARJORIE. You've come to play?

JINKS. Yes.

MARJORIE. On my terms?

JINKS. Certainly.

MARJORIE. They may seem hard to you, but....

JINKS. Not at all.

MARJORIE. But I was probably feeling pretty desperate when I made them.

JINKS. Don't mention it.

MARJORIE. And now they're made I abide by them.

JINKS. Certainly, miss.

MARJORIE. Well, our ping-pong room is there.

JINKS. Thank you.

MARJORIE. And, I've warned you.

JINKS. I think it's only fair to say, miss; I really feel that it's only right to tell you, even if it should chance to sound a little boastful.

MARJORIE. Yes?

JINKS. Well, I, I am, I mean I am the champion of Surrey.

MARJORIE. Oh. Well, never mind. I play a bit.

[*She shows him through.*]

DAWK. I say. What part of the front page?

MARJORIE. I've challenged him to ping-pong, Daddy. You mustn't interrupt us.

DAWK. Oh, I *see*. A game of ping-pong. And you hope something may come of it. Well, well.

MARJORIE (*grimly*). Something may!

DAWK. But I say. You didn't get ping-pong out of Morris.

MARJORIE. Well, I'm no good at running.

[*Exit.*]

DAWK. No good at running? What does she mean? Well, let's see what she says.

[*Turns to Morning Post again. The sounds of ping-pong are heard.*]

MARJORIE (*off*). I've won my serve, Daddy.

DAWK (*quite mechanically*). Well done, dear. Ah, here we have it. Marjorie Dawk. Now what—what does she say? (*He takes glasses out of his case and puts them on. Knocks on door.*) Come in.

Enter Constable.

DAWK. Well, Spelkins?

CONSTABLE. Very sorry to have to come, sir. Very sorry indeed.

DAWK. Sorry to have to come?

CONSTABLE. It's about Miss Marjorie, sir.

DAWK. Miss Marjorie? Nonsense. You can't have anything against her.

CONSTABLE. Sorry, sir, but the law's the law, you know.

DAWK. But you've nothing against *her*.

CONSTABLE. Incitement, sir.

DAWK. Incitement? But I'm sure my girl would never incite to anything, to anything that ... er. What *is* the absurd trifle, Spelkins?

CONSTABLE. Only murder, sir.

DAWK. What?

CONSTABLE. Just murder.

DAWK. What ever do you mean?

CONSTABLE. You've got it in your hand, sir.

DAWK. Why, I was just going to read it. You don't mean to say she incites to....

CONSTABLE. To murder, sir.

DAWK. Why, dear me. I thought it was all about ping-pong. Let me read it.

[*Fumbles.*

CONSTABLE. I've a copy here, sir.

DAWK. Oh?

CONSTABLE. Yes.

DAWK. What does it say?

CONSTABLE. "To any young man of courage. I will play ping-pong at The Elms, Wimbledon, against any young man on these terms: that if he win he may claim my hand in marriage, with absolute control over whatever my father may settle on me, not less than £300 a year, and if he lose, he shall forthwith die by the sword. Marjorie Dawk."

DAWK. Good gracious. But look here, Spelkins. Look here. No harm whatever has been done yet. I don't quite see....

CONSTABLE (*with the air of a sleuth*). Hark.

DAWK. What?

CONSTABLE. Listen, sir.

DAWK. Ping-pong.

CONSTABLE. She's well on her way to it.

MARJORIE (*off*). I've won again, Daddy.

DAWK. Good Lord.

CONSTABLE. Just as I said, sir.

DAWK. Well, I'll stop her. Marjorie ... Marjorie.

MARJORIE. Wait a moment, Daddy.

DAWK. Marjorie. Come at once.

MARJORIE. Oh, Daddy. Don't interrupt me. You've made me lose my serve.

[*Constable moves towards door.*

DAWK. That's all right. I'll stop her.

CONSTABLE. Lost her serve indeed.

DAWK. Well, perhaps that's best, you know.

CONSTABLE. I've something here that will make her lose her serve.

[Shows handcuffs.]

DAWK. No, no, Spelkins. Now look here, how can she kill him even if she wants to? A girl like Marjorie. A strong young man.

CONSTABLE. I see she's got a sword out for it.

DAWK. Now, could she use a great thing like that?

CONSTABLE. Might tell him to do it himself.

DAWK. Now, Spelkins. (*Detaining him from door.*) Would you kill yourself with a sword because a girl told you to?

CONSTABLE. Not now I wouldn't, sir.

[A look of regret for past years goes across his face.]

DAWK. But look here now. Now, really, Spelkins. Supposing he would.

CONSTABLE. That's what we've got to look at, sir.

DAWK. Well, supposing he would. How's he going to get at himself with it? Look here now, if I take hold of it (*does so*) I'm yards away from the point.

CONSTABLE. Just so, sir. Just so. But she could get someone to do it for her.

DAWK. Well, I won't.

CONSTABLE. Who've you got in the house, sir?

DAWK. Well, Marion and Eliza; you know them. And Blegg who cuts the faggots. Marion or Eliza couldn't handle a thing like that. Marjorie can't do any harm.

CONSTABLE. What about Blegg?

DAWK. Well, of course, he could. But you've known him for the last twenty years. The steadiest man, I should say, in the parish. He'd never do a thing like that.

CONSTABLE. Well, I'll have to make sure, sir, if I'm not to handcuff Miss Marjorie.

DAWK. Certainly. Certainly. Blegg. Blegg. Come here a moment, would you?

BLEGG. Yes, sir.

Enter Blegg.

DAWK. Now look here, Blegg. Miss Marjorie sent up a little joke to the *Morning Post*, purely a joke, and Spelkins has come and taken it very seriously. He wishes to question everybody. Well, all he wants to be sure about is that you for one would never break the law whatever happened. I know you never would.

BLEGG. Oh no, I never would, sir.

DAWK. Well, that's all we wanted to know.

BLEGG. Lived here man and boy for sixty-four years and never broke it yet, sir.

DAWK. No, that's right.

BLEGG. Not a tittle of it, sir.

DAWK. No, I know, Blegg. Thank you. That's all.

BLEGG. Thank you, sir. (*Going.*) Never a tittle of it.

CONSTABLE. Wait a moment. (*Blegg looks round.*) What we wanted to know was: you'd do anything Miss Marjorie told you?

BLEGG. Oh, yes. Anything Miss *Marjorie* told me. Known her since she could walk.

CONSTABLE. Whether it was against the law or not?

BLEGG. Shouldn't feel anything Miss Marjorie wanted was against the law, like.

CONSTABLE. No, but if it was against the law and she told you to do it, you'd do it whatever it was?

BLEGG. Well, I've known Miss Marjorie since she could walk.

CONSTABLE. So you'd break the law for her?

BLEGG. Miss Marjorie knows a lot more about the law than I do. If she said a thing was right, it would be right.

CONSTABLE. And if she told you to kill a man even, that would be right?

DAWK. No, no, Spelkins, of course not.

CONSTABLE. Wait a moment, sir. *I'm* questioning Blegg. Well?

BLEGG. Why, if Miss Marjorie wanted a man killed; if he were that sort of man; all I can say is, he's better killed, if you ask me.

CONSTABLE. And you'd kill him?

BLEGG. Well, if she'd only me to protect her, I wouldn't have any young man coming monkeying round Miss Marjorie, not if they were that sort of man.

CONSTABLE. You mean she could trust you to kill them?

BLEGG. She could indeed, mister. She could.

DAWK. No, no, Blegg, that's not what you mean at all.

BLEGG. Well, I've known Miss Marjorie since she could walk, you know, sir.

CONSTABLE. And she spoke to you this morning about killing a man.

BLEGG. Yesterday, sir.

DAWK. What!

CONSTABLE. Yesterday. And she told you you'd have to kill him with a sword?

BLEGG. No, she didn't. She didn't say that at all. All she said was "Blegg, I may want you to-morrow." And I said "What for?" And she said "Chopping." And I said: "What do you want chopped, miss?" And she said, "Nothing. But I *may* want something chopped; and if I do, would you chop it, whatever it was?" And I said, "Yes, miss." And she said, "Even if it's a man's neck?" And I said, "I've known you ever since you could walk, miss." And then we went and got down the old sword. But she didn't say for certain as she'd want anything chopped.

MARJORIE (*off*). Five all! We're five all, Daddy.

CONSTABLE. Getting along nicely with their game.

DAWK. The devil they are.

[*Constable goes to door R. and opens it.*]

JINKS (*off*). Shall we play sudden death or vantage games?

CONSTABLE. Come on, miss.

MARJORIE (*off*). What's the matter?

CONSTABLE. Inspector just wants to have a talk with you up at the station, that's all. And it's my duty to warn you that anything you may say—oh.

[*Blegg has come towards him with the sword. Constable steps back. Blegg stands in doorway.*]

DAWK. Come, come, Blegg. Put that down. You mustn't do that.

BLEGG. Always was a law-abiding man, sir. But I'm not going to have anyone touching Miss Marjorie.

[*He moves nearer Constable.*]

CONSTABLE. Here! I wasn't the man she told you to chop.

BLEGG. Don't care about that. I'll chop anyone that interferes with Miss Marjorie.

DAWK. Now, now, Blegg. You know you wouldn't. You know you wouldn't.

BLEGG. Just as soon as I'd chop your faggots, sir. As I've done the last twenty years. (*After a moment's reflection.*) Wet and fine.

[*Constable, edging away, puts whistle to his lips.*]

DAWK. No, don't blow that. Don't blow that. It can all be explained. It...

MARJORIE (*off*). Oh, what's the matter? (*Enters. Sees sword.*) No, Blegg, not yet. We're only five all, Daddy.

BLEGG. As you like, miss. But you've only to say the word.

MARJORIE (*to Constable*). Oh, it's you.

CONSTABLE. Yes, miss. The Inspector wants to have just a word with you.

MARJORIE. Very well. But this game must be finished first.

CONSTABLE. If you'd just come here, miss, I've something to show you.

MARJORIE. So long as it doesn't interfere with the game.

CONSTABLE. It might, miss.

MARJORIE. What is it?

CONSTABLE. If you'd come a little farther away from Blegg, miss.

MARJORIE. All right. You don't want that yet, Blegg.

BLEGG. As you wish, miss. As you wish.

*[He puts sword back. Marjorie goes to Constable.
Constable slips handcuffs on.]*

MARJORIE. Oh!

CONSTABLE. Just while you talk to the Inspector, miss.

MARJORIE. No, Blegg! *(Knocking on door.)* Well, somebody say "Come in."

DAWK. Er—come in.

Enter Bill.

BILL. Marjorie.

MARJORIE. Bill.

BILL. They told me the police were in here. So I came. What is the matter, Marjorie?

MARJORIE. Well, they are. Now, Blegg!

BILL. Well, I'll rescue you if you say a word.

CONSTABLE. Another of them!

JINKS. Excuse me, but I believe that that is my privilege.

MARJORIE *(to Jinks, snubbingly)*. We're only five all.

JINKS. I was five all in the Surrey final.

BILL. Who are you?

JINKS. I hope to become Miss Marjorie's fiancé.

BILL. The devil you do.

MARJORIE. Why, Bill. Do you mind?

BILL. Of course I mind.

MARJORIE. You never said so, Bill.

BILL. Didn't you know?

MARJORIE. How could I know?

BILL. Couldn't you guess?

MARJORIE. I thought I'd guessed wrong.

BILL. Well, you guessed right, Marjorie. Of course I mind. I say, you don't want this young gentleman.

JINKS. Sir!

BILL. Send him away, Marjorie.

MARJORIE. It's too late, Bill.

BILL. Too late?

MARJORIE. Too late.

BILL. I say. Are you serious?

MARJORIE. Quite. It's too late.

BILL. But we'll get these handcuffs off. That's some mistake. It will be all right then, Marjorie? It will be all right then?

MARJORIE. No.

BILL. No?

MARJORIE. No. As soon as I get them off I go on with the game. We're committed to that. (*To Jinks.*) Isn't that so?

JINKS. *I don't draw back.*

BILL. The game? What is it?

CONSTABLE (*shows cutting*). You see.

BILL. Lord! And (*to Jinks*) you won't back out?

JINKS. No, sir.

BILL. Quite right. Quite right from your point of view. But oh, Marjorie.

MARJORIE. We can't go back.

JINKS. No.

MARJORIE. So perhaps you'll all help me to get these handcuffs off.

[*Blegg and Jinks close on Constable.
No one helps Constable.*]

JINKS. Come on. Give us the key quietly.

CONSTABLE. If you dare to touch me.

JINKS. Come on, give us it quietly.

BLEGG. Thankee. (*Blegg unlocks handcuffs and gives them to Constable.*) Here you are, mister.

CONSTABLE. I've got *all* of your names in this book.

MARJORIE. Come on, Mr. Jinks. We must finish the set. I'm sorry, Bill. Wait there, Blegg, in case.

JINKS. I was five all, you know, in the Surrey final.

CONSTABLE (*reading over his list again*). Yes, all your names.

DAWK (*to Bill*). If only you'd spoken sooner.

BILL. I couldn't. I didn't know till to-day that I could have afforded it.

DAWK. Never mind that. You should have spoken sooner.

BILL. I feel everything's ended.

DAWK. Oh, you'll find plenty to do.

BILL. It's all come to an end.

[*Heavy and determined knocking. Constable gets out pencil and reopens book.*]

DAWK. Oh, come in.

Enter Mr. Leonard.

CONSTABLE. And *your* name, sir?

LEONARD. Never you mind my name. (*To Dawk.*) Is this the Elms?

DAWK (*wearily*). Oh yes.

LEONARD. Thank you. Is Mr. Jinks in here?

DAWK. Oh, I believe so. In there. Playing ping-pong.

LEONARD. Playing ping-pong is he?

DAWK (*wearily*). What is *your* objection?

LEONARD. I will tell you my objection, sir, if you will be so good as to call him.

DAWK. Oh, very well. (*Goes to door.*) Marjorie. Marjorie.

MARJORIE. Yes?

DAWK. More trouble.

MARJORIE. What is it?

DAWK. A gentleman says he must see Mr. Jinks.

LEONARD. Instantly.

CONSTABLE. Are you from Scotland Yard, sir?

LEONARD. Certainly not.

Enter Jinks and Marjorie.

JINKS. What is it?

LEONARD. I have come to warn you, sir.

JINKS. To warn me?

LEONARD. Such is my duty. I may as well tell you who I am. I am the Secretary of the World Ping-Pong Amateur Association.

JINKS. Mr. Leonard?

LEONARD. The same, sir. And it is my duty to warn you that if you are playing for the consideration or emolument (those are the Committee's exact words) set forth in this cutting from to-day's *Morning Post*, you forfeit your amateur status.

JINKS. Good God!

MARJORIE. But you can hardly say....

LEONARD. Any consideration whatever.

JINKS. I'm not playing for money.

LEONARD. May I ask, sir, would you settle nothing at all on your daughter?

DAWK. If you mean would I give her away absolutely penniless, no.

LEONARD (*to Jinks*). Well, sir?

JINKS. Wouldn't the Committee reconsider...?

LEONARD. Their decision is final.

[Jinks drops his ping-pong bat.]

JINKS (*to Marjorie*). I must scratch.

MARJORIE. You'll draw back?

JINKS. I must.

LEONARD. I will inform the Committee. (*To Dawk.*) Good morning, sir. (*To Marjorie.*) Good morning. (*To Jinks.*) After you, sir.

[Jinks gives a hopeless shrug and walks downcast into the street. Exit Leonard.]

MARJORIE. You needn't wait, Blegg.

BLEGG. Thank you, Miss. Then I'll get back to my faggots.

[Exit.

BILL (*picking up Jinks's bat*). Marjorie. Would you care for a quiet game with me? A friendly game, I mean.

MARJORIE. Yes, Bill. Come on.

[Exeunt.

DAWK. Well, Spelkins, I'm very sorry about all this. But it will be all right now, won't it?

CONSTABLE. Well, sir, I don't want to be too hard, now that they're playing quiet like.

[*They both listen a moment to the sounds of the game.*

DAWK. No. Sit down, Spelkins. (*Both sit.*) And.... Hullo. Why, they seem to have stopped.

[*Constable listens too. No sounds of ping-pong.*

CONSTABLE. That's what they've done, sir. They've stopped.

DAWK. I hope she's not overtired herself.

CONSTABLE. No, sir. I don't think so, sir.

DAWK. You think not.

CONSTABLE. No, sir. I remember me and my missus. My girl she was then. Her father had a licensed house out at Bromley, and a nice little lawn at the back. My girl and I we used to go there of an evening to play a bit of bowls. A fine set of bowls he had.

DAWK. Did he really?

CONSTABLE. Yes, sir. He did, the old chap. And *we* usedn't to play much bowls.

DAWK. Oh. You didn't?

CONSTABLE. No, sir.

CURTAIN

THE RAFFLE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SIR JAMES ELFORD, *a business man who has
bought a place in the country.*

MISS ELFORD, *his sister.*

THE REV. JOHN BIFFINS.

THE DARK STRANGER.

THE BISHOP OF SAND AND MURROW.

THE RAFFLE

SCENE: The smoking-room of Sir James Elford's house in the country. Ground floor, with French windows opening on to garden, in which a garden-party or church bazaar is raging. Amongst papers on his table lies a folded legal document (about four inches by ten), which turns out to be a bond payable to bearer, value £2,500. The bond that is laid there later is similar in size and shape.

BIFFINS. The raffle will be announced, Sir James, by the ringing of a bell.

MISS ELFORD. Oh, that will be an excellent way, Mr. Biffins, an excellent way.

BIFFINS. Yes, we have a little hand-bell of a rather attractive note; a gift, you know, a gift from dear Mrs. Muldroom.

MISS ELFORD. Dear Mrs. Muldroom. Such a helpmeet to the dear bishop.

BIFFINS. Yes, they both arrived looking so well. They are in the garden now, partaking of a little strawberry ice.

SIR JAMES. Well, look here.

MISS ELFORD. Oh, I *hope* they are enjoying it. So nice of them of share in our simple pleasures.

BIFFINS. Oh yes, his lordship expressed himself as very well satisfied with the strawberry ice. Very....

SIR JAMES. Look here.

BIFFINS. Oh?

SIR JAMES. Look here. I've got the bond here. You'd better have it.

BIFFINS. Oh, not yet, Sir James, not yet. A few little preparations yet. A few preliminary arrangements.

SIR JAMES. Well, it's here when you want it.

BIFFINS. Very well, Sir James. Very well.

MISS ELFORD. And my little tea-cosy. The humble receptacle. That is quite ready too.

BIFFINS. Ah, Miss Elford, humble no doubt, as becomes us all, and yet in its way as acceptable as the great sum that it will contain. In its way perhaps even inestimably worthier than £2,500.

MISS ELFORD. Oh, Mr. Biffins.

BIFFINS. I will make the necessary preparations, and arrange for the ringing of the bell.

[Exit.

SIR JAMES. Well, how a sane business man can promise £2,500 worth of good bonds for a silly bazaar as I've done...

MISS ELFORD. Oh, James.

SIR JAMES. ... As I've done, passes my comprehension. If indeed I *am* sane!

MISS ELFORD. James!

SIR JAMES. Yes, I think that listening to Biffins' maunderings unhinged my intellect, until I was easy fruit for a shrewd fellow like that bishop.

MISS ELFORD. James. Really!

SIR JAMES. Yes I. A man with a certain repute in the city. Looked on as a pretty hard-headed man, and watched pretty closely on the Stock Exchange to see how I think things are going. And do you know what I am?

MISS ELFORD. James, you're heated.

SIR JAMES. Do you know what I am? I'm a mug.

MISS ELFORD. You're heated now. But you've given liberally. Liberally, James. And your reward will be elsewhere, if you don't spoil it all by a fit of temper.

SIR JAMES. Temper, indeed. Well, it's done now. There's the damned bond.

MISS ELFORD. What, James?

SIR JAMES. Well, there's the bond. It's worth £2,500, payable to bearer. It's there. I've pencilled £2,500 on the outside so that you will know. Don't go and pick up the wrong bit of paper. I rather hope you will.

MISS ELFORD. You must think me very careless, James.

SIR JAMES. Well, who am I to call people careless when I've given away good securities for £2,500, for you to put under that damned tea-cosy and raffle.

MISS ELFORD. James!

SIR JAMES. Yes, it *is* a damned tea-cosy. I was wrong about the bond; but it is a damned tea-cosy. Fancy putting good securities under a damned thing like that and raffling them.

MISS ELFORD. James, I shall leave you.

SIR JAMES. Yes, leave me to my folly.

MISS ELFORD. I will. You had earned your reward by this, and you're throwing it away with both hands.

SIR JAMES. I wish I could if I could get my £2,500 back. And I wish Biffins was with the Devil!

MISS ELFORD. James, you are in a mood that is open to the very worst influences.

[Exit.

SIR JAMES. Well, let them come. Let them... Hullo.

Enter the Dark Stranger.

DARK STRANGER. Your garden-party is so delightful, Sir James.

SIR JAMES. Oh? I'm glad.

DARK STRANGER. One of the most delightful I've ever attended.

SIR JAMES. Oh, I——

DARK STRANGER. One can hardly tear oneself away from it to come in here.

SIR JAMES. Oh? You, er? You came over with the bishop?

DARK STRANGER. Well, no. Er, no. No, not with the bishop.

SIR JAMES. Mrs. Muldron invited you, I expect.

DARK STRANGER. Well, no. No, in the end she didn't.

SIR JAMES. But I don't think I quite remember you.

DARK STRANGER. No, Sir James. And the fact is you didn't invite me.

SIR JAMES. Really?

DARK STRANGER. Well, not exactly. No, it was business that brought me.

SIR JAMES. Business?

DARK STRANGER. It often does.

SIR JAMES. I don't think I quite understand what you want with me.

DARK STRANGER. If you want nothing with me, Sir James, I will go. But I came to make you an offer of £2,000 in a matter of business.

SIR JAMES. Oh, business. Do sit down. (*Dark Stranger sits.*) Will you have a cigar?

[Dark Stranger accepts it and lights up.]

DARK STRANGER. Well, I hope you'll forgive me coming in like this. But business always attracts me. And as I have a perfectly sound offer to make I took the liberty....

SIR JAMES. Don't mention it. I'm delighted to see you, delighted. You find that cigar all right?

DARK STRANGER. Perfect.

SIR JAMES. I don't mind saying that it's a great relief to me to be talking with you after Mr. Biffins. He gets on my nerves.

DARK STRANGER. It was about him that I came.

SIR JAMES. Oh, really?

DARK STRANGER. Yes. Well, you see, I am a collector. I'll ask you to bear in mind, Sir James, that most collections are very silly. I mean people collect luggage labels and, well, anything.

SIR JAMES. Yes. Yes, of course.

[*He lights a cigar too.*]

DARK STRANGER. And other people's collections always seem silly *whatever* they are. I mean to say that my collection is not interesting like yours. But my offer is sound enough. Two thousand in cash.

SIR JAMES. What do you know of my collection, may I ask?

DARK STRANGER. Nothing. I only mean that other people's collections always seem absurd compared to one's own.

SIR JAMES. Yes, *I* see. And what do you collect?

DARK STRANGER. Souls.

SIR JAMES. I beg your pardon?

DARK STRANGER. Souls.

[*Knocking ash off into ash-tray in matter-of-fact way.*]

SIR JAMES. I don't quite follow.

DARK STRANGER. I collect souls. And I've come to offer you two thousand pounds for the soul of the Rev. John Biffins.

SIR JAMES. You collect souls? Who are you?

DARK STRANGER. Haven't you guessed?

SIR JAMES. Well, I suppose I have.

DARK STRANGER. Then I thought that between ourselves we ought to be able to arrange a matter of business.

SIR JAMES. You said two thousand?

DARK STRANGER. Yes.

SIR JAMES. But Biffins' soul doesn't belong to me.

DARK STRANGER. Aren't you squire here?

SIR JAMES. Yes—oh yes. But you know things aren't what they were.

DARK STRANGER. Aren't you in with him a good deal?

SIR JAMES. Yes, damn him. I am. Too much.

DARK STRANGER. I expect you could persuade him.

SIR JAMES. I don't see how.

DARK STRANGER. Well, he persuaded you.

SIR JAMES. Oh, about the raffle? Well, it was the bishop that got that out of me.

DARK STRANGER. Couldn't you try?

SIR JAMES. I'd like to. Damn it. I'd like to. Only...

DARK STRANGER. Only what?

SIR JAMES. You mentioned two thousand pounds.

DARK STRANGER. Yes.

SIR JAMES. Well, you see, he's the sort of fellow who'd set a lot of *store* by his soul.

DARK STRANGER. You think two thousand's not enough.

SIR JAMES. As a price, as a price for the actual goods, no doubt it would be enough. I don't say it wouldn't. The question is whether he'd take it.

DARK STRANGER. I should think you could persuade him to take a good deal less.

SIR JAMES. I'm afraid not. There's a very small margin for profit. Why don't you persuade him yourself?

DARK STRANGER. I thought an intermediary would ensure better results. And as you are the squire, Sir James, I naturally came to you. If the offer doesn't appeal to you, I will go for a walk amongst your guests, and apologize for having encroached on your time.

[*He prepares to rise.*]

SIR JAMES. Wait a moment. I should like to do business with you. I quite appreciate the offer. Only the probable margin of profit seemed to be so small, on account of his setting so much store by it.

DARK STRANGER. Well, well, Sir James; you were thinking of asking me two thousand five hundred.

SIR JAMES. How did you know what I was thinking?

DARK STRANGER. That is my job.

SIR JAMES. Very well. I was.

DARK STRANGER. Well, shall we call it two thousand five hundred, Sir James?

SIR JAMES. Well, all right. I never liked to stand out for too much. One makes much better connections by satisfying everybody. I ... I...

DARK STRANGER. Quite so. We part very good friends. Now that is the bond I suggest. You see he parts with all rights here or elsewhere in the following goods or commodity, that is to say his soul, to you absolutely, in consideration of...; well, that is your affair, and I hope you make a good profit.

SIR JAMES. Thanks. Well, naturally, I'll try. But I'm afraid it won't be very large, on account of the store he sets by it. But never mind.

DARK STRANGER. Well, you'll see what you can do with him. Then he signs it there, and then you merely sign this brief footnote re-assigning all rights to me in consideration of two thousand five hundred pounds.

SIR JAMES. Yes, I see. I'll have all that made out. When shall I see you?

DARK STRANGER. Oh, I'll drop in.

SIR JAMES. Thanks so much. You're going now?

DARK STRANGER. Just for a stroll amongst your guests.

SIR JAMES. I'm afraid you'll find a Church Bazaar rather dull.

DARK STRANGER. Oh, I rather like them.

SIR JAMES. Well, I'll do what I can then.

DARK STRANGER. Thank you so much.

SIR JAMES. Well, good-bye.

DARK STRANGER. Good-bye.

[Goes out smoking jauntily.]

SIR JAMES. H'm... H'm... Well, I'll get back some of my two thousand five hundred anyway.

Enter Biffins.

BIFFINS. You wanted to see me, Sir James.

SIR JAMES. No.

BIFFINS. Oh, but a gentleman just came up to me and said you did. I mean a gentleman with a most charming manner, very charming indeed. I do not think he can have wilfully misled me.

SIR JAMES. Oh, yes, of course. Yes, I do.

BIFFINS. I didn't think he would have misled me.

SIR JAMES. No. Well, Mr. Biffins, I am a business man, as you know.

BIFFINS. Oh yes, Sir James, and a very generous one. I'm sure we've all had cause to know that since you came here.

SIR JAMES. Well, anyway, I'm a business man.

BIFFINS. Oh yes, Sir James. In the city. Of course.

SIR JAMES. So I'm going to make you a business offer.

BIFFINS. Yes, Sir James?

SIR JAMES. I hope you'll treat it as such.

BIFFINS. Oh, certainly, Sir James.

SIR JAMES. Purely as a business matter.

BIFFINS. As you wish, Sir James. Certainly. As you wish.

SIR JAMES. Because; well, because it *is* a business matter; and that is all about it.

BIFFINS. I understand, Sir James.

SIR JAMES. Well, the fact is, you see; the fact is, I have my cheque-book here, and I was thinking of offering you a thousand

pounds for your soul.

BIFFINS. For my soul, Sir James?

SIR JAMES. Yes, a thousand pounds.

BIFFINS. Oh, I couldn't, Sir James, I couldn't. With all the respect in the world, I really couldn't. Oh, it would be, it would be a dreadful deprivation.

SIR JAMES. But look what you could do with a thousand pounds.

BIFFINS. Oh, I know, Sir James. It's very liberal of you indeed. Very liberal. But really, I couldn't.

SIR JAMES. You only have to sign this. Just sign it here, and I give a cheque for a thousand.

BIFFINS. Oh no, Sir James. I don't think you understand how much it means to me. I really feel I couldn't.

SIR JAMES. Well, then, I tell you what. I tell you what. I'll give you twelve hundred and fifty.

BIFFINS. It's a great sum, Sir James, but even for that. . . . I really have the greatest compunction.

SIR JAMES. Now look here, Mr. Biffins. Am I the squire or am I not?

BIFFINS. Oh yes, Sir James. Oh yes.

SIR JAMES. Well, very well. Do you refuse to do business with me?

BIFFINS. Oh no, Sir James.

SIR JAMES. Well, that is what it amounts to.

BIFFINS. I didn't actually refuse, Sir James. I only said I had great compunctions. And so I have, the very greatest compunctions.

SIR JAMES. Well, *I* had the greatest compunctions when the bishop asked me for that two thousand five hundred. (*Points to it.*) But he got over my compunctions and talked me round. It seems rather hard that *my* compunctions should be treated as amounting to nothing; but, the moment I try to do a bit of business with one of you on my own, all these compunctions are put in my way.

BIFFINS. Oh, but Sir James, I can't *help* having compunctions.

SIR JAMES. Nor can I. But I put mine aside to amuse the neighbourhood. And now you won't treat me in the same way.

BIFFINS. Well, Sir James, if you put it like that. . . .

SIR JAMES. And look what you could do with twelve hundred and fifty pounds.

BIFFINS. Oh, yes, I know. But I still have the greatest compunctions. But to oblige *you*, Sir James, only to oblige *you*.

SIR JAMES. All right, then, you sign here. Just read what you're signing while I write the cheque.

BIFFINS. It's only to oblige you, Sir James.

SIR JAMES. Yes, I know. You see you just part with all rights in your soul, to me absolutely. That's all you do, and I've made out this cheque to you for one thousand two hundred and fifty pounds.

BIFFINS. Thank you, Sir James, thank you. I feel I still have great compunctions. But thank you very much. (*Sir James gives cheque.*) Thank you. And now I must really go and arrange for the raffle.

SIR JAMES. Very well. My sister will bring you the security whenever you're ready, and her tea-cosy.

BIFFINS. Oh yes. Of course the tea-cosy. Especially the tea-cosy. (*Goes to door.*) Ahem. I was thinking; I fear I must inform the bishop of this. I feel I must tell the dear bishop.

SIR JAMES. The bishop? Good Lord! Don't tell a soul.

BIFFINS. Oh, I feel I must tell the bishop.

SIR JAMES. Tell the bishop? What ever for?

BIFFINS. Oh, I feel I must.

SIR JAMES. Well, I wouldn't.

BIFFINS. Oh, I feel I ought.

[*Exit.*]

SIR JAMES. Hum! That'll make trouble. Meanwhile this is worth two thousand five hundred to me. (*Writes on outside of bond in pencil, saying aloud.*) Two thousand five hundred. (*Looks out of window.*) Good Lord, he's telling him. (*Steps are heard running.*) Running!

[*Bishop appears in doorway a bit blown. Sir James throws the bond on to table, where it falls more or less on top of the other one.*]

BISHOP. Sir James, I have just heard Mr. Biffins' dreadful story.

SIR JAMES. Oh yes. Well, I did a bit of business with Mr. Biffins.

BISHOP. Business, Sir James! A shocking transaction.

SIR JAMES. Well, of course in business one may sometimes do a deal that doesn't look all it should, if it gets out. But what did he want to blurt it out for?

BISHOP. It was his duty, Sir James, to tell me of this most shocking transaction.

SIR JAMES. Well, I am a good deal out of pocket over this bazaar, and I felt I was entitled to get a little back by a business deal if I could.

BISHOP. I am pained, Sir James; I am inexpressibly pained. Nor can I conceive how it is possible for you to make anything whatever by this extraordinary and very painful joke.

SIR JAMES. As a matter of fact, someone has offered me a considerable sum for this very stuff.

BISHOP. For this very stuff, Sir James? My comprehension may be weak, but it fails to follow you.

SIR JAMES. For Mr. Biffins' soul.

BISHOP. His soul? A considerable sum? Who? Who offered you this?

SIR JAMES. Well, he seems to be the fellow you preach against.

BISHOP. The fellow I... Oh! And in a Christian country. May I *ask* you, Sir James, how ever you found yourself able to do what you say you have done?

SIR JAMES. Well, Bishop, if you had a sister like mine, she'd drive you to it.

BISHOP. Oh! How dreadful.

SIR JAMES. I see how it looks to you, Bishop. But then, you see, I'm a business man, and a deal is a deal to me. I don't mind giving money away if I've got to; but I never go back on a deal.

BISHOP. I am inexpressibly pained.

SIR JAMES. But I'm prepared to meet you, Bishop. What do you say to three thousand five hundred? Three thousand five hundred pounds and Biffins' soul is yours.

BISHOP. You ask me to buy this poor man's soul from you?

SIR JAMES. I give you the option.

BISHOP. Are you aware of the dreadful nature of this traffic that you propose?

SIR JAMES. Well, to me it's business. I thought you might be glad of the opportunity.

BISHOP. So I would. So I would. I would welcome anything that would enable me to save that poor man from his folly.

SIR JAMES. Well, three thousand five hundred is my price. I hope we shall agree on it.

BISHOP. That is my difficulty.

SIR JAMES. Well, Bishop, I'm sure that I've named nothing you can't afford.

BISHOP. That is not quite the point.

SIR JAMES. No?

BISHOP. No. You see, I've been a bishop for some years now. And I necessarily have a certain amount of experience. And if I were to begin, only to *begin*, to pay more for anything than its reasonable value, I should in a very short while have nothing left, like any other spendthrift. A bishop *cannot* give reckless prices.

SIR JAMES. I make a small profit, of course, in everything that I touch. But I don't think that "reckless prices" is a phrase fairly describing the price that I ask of anybody.

BISHOP. Now, Sir James, I am a very busy man and necessarily I acquire a certain amount of experience, just as you do yourself.

SIR JAMES. Oh, certainly.

BISHOP. Well, then, between ourselves, strictly between our two selves. *Is* the soul of Mr. Biffins worth the price you are asking?

SIR JAMES. Well, I didn't say it was, quite. I naturally have my profit.

BISHOP. Can you conscientiously say that your profit would be a reasonable one?

SIR JAMES. Well, it's all a question of supply and demand. You seemed eager to get it, and I should have thought it was worth that to you.

BISHOP. No, no. There are innumerable demands on a bishop's purse. He cannot afford to pay fancy prices for anything.

[*Mr. Biffins is heard with his silly bell, ringing up and down the garden. Both men listen to him. Somehow the noise seems to convince Sir James that he is asking too much.*]

SIR JAMES. Well, shall we say three thousand?

BISHOP. No, no, I cannot give so much for . . .

Enter Miss Elford.

BISHOP. . . . for the matter in question.

MISS ELFORD. Oh. I will not disturb you a moment.

[*She runs up to tea-cosy, takes bond from the table, and runs out archly.*]

SIR JAMES. Well, Bishop, I can't take less. It would scarcely leave me a profit.

BISHOP. I cannot. I cannot pay three thousand pounds for the soul of Mr. Biffins. My position compels me to consider prices as carefully as you would. And I cannot, I cannot in anything, go so far beyond its intrinsic value.

SIR JAMES. Well, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I cannot meet you and I'm sorry for Mr. Biffins. But I cannot appreciably reduce my demand and leave myself any considerable increase over what I shall get for that. (*Points to table where he threw bond.*) One can't let sentiment enter into business.

BISHOP. No. I understand that.

SIR JAMES. But I thought you might put up three thousand pounds to save Mr. Biffins.

BISHOP. No, no, I cannot make exceptions. I cannot give more than things are worth just because I am a bishop. Quite the contrary. If once I made an exception everyone would take advantage of me.

SIR JAMES. It's not so very much.

BISHOP. Now, Sir James, a diocese requires as much *savoir faire* as perhaps any business.

SIR JAMES. Oh yes, I grant you that.

BISHOP. Well then, as two men of affairs, *is* the soul of Mr. Biffins worth what you're asking for it?

SIR JAMES. Well. Well, no. But you know, Bishop, we business men, we don't ask what things are worth, we ask what we think we can get.

BISHOP. Yes, and I as a bishop of a very large diocese, with many demands on my purse, go very carefully into every demand; and where I make purchases I do so only at reasonable prices.

SIR JAMES. Well, what would you say was a reasonable price, Bishop? I won't spoil a deal for the sake of a hundred or so. What would you say was reasonable?

BISHOP. A thousand pounds.

SIR JAMES. Impossible.

BISHOP. Not a penny more.

SIR JAMES. It would be sheer loss to me.

BISHOP. I couldn't give more than a thousand for Mr. Biffins' soul.

SIR JAMES. We cannot meet then?

BISHOP. No.

SIR JAMES. It seems hard on Biffins.

BISHOP. Nobody would give such a price for it.

SIR JAMES. Then there seems nothing to be done.

[Bishop sadly shakes his head.]

Enter Biffins running and skipping, hugging the tea-cosy.

BIFFINS. Oh, I've won it, I've won it. My lord, I've won it.

BISHOP. Control yourself, Mr. Biffins. I congratulate you. Two thousand five hundred pounds will mean a great deal. But control yourself.

BIFFINS. Oh, my lord, it wasn't the two thousand five hundred. It was my soul. Oh, the joy of it. The joy of it. Look, my lord, look. *(He shows the Bishop the bond that he had signed.)* You see, my lord, you see, it has two thousand five hundred written on it in pencil; but it isn't that, my lord, it isn't that. It's that bond that I signed, that I told you of.

BISHOP. Let me see.

[He takes it. Sir James looks over his shoulder.]

SIR JAMES. Why? What? *(He rushes to table.)* She's taken the wrong one and raffled it.

BISHOP. Yes, that's it.

BIFFINS. Oh, the inexpressible joy.

CURTAIN

THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MR. POLLIT, a Playwright.

MR. TOTE, *Stage Manager*.

ALF
BILL } *Scene Shifters.*

MR. TRENDER
MR. HANLEY } *Actors.*

MISS PHYLLIS PERKINS, *a Famous Actress.*

THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

SCENE: The Lord Chamberlain's Theatre.

TIME: The Present.

ALF. Come on, Bill; they're going to go through that curtain-raiser.

[They bring bed to centre back.]

BILL. What do they want?

ALF. All the usual stuff.

[They bring on bedroom utensils.]

BILL. What's the curtain-raiser, Alf?

ALF. "The Journey of the Soul" they call it.

BILL. "The Journey of the Sole"? Soles don't make journeys.

ALF. 'Ow do you mean—don't make journeys?

BILL. They just flap about in the sea.

ALF. Well, can't he flap from one sea to another?

BILL. Yes; I suppose so. Who's playing it?

ALF. Mr. Trender.

BILL. He's not generally funny.

ALF. Give it me.

BILL. Alf——

ALF. They'll want that here.

BILL. Alf——

ALF. Well?

BILL. If it's all about a sole, will they want a bed?

ALF. Of course they'll want a bed.

BILL. What for, Alf?

ALF. 'Aven't you ever heard of dramatic technique?

BILL. Yes. Read of it often.

ALF. Well, they always do have a bed in this theatre. It's dramatic technique.

BILL. Well, we've got it fixed up for them.

[They sit on the bed.]

ALF. Talking to Mr. Zoss himself the other day, and he tells me about this very thing. The public, he says, demands a bed. Doesn't care about beds himself, but the public must have it; and as a humble servant of the public, he says, he has to give it 'em. And what Mr. Zoss doesn't know....

BILL. Oh, that's all right. Still, I can't see as how a sole can want to flap about in a bed.

ALF. That's 'cause you know nothing about dramatic technique.

BILL. Well, the sea's the place for a sole.

Enter the Stage Manager.

STAGE MANAGER. We shan't need a bed to-day, Alf.

ALF. Not need a bed, sir?

STAGE MANAGER. No; not to-day.

ALF. God 'elp us!

[They take off some utensils.]

Enter the great actress, Phyllis Perkins.

STAGE MANAGER. Oh, good-morning, Miss Perkins. I'm afraid we aren't quite ready for you yet.

PHYLLIS. Good-morning.

STAGE MANAGER. We've a bit of a curtain-raiser to run through, but it will only take a few minutes. Mr. Pollit! Mr. Pollit! Would you mind coming now? "Journey of the Soul," please. We'll only be a few minutes, Miss Perkins, if you don't mind.

PHYLLIS. Not at all. I'm before my time.

[She sits on bed.]

Re-enter Bill and Alf.

STAGE MANAGER. Oh, well, you can leave the bed for the present.

ALF. It will never go without a bed, sir.

STAGE MANAGER. Oh, won't it. We *make* 'em go here. We *make* 'em.

[*Exit Alf, wagging a doubtful head. Exit Bill.*]

Enter Pollit.

STAGE MANAGER. Ah, this is Mr. Pollit, Miss Perkins. He's written the little thing that comes on before yours.

POLLIT. Oh, it's nothing really. How do you do? It's not anything. It's nothing compared with what you do.

PHYLLIS. What's it about?

POLLIT. Well, it's called "The Journey of the Soul."

PHYLLIS. Oh?

POLLIT. Yes; you see the Soul sets out accompanied by Hope to find the Celestial Heights. Well, then, he meets Despair and Remorse, and—and Temptation; and—and all that sort of thing.

PHYLLIS. (*unhappily*). Oh.

POLLIT. Yes; and after that he meets Sin.

PHYLLIS. Oh, does he?

POLLIT. Yes; and then—of course I'm not *telling* it very well—then he comes at last to a sort of place where he meets one with an inexpressibly beautiful face, and....

PHYLLIS. (*slightly interested*). Oh?

POLLIT. Yes; and he....

PHYLLIS. (*bored again*). Oh, it's a he?

POLLIT. Well, it's a sort of an angel, you know, really. They aren't any particular sex, I think.

PHYLLIS. (*very bored*). Oh.

POLLIT. Yes; and then you see——

PHYLLIS. But does anything *happen* at all?

POLLIT. Oh, yes. You see he guides the Soul of Man to the Celestial Heights—and that of course, well that's Eternity really. It's rather ... er, er.... What do you think of it, Miss Perkins?

PHYLLIS. Oh well, I think, you know, you ought to have something happen a little more.

STAGE MANAGER. Oh, that will be all right, Miss Perkins. We'll put in lots of things. Ginger it up, you know.

POLLIT. Well, I don't know if I'd like too much put in, you know.

STAGE MANAGER. No, no; not too much. Just what you want to say yourself, you know. Only put so that it will get over.

POLLIT. I ... see.... What sort of things exactly?

STAGE MANAGER. Well, there's the journey itself, for instance. You want to tell them that it takes—it's a hundred years, isn't it?

POLLIT. Yes.

STAGE MANAGER. Well, you want them to know it.

POLLIT. But I tell them that right at the beginning of the play.

STAGE MANAGER. Right at the beginning. Yes. That's the point. They're none of them in their places by then.

POLLIT. None of them?

STAGE MANAGER. Except the pit.

POLLIT. Oh.

STAGE MANAGER. No. You want to get it over. Now a little bit about the South Eastern would *show* them that it was a slow journey. I've thought of a bit that would make your point quite clear, and it would be sure of a laugh. One's always sure of a laugh over the South Eastern.

POLLIT. Well, I'm not quite sure that I quite wanted a laugh. You see, it's meant to be rather serious, and....

STAGE MANAGER. You don't quite *want* a laugh? You *don't want* a laugh? Well, if you'd told me that before. I mean to say, I've spent a lot of time on your play, and if you'd told me before that you didn't want a laugh—— Well, I should have perhaps understood you better, that's all.

POLLIT. Well, I'm sorry; but I'd much rather they didn't laugh, if you don't mind.

STAGE MANAGER. We can't have them all scared out of the house by your trying to be solemn.

POLLIT. You see I meant the Soul really to be each of their own souls, and——

STAGE MANAGER. Well, let's get on with it; they're all here. (*Reads.*) One with an inexpressibly beautiful face. Come on, Mr. Hanley. We'll start from there. We shan't keep you long, Miss Perkins.

PHYLLIS. Never mind.

STAGE MANAGER. One with an inexpressibly.... (*Sees Hanley, who has been lolling against the wings, coming forward with script.*) That's right. (*Mr. Hanley is not looking his best to-day, and his cigarette has a sickly droop.*) Now, where's the Soul?

TRENDER. Oh, I beg your pardon.

STAGE MANAGER. Come on, Mr. Trender, please. We're taking it from where one with an inexpressibly beautiful face comes on.

TRENDER. Oh, all right.

[*Takes script from pocket.*]

HANLEY (*reading, still smoking*).

Henceforward follow me.

Yonder below you lie the forms and shades
Of monstrous images.

TRENDER. Just a moment. (*Turns pages.*) Oh, all right.

HANLEY. Henceforward follow me.
Yonder below you lie the forms and shades
Of monstrous images; amongst them Sin
With all her children—Gluttony and Sloth,
O'er-reaching Pride and deadly Lechery,
And stubborn....

PHYLLIS. Mr. Tote.

STAGE MANAGER. Yes.

PHYLLIS. Excuse me a moment. Would you mind if I got ready for "A Girl On Her Own"?

STAGE MANAGER. Certainly, Miss Perkins, certainly. We'll only be a few minutes.

PHYLLIS. Thank you so much.

[*She takes off her hat.*]

STAGE MANAGER. All right, Mr. Hanley.

HANLEY. Henceforward follow me.
Yonder below you lie the forms and shades
Of monstrous images; amongst them Sin
With all her children—Gluttony and Sloth,
O'er-reaching Pride and deadly Lechery.

[*Miss Perkins gets into the bed.*]

And stubborn worldliness, not to be turned.

[*Pointing as to a mountain-top before them.*]

And yonder lies the goal of all desire,
Erect, transcendent, shining, seen more far
Than on earth only....
(Damn this typescript; it's like mud!)
Than on earth only, gleaming to great spheres
That through the night in numbers past thy guess.
Mr. Tote, how *am* I to read this script. It's all blurred like *this*.

STAGE MANAGER. Well, she's done her best.

HANLEY. Oh, all right. I'll try and make it out.

STAGE MANAGER. Now, Mr. Trender.

TRENDER. Excuse me one moment; I wanted to ask Mr. Pollit....

POLLIT. Yes?

TRENDER. I wanted to be sure if I quite got your symbolism. Which kind of a soul did you mean?

POLLIT. Which *kind* of soul?

TRENDER. Yes. You see there's—there's what one calls one's immortal soul....

POLLIT. Yes?

TRENDER. Well, and then there's the kind we eat.

POLLIT. Oh, Heavens!

TRENDER. Well, I only wanted to be sure if I got your idea.

STAGE MANAGER. Well, perhaps we'd better get on. "That throng the night in numbers past thy guess." We'll go on from there.

TRENDER. Henceforth I follow; those dark images
Forgotten, and all else that is of Earth.
That peak alone shall beckon....
or is it "reckon"? I can't read it either.

STAGE MANAGER. Let me see. (*Sees.*) It's "reckon."

POLLIT. No, no, no. "Beckon."

STAGE MANAGER. Well, she's *put* "reckon."

POLLIT. No, no, *no*.

STAGE MANAGER. Well, it's "reckon" here.

POLLIT. Oh, it's all wrong. It should be "beckon."

STAGE MANAGER. Are you sure?

POLLIT. Of course I'm sure.

STAGE MANAGER. Well, if you like; but "reckon" seems better to me. What do you think, Mr. Trender?

TRENDER. Well, I think "reckon's" better. I don't see how a peak could beckon very well. Not a mountain peak.

POLLIT. Well, how could it reckon?

TRENDER. Well, I don't know of course. I don't quite see what you're driving at.

STAGE MANAGER. Well, perhaps we'd better get on. We'll have it "beckon," Mr. Pollit, to please you. We'll have it just as you want. But perhaps after this you wouldn't mind letting us get on with it by ourselves. We'll get through much quicker that way; and you can safely leave it in my hands. You see, we've met you over "reckon," and now if you'll just meet us by letting us get on with the rehearsal——

[*Exeunt Stage Manager and Pollit.*]

TRENDER. Well, where were we?
That peak alone shall reckon me and guide
These weary feet——

HANLEY. Better wait for Tote.

TRENDER. All right. Alf!

Enter Alf.

ALF. Yes, sir?

TRENDER. Where's Mr. Tote?

ALF. He's seeing off of Mr. Pollit, sir.

HANLEY (*to Trender*). This thing will never go. There's no snap in it.

ALF. Oh, it will go all right, sir. Mr. Tote will make it go. But it would be better if there was a bed in it.

Enter Stage Manager.

STAGE MANAGER. Now, Miss Perkins. I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting. Now. "A Girl On Her Own." You're both in this, so we can get started. Miss Esmer will be here in five minutes. Now. Curtain up!

PHYLLIS (*in bed, and looking charming. Reading from script*). Count, this is charming of you.

CURTAIN

IN HOLY RUSSIA

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MARYA NICOLAEVNA.

ANNA PETROVNA.

IVAN MICHAILOVITCH.

ALEXEY.

ZERSTCHIN.

ALCOHOL.

A POLICEMAN OF NIBOLESKAYA.

IN HOLY RUSSIA

SCENE: Outside a Russian cottage. A table and chairs stand before the little cottage. The housewife (Marya Nicolaevna) is tidying it.

Time: Russia about 1912.

Enter another peasant-woman, the neighbour.

MARYA. Why, Anna Petrovna, an angel has sent you.

ANNA. Well, Marya Nicolaevna, I came to talk.

MARYA. Surely an angel sent you, for I needed a talk so much.

ANNA. Ah, often I feel like that. And then I must talk. I must. And if the men are away I just talk to myself.

MARYA. Oh, one should not do that.

ANNA. No?

MARYA. No. For an evil spirit might hear, and think that you spoke to him.

ANNA. I should not like that.

MARYA. No. He would answer then.

ANNA. That would be dreadful. But we have each other to talk to now.

MARYA. Yes. Let us talk of all things. But fast, for my nephew Ivan will be here soon to speak with his friend Alexey from Tobolsk, and young Zerstchin. You know of what they speak?

ANNA. No.

MARYA. It is of politics.

ANNA. Of politics!

MARYA. Yes, they say wonderful things. Their talk is all strange like a dream, and it makes my heart beat faster.

ANNA. What do they say?

MARYA. Oh, I know not. Strange words, strange sayings, and many things not true. I know not what they mean, but I know it's politics. It's very strange to hear them: it is like something quite different.

ANNA. Do they speak of change?

MARYA. Yes. Of things quite different.

ANNA. God does not wish that.

MARYA. No, nor the Czar. Yet their talk thrills me. There are new words in their mouths. And though I know not their meaning, it sets me thinking of strange new things. You shall hear them Anna.

ANNA. Not here! Not politics in the open daylight and just by the road that runs through Niboleskaya.

MARYA. Ah. But they are so cunning. None knows what they talk of.

ANNA. If they see three men talking together, they may suspect.

MARYA. No. For they are cunning. Alexey has lived in Tobolsk and seen the wide world, and knows things that they would not dream of in Niboleskaya. It is his plan. They have a box of images that I keep for them. And they set them all up on the table, and play with them for all the world like children. And if the police come by they think they are playing.

ANNA. Playing? But, Marya, the police will never think big men like your nephew are children.

MARYA. Ah. That is the strange thing. Yet so it is. Alexey has learned it in Tobolsk. Grown men, it seems, work their brains over those images, aye, and will beat their foreheads with their fists, and will sit and gaze at them all day. It is strange, but so it is, and the world is full of strange customs.

ANNA. Strange indeed. And will the police in Niboleskaya know this custom?

MARYA. They know of it; though they know not how to play with the images. Alexey says that, for that, they are all the readier to smile on the images and to appear to comprehend the ways of them.

ANNA. I like not playing with images.

MARYA. Why not?

ANNA. It may bring bad luck.

MARYA. Bad luck? Will it come to us?

ANNA. Not this year, I think, for it is a lucky year, and we will have a beautiful harvest.

MARYA. God be praised. How do you know?

ANNA. The beans are in double rows in the pods this year. I have seen twenty such.

MARYA. Are they indeed?

ANNA. Yes. It is a portent.

MARYA. Look. Here they come. I must get the queer box.

[Exit into cottage.]

Enter Ivan, followed by Alexey and Zerstchin.

IVAN. Well, neighbour. How do you prosper?

ANNA. Well, thank you, Ivan Michailovitch, for we are to have a great harvest this year. There are double rows in the bean-pods.

IVAN. Ah, yes. You would know by that.

ANNA. Certainly, Ivan Michailovitch. God put them there for that purpose.

IVAN. Ah, to be sure He does.

*Enter Marya with a chess-board and box of large chessmen.
She puts board and box on the table.*

MARYA. Well, Ivan, I've brought you your images.

IVAN. Thank you, Aunt Marya.

MARYA. You wouldn't like me to help you with them?

IVAN. No, no. *(He turns to his silent, serious, preoccupied companions and they set up handfuls of chessmen)*

haphazard upon the board. Ivan and Alexey (from Tobolsk) sit down at opposite ends of the board.) Now we can talk.

ALEXEY. No, not yet. Sit you down, Zerstchin, there. Now; there are two men playing chess and one watching. What more natural? We may talk.

IVAN. Tell him, then, of the future of Russia. He has not heard.

ALEXEY (*to Zerstchin*). You are ready to work for Russia?

ZERSTCHIN. I yearn to see Holy Russia free.

ALEXEY. Learn first, then, to speak of "Holy Russia" no more. It was that in the past, and all the past is bad. We shall only be free by escaping from it utterly. The past will try to bind you with old customs, will reach out hands to clutch you, will bring chains to fasten you down; and old customs and chains and hands must all be broken. What the past made holy must be unholy now, and only what none dared speak of hitherto shall be holy, things of which none dared think. It is only by this that we shall be free.

ZERSTCHIN (*eagerly*). Tell me how we shall free Russia.

ALEXEY. Each man shall teach ten men every week. And of those ten he shall choose one, also to be a teacher. Thus, wherever there was one teacher on Monday, at the end of that week there shall be two, and every teacher teaching ten more.

IVAN. No, no, that will be too long. Let them find a new teacher every day.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes. Then we shall soon be free.

ALEXEY. No. If we have but fifty teachers now, and double them every week, we shall have six or seven million in four months.

ZERSTCHIN. Six or seven million!

ALEXEY. Aye, and nearer ten million.

ZERSTCHIN. It is wonderful.

ALEXEY. We shall do it.

ZERSTCHIN. And then. In four months' time?

ALEXEY. Then we shall wait a little longer.

ZERSTCHIN. And then?

ALEXEY. Then we shall have taught that the sceptre that men go in fear of is only a bar of gold, and that there is nothing more in that than there is in lead. That the sanctity of the Czar and his sceptre are but dreams from which men may waken as they waken from others. We shall waken them with a whisper. We shall waken them in the golden future and the dream will be all gone, and Russia will be happy again as free birds are happy at dawn.

IVAN. Will all awaken?

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, surely.

ALEXEY. No. There will be those that will not hear our voices. Heavy minds that would sleep on though all the birds were

singing. Against these we shall teach the holiness of assassination. For things shall be holy that were not holy before, and things unholy that were holy of old. It will be for the sake of Russia. When these are gone all shall be free.

ZERSTCHIN (*ecstatically*). Russia free!

ALEXEY. Yes, for all that live will be those with freedom in their hearts. How should these oppress any? And all the old oppressions will be gone. They will have all been sacrificed to Freedom.

ZERSTCHIN. And we shall all be free?

ALEXEY. Free as the birds that sing. And then we shall live in a State planned by sensible, reasoning men, not made by the chance absurdities and violences of uncivilized ages. We shall.... Your move, Ivan.

[They bend over the chessboard. The village Policeman walks across.]

POLICEMAN. Chess, Ivan Michailovitch?

[But Ivan, deep over the game, does not answer.]

ALEXEY. Yes.

POLICEMAN. A clever game. A very excellent game.

[Exit.]

ALEXEY. We shall have none of those folk.

IVAN. A few, perhaps, to enforce our free laws!

ALEXEY. No! Why do Russians break the law? Because it is not *their* law. It is not the law of a free people, but the law of a tyranny that they detest. When the tyranny is gone, and the laws are the people's own, made by themselves and for each other, what Russian will ever break them?

IVAN. See, Zerstchin; you are learning. You shall hear the constitution of the new Russia.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, it is wonderful.

ALEXEY. And then none will have any desire to break the new laws, even if free Russians could be found to do it, for all will be so rich that they'll be content.

ZERSTCHIN. We'll all be rich, Alexey?

IVAN. Yes, listen, and you shall hear.

ALEXEY. Yes, there is enough of gold and jewellery in the imperial palaces alone to feed all the people of Russia for a year, even if they did no work for the whole of that time. But they *will* work, and for themselves: there will be no rent to any landlord, and no interest to be paid on any borrowed money, for we shall abolish capitalism. The wealth of Russia will be for the people of Russia. It is boundless; it is enormous. We have worked it all out, and we have found that every peasant will be as wealthy, all his life, as any lawyer or priest or doctor in a large provincial town. And furthermore there will be no taxes, or very few.

IVAN. That is because there will be no army or navy to maintain. Is it not, Alexey?

ALEXEY. Only at first, until other nations have learned from us not to desire to make war.

ZERSTCHIN. But if any do break the laws of free Russia, what then, Alexey?

ALEXEY. If any do? Why, if any do, we shall put them in pleasant schools. Not in Siberian prisons like the imperialists. And in those schools we shall teach them until they can know their error. Then we shall free them and they will go back better citizens than the rest, for we shall have trained them in all civic things.

ZERSTCHIN. It will be a glorious time.

ALEXEY. Ah, you say that when I tell you how rich we shall all be.

ZERSTCHIN (*ecstatically*). No. I say it because Russia will be free.

IVAN. Come. We will drink to that day. Marya Nicolaevna! Marya Nicolaevna!

MARYA. I come, Ivan.

IVAN. Will you give us some vodka, Aunt?

MARYA. Vodka, so early?

IVAN. We wish to drink to a very glorious day.

MARYA. Oh, your politics.

IVAN. Our politics will free Russia.

MARYA. They make my heart beat faster.

[*Exit into house.*]

ZERSTCHIN. Russia will be free.

IVAN. Yes, we will drink to that day.

ZERSTCHIN. I will not drink.

IVAN. Why not?

ZERSTCHIN. I want to think of those glorious days. I want to think with clear brains of the freedom of Russia; the rule of reason, and freedom for all. The glory of it warms me so that I want no drink.

ALEXEY. Nonsense. We will drink to the day that is coming. It will make it seem nearer.

ZERSTCHIN. I do not need it. The glory of those days is enough for me.

IVAN. Here comes Marya Nicolaevna with the vodka. We will all drink. We shall be able to work the better for it.

ZERSTCHIN. No.

IVAN. One drink.

ZERSTCHIN. Well, one then, and no more.

ALEXEY. Yes, that is all we need. We must keep our brains clear for they have to free Russia.

MARYA (*to Anna*). The strange things they are saying.

ANNA. Yes. Yes. God send no ill come of them.

MARYA. Ill? I trust not.

[*Exeunt Marya and Anna.*]

ZERSTCHIN. This is good stuff.

IVAN. Have another.

ZERSTCHIN. Well, one more, but only one more. Then I will leave you, or I shall drink too much. I want to think of free Russia and all the golden days. (*Ivan pours.*) Too much. Too much. You've poured out too much.

IVAN. You needn't drink it all.

ZERSTCHIN. I'll sit over there and think. If I stay with you here, soon I shan't be able to. (*He goes away with his glass and sits on a tree-stump (Stage R.) by footlights.*) The golden days!

[*He sips the vodka. The lights lower slightly. He sips it again: a thin gauze descends between him and the others. Again he sips, and again a thin gauze. Once more: and again a gauze, until all is misty white between him and the rest of the stage. Then a brilliant harlequin in his jazz-bright tights leaps up beside him in sunlight.*]

ZERSTCHIN. Who are you?

THE FIGURE. Alcohol.

ZERSTCHIN. Alco-what?

ALCOHOL. Alcohol. An old, old family. You know our motto: *In vino veritas*.

ZERSTCHIN. *In vino*...?

ALCOHOL. Look!

[*He waves with his harlequin's sword and the gauzes disappear, all but one thin film. All is bright sunlight. Alexey is gone, but Ivan is sitting at the same table, but his head and arms are fallen upon it, a bit of a gnawed twig lies by his hand. Marya and Anna, lying upon the ground, are trying to gnaw the bark of twigs, or eat pieces of grass. The Policeman leans hopeless against a tree. The misery of all shows they are starving. The thatch of the house, etc., have become unkempt.*]

ZERSTCHIN. Starving!

ALCOHOL (*cheerfully*). Yes.

ZERSTCHIN. What! In Russia?

ALCOHOL. Yes. Here in Russia.

ZERSTCHIN. Oh! (*Alcohol, leaning against tree by Zerstchin, toys with his harlequin's sword and watches the starving people.*) No, but this shall not be. Folk must not starve in Russia. I'll give them money to buy bread. I've a hundred-rouble note. And I can get more. They shall not starve in Russia. Here, good folk. (*He steps towards them with his rouble note outstretched.*) Here. (*But he comes against the gauze, and both hands grope at it, though he does not*

actually touch it, and he can get no further. None of them see him.)

ALCOHOL. You cannot. It is too far.

ZERSTCHIN. Too far?

ALCOHOL. Yes, this is Russia of 1920.

ZERSTCHIN. The future! What can I do?

ALCOHOL. You have done all you can do.

ZERSTCHIN. I?

ALCOHOL. Look!

ZERSTCHIN (*with his hundred-rouble note still held out childishly towards them. Plaintively.*) I want to give them my money.

ALCOHOL. Look!

MARYA (*to Ivan, pulling at his shoulder*). Ivan, Ivan. Arouse yourself.

IVAN (*turning his head without raising it*). Why?

MARYA. We must find food at once.

IVAN (*contemptuously*). Food? Where?

MARYA. Listen and I will tell you. Listen, Ivan.

IVAN. Let me sleep.

MARYA. Listen, Ivan. Only listen. There is food in Niboleskaya.

IVAN (*incredulously*). In Niboleskaya?

MARYA. Not so loud. Listen, Ivan.

IVAN. Well.

MARYA (*with the air of a secret*). Yesterday Skoboleff opened a tin of sprats. It is known. It came from England. He ate two or three, not more; but they smelt bad and he stopped eating them. There must be nine sprats in that tin now: there were twelve. Take your money, and go and buy them.

IVAN. I have no money, but these (*showing four notes*).

MARYA. How much?

IVAN. Four thousand roubles. You can't buy all those sprats for four thousand roubles.

MARYA. They smelt very bad, little Ivan. Perhaps Skoboleff will sell.

[Zerstchin, dropping his rouble note, hides his face in sudden despair. The scene darkens till nothing is visible but Zerstchin sobbing. Alcohol has lain down to rest. And then above the sound of Zerstchin sobbing comes a yawn of the most intense boredom. It is Alcohol awaking. He is now dressed all in

grey. Alcohol rises slowly, yawning. He is scarcely able to lift his weight. He walks away, leaning heavily on trees; not of course drunkenly, but wearily. Exit. The earlier scene comes back again. It is once more Russia of about 1912, with Ivan and Alexey seated at the table. Marya and Anna enter gossiping to each other.

ZERSTCHIN (*drying his tears as the light brightens*). Ah! I will save them yet. (*He rises and goes over to Alexey and Ivan.*) Friends. Friends. A moment before you decide. Alexey, a moment.

ALEXEY. Well?

ZERSTCHIN. If in the changes you make you affect our commerce. Suppose you injure its delicate organization. And our finance. What if the sudden change harms that?

ALEXEY. I told you. I shall make the people rich.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, Alexey, yes. Yes, certainly. But what if the sudden change injure our credit? What if the rouble should lose its value, when, when we want to buy food.

MARYA. Still at their politics.

ANNA. Ah, well. Let the men talk as well as us.

[*Marya laughs.*]

ALEXEY. I will deal with that point.

IVAN. Alexey has studied all that.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, I know, Ivan. I know. And yet....

ALEXEY. I will deal with that point. If any unfavourable influence should affect the purchasing value of the rouble, which is not to be anticipated, but in case it should, the People's Central Revolutionary Banks will in that case so regulate the deflation of currency, that....

CURTAIN

HIS SAINTED GRANDMOTHER

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PHYLLIS TRAVERNE.

HER FATHER.

LUCY.

ANNIE.

HIS SAINTED GRANDMOTHER

SCENE: An old room with a four-poster in the middle. Wainscot about seven feet high. A fire-place on the left-hand side (Stage left), at which Phyllis, when she sits about the middle of the left side of the bed, can easily warm her hands. Nearer the footlights a door in the left-hand side. A dressing-table in the middle of the right side.

Enter Phyllis Traverne, followed by her Father.

PHYLLIS. But, Father, I don't like this room.

HER FATHER. I have had your things put here.

PHYLLIS. But I don't like it.

HER FATHER. Why?

PHYLLIS. Nobody likes it.

HER FATHER. Do they give any reason?

PHYLLIS. It is so old.

HER FATHER. It's in good enough repair.

PHYLLIS. Oh, I don't mean that. But it's not for us.

HER FATHER. Not for us? What do you mean?

PHYLLIS. Why, it's all made for people a long time ago. Dead people. Not like us. It's full of their needs, their ways, and their awful faces. Don't make me sleep in it!

HER FATHER. Do you call that an awful face?

[Points at the portrait, with its crinolines and its sainted expression.]

PHYLLIS. No, only I, only....

HER FATHER. What?

PHYLLIS. It's full of their ways.

HER FATHER. Very well then, I'll come to that at once.

PHYLLIS. Come to that, Father?

HER FATHER. Yes. I have put you here with good reason.

PHYLLIS. Good reason? Why?

HER FATHER. If you could possibly draw any influence out of the shadows of this old room, its hangings, its furniture, above all that portrait, from those sane and sober ways you so much despise; if you could find *anything* of a bygone grace, both of spirit and body, from this quiet gloom that is laden with memories of my grandmother, you might—well, all I can say is, you might be the better for it.

PHYLLIS. In what way, Father?

HER FATHER. Do you want me to explain myself?

PHYLLIS. It's awfully late, Father.

HER FATHER. I trust not too late.

PHYLLIS. What do you mean by that?

HER FATHER. I will explain.

PHYLLIS. Oh, well.

[*So she sits on bed and lights a cigarette.*]

HER FATHER. One should not need to have to explain. Well, to begin with, there is this young fellow Shawley.

PHYLLIS. Peter?

HER FATHER. Oh, you call him Peter then?

PHYLLIS. Of course.

HER FATHER. Well, Peter, then. How many times did you dance with Peter to-night?

PHYLLIS. Seven.

HER FATHER. Why?

PHYLLIS. There was nobody else there I wanted to dance with. And he didn't want to dance with anyone else either. Only there was a woman there he couldn't avoid dancing with. You don't know or, or you'd understand; but there it was. So we only danced seven, otherwise I'd have danced....

HER FATHER. Seven. And in my day if a man danced more than three times with the same girl, it was tantamount, why it amounted to....

PHYLLIS. But I like dancing with Peter.

HER FATHER. Evidently.

PHYLLIS. Then why shouldn't I?

HER FATHER. To *begin* with, to begin with because you make yourself conspicuous.

PHYLLIS. But who to, Father?

HER FATHER. To the whole room.

PHYLLIS. But they are dancing with each other.

HER FATHER. Not seven times with the same partner.

PHYLLIS. Lots of them dance with one partner all the evening.

HER FATHER. In my time that would have been tantamount to an engagement, and would have been taken as such by everybody.

PHYLLIS. But, Father, mayn't the times change?

HER FATHER. Yes, in externals. Fashions must change, and customs, and even perhaps manners, though it is unfortunate that they all change for the worse. But there are things that surely must shock all the right-minded people in any age as much as they would have shocked my sainted grandmother, who seems to watch you now so sorrowfully.

PHYLLIS. But, Father, who can object? (*A glance, almost of fear, at the portrait.*) I mean, who that's living to-day and knows our ways can object to my dancing seven dances with Peter?

HER FATHER. Young Arnold.

PHYLLIS. (*lowers her cigarette and thinks a little gravely for a second*). What? Dick?

HER FATHER. You call him Dick, then?

PHYLLIS. Well, we all do.

HER FATHER. Then what does Dick think of it?

PHYLLIS. It isn't his business.

HER FATHER. I see, so his business is limited to taking you out in his motor-launch whenever you want sea air, or to driving you a hundred miles from here, and back again the same evening, all alone together, a thing inconceivable in her time (*pointing to portrait*)....

PHYLLIS. They hadn't motors, Father.

HER FATHER. They had morals.

PHYLLIS. Oh, well.

HER FATHER. And that isn't all; this Dick of yours has to get you tickets for any theatre you want, has to do all kinds of odd jobs for you, and actually has had more than once to hang about with his motor on the chance that you might want him to take you to other people's tennis-parties.

PHYLLIS. Oh well, it rained that day, Father.

HER FATHER. It wasn't the only day.

PHYLLIS. Father, is it *really* wrong?

HER FATHER. *Really* wrong! Good heavens, how shall I answer it? Only by placing you, as I have placed you, in such contact as may touch you here from a godlier age, in a room whose very shadows are hallowed with the long association of a calm and sainted lady. If no influence of hers can reach you here to tell you that in all ages and places it is wrong to have one man to amuse you all day and dance half the night with another, then you are indeed lost. Good-night.

[*Exit.*

PHYLLIS. Oh, dear me.

[*She sits a few moments in thought, knocking off cigarette-ash into an ash-tray, then throws the end of the*

cigarette into the fire-place and rises and goes across to her dressing-table, looking at the great four-poster as she passes it, and giving a shudder at the gloomy old room. She sits down at her dressing-table to do her hair, or what not, and sighs. Then over on the far side of the four-poster, whence she had come, the ghost of her great-grandmother is seen, without any appearance (where practicable) of having entered or moved. Phyllis, turning round after a while, stares and cranes her head nearer, from her chair, not only in fright, but because the ghost is a little dim.

PHYLLIS. Great-grandmamma.

[The Ghost nods its head twice. Phyllis pauses, gives way to fear, runs to bell, and pulls it hard.]

GHOST. Don't do that, dear.

PHYLLIS. I've done it.

GHOST. Never mind.

[Looks at door and gives a little laugh.]

PHYLLIS. Great-grandmamma, are you angry with me?

GHOST. No, child.

PHYLLIS. Great-grandmamma.

GHOST. Yes, child.

PHYLLIS. You're quite young.

GHOST. Yes.

[A little laugh.]

PHYLLIS. But you were quite old, great-grandmamma. You didn't look like that.

GHOST. Oh, that was only my body. But I was like this always.

PHYLLIS. Then what made you old, great-grandmamma?

GHOST. Oh, that was the spirit wearing the body out. It wears it quite out in the end.

PHYLLIS. Great-grandmamma.

GHOST. Don't call me great-grandmamma.

PHYLLIS. Er, sainted spirit.

GHOST. Call me Lucy.

PHYLLIS. Oh. *(Smiles.)* Well, Lucy, are you quite sure you aren't angry with me?

GHOST. Mercy no, child.

PHYLLIS. Not about Dick and Peter?

GHOST (*interested*). Dick and Peter? Tell me about them.

PHYLLIS. Well, you see, Peter—Peter's wonderful; I like him ever so much. He's—I can't explain, but he's marvellous. More than anyone else in the world I should think. Well, anyway, he's perfectly wonderful. But, of course, he hasn't any money. He'll make some in a year or two, because he's so wonderful. He's at the bar, and he'll make a lot one day. But it's a bit dull waiting. So then, you see, there's Dick. (*Ghost titters.*) He's got lots of money. And he likes taking girls out in his—in his barouche, you know. And he doesn't care much who he takes so long as they're pretty. So it may just as well be me, mayn't it, Lucy? But you know what Papa is. (*Ghost laughs.*) You aren't angry with me, are you? I'm so glad, Lucy dear.

GHOST. And what does your Papa say?

PHYLLIS. Oh well, *he* says—he says, if only you could teach me better ways.

GHOST. Oh, it was he that was invoking me then. I thought it was you.

PHYLLIS. Invoking you, Lucy?

GHOST. This old place was calling me so strongly.

PHYLLIS. I'm so glad you came.

GHOST. I had to.

PHYLLIS. Had to, Lucy?

GHOST. Yes, the pull of old places, you know. And then when anyone stirs it at all, as he was doing, it begins to draw you at once, and back you come.

PHYLLIS. Lucy, Lucy, may I ask you something?

GHOST. Yes, anything you like, child.

PHYLLIS. Then, Lucy, where do you come from?

GHOST. Come from? From over there.

PHYLLIS. Over there? What's it like, Lucy?

GHOST. Oh, I can't stop all night in a tiny place like Earth to explain all that to you.

PHYLLIS. Can't you, Lucy? Well, do tell me one thing that really matters. Do tell me what I ought to do about Peter and Dick. I can't find out from Father, he gets so angry. And Dick's such a silly ass he can't tell one anything. I've no one else to ask.

GHOST. Well, my dear, if I were you....

PHYLLIS. Yes, Lucy.

GHOST. Well, I'd stick to Peter.

PHYLLIS. Oh, would you, Lucy?

GHOST. Yes, and meanwhile——

PHYLLIS. Yes, Lucy.

GHOST. While you're waiting, I mean.... You say Dick has a barouche.

PHYLLIS. Oh yes, Lucy. A great big ... I mean a nice fast one.

GHOST. Well, I always preferred a phaeton. They're smarter.

PHYLLIS. Well, he has a phaeton too. It's a Rolls, really, but you wouldn't quite understand that.

GHOST. A Rolls?

PHYLLIS. A new maker.

GHOST. No, he wasn't a carriage-builder in my time. I expect the old firms are the best.

PHYLLIS. Yes, I suppose they are. What were you saying about Dick?

GHOST. Oh, well, if he has a smart phaeton, there's nothing like a nice drive in the country. And then, of course, the less you compromise yourself the pleasanter it is to look back on.

PHYLLIS. Compromise myself, Lucy?

GHOST. Yes. One wouldn't choose for an outing villages where you might be known, or any large village at all. And then there are some quite becoming bonnets that can satisfactorily conceal your identity if you do meet people that....

PHYLLIS. We don't wear bonnets now, Lucy.

GHOST. Oh well, a pretty parasol, if held adroitly, can be a complete protection.

PHYLLIS. Oh, what a lot you know, Lucy.

GHOST. I was here for eighty years.

PHYLLIS. Yes, I suppose you were. But hasn't it altered a good deal since?

GHOST. I don't know. But it hadn't altered much up to my time.

PHYLLIS. What? Not ever?

GHOST. Well, I don't suppose so, child.

PHYLLIS. But Lucy, about Dick. I've sometimes wondered what would happen if Peter hears that I am always about with him. You know so much, I'm sure you can advise me.

GHOST. Let him hear, child. But always in moderation. Let him hear.

PHYLLIS. Let him hear?

GHOST. He mustn't think he's the only fish in the sea.

PHYLLIS. But he is, for me. And I wouldn't mind if he knew.

GHOST. Oh, no, that would never do.

PHYLLIS. Wouldn't it? He's awfully fond of me.

GHOST. But you want to keep him so.

PHYLLIS. Oh yes.

GHOST. Well, there's nothing like letting him know he might lose you.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, do you really think so?

GHOST. My dear child, I was here eighty years.

PHYLLIS. I—I suppose you're right.

GHOST. Of course I'm right, child.

PHYLLIS. But, Lucy, you led such a—such a sainted life.

[*Ghost titters. A knock is heard on the door.*]

PHYLLIS. Oh! Er—don't come in.

[*A housemaid's head, in curl-papers, looks in. She is in nightdress and carries a candle. She comes in no further and Phyllis is able to conceal the Ghost.*]

ANNIE. Mr. Traverne wanted to know what you rang for, Miss.

PHYLLIS. Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.

ANNIE. Nothing, Miss?

PHYLLIS. No, no. Just nothing.

ANNIE. Then there's nothing you want, Miss?

PHYLLIS. No, thank you, Annie. Nothing at all. Really.

ANNIE. All right, Miss. I'll tell Mr. Traverne.

[*Exit.*]

PHYLLIS. Oh! Lucy, do you mind if I smoke?

GHOST (*laughs*). No, child.

PHYLLIS. Why are you laughing, Lucy?

GHOST. I smoked once.

PHYLLIS. You, Lucy? (*Looks at portrait.*) Did you really?

GHOST. Yes. There was a bit of a fuss. But I *smoked*.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy. Is there anything you didn't do?

[*She lights up.*]

GHOST. Well, of course, eighty years isn't long.

PHYLLIS. No, I suppose it isn't, really.

GHOST. But whatever one can do in eighty years, I did.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, you must know a lot more than Father. (*Ghost laughs.*) Lucy, do tell me more about what I ought to do.

GHOST. Have a good time, child.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, and what else?

GHOST. That's all.

PHYLLIS. Then, Lucy, perhaps you think I ought to marry Dick. He's got tons of money.

GHOST. Not a bit of it. You'd have a wretched time.

PHYLLIS. Why, Lucy?

GHOST. Because you want Peter.

PHYLLIS. Yes, I do.

GHOST. Well, you get him then.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, how nice you are.

GHOST. I'm sure Peter's a nice young man.

PHYLLIS. Oh, yes, Lucy, he is.

GHOST. But I'm sure he hasn't such nice whiskers as ... oh, well, never mind now.

PHYLLIS. Well, they don't wear whiskers now, Lucy; nothing to speak of.

GHOST. Not wear whiskers! Oh, well, I've no doubt they're nice boys even if they do look frights.

PHYLLIS. Peter doesn't look a fright, Lucy. Well, not quite, you know.

GHOST. Well, never mind, child, I must go now.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy.

GHOST. Yes, I must go back over there.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, you've hardly told me anything.

GHOST. I must go back. I can't stay here much longer.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, why not?

GHOST. It's all so tiny. It's like fastening your eyes on a line of a page of a little book in a room, when summer's outside.
But you won't understand that yet.

PHYLLIS. I think I can see what you mean, Lucy. But do stay a little longer. Just tell me what I should do for a little while.

GHOST. Spend Dick's money for him, if he wants you to.

PHYLLIS. Yes, Lucy?

GHOST. Have a good time. And then one day give Peter a good time.

PHYLLIS. Yes, Lucy, and then?

GHOST. Why then, one day you come to us.

PHYLLIS. But Lucy, what if Peter won't have me?

[Ghost gets dimmer.]

GHOST. *(sleepily)*. What do you say, child?

PHYLLIS. Lucy, Lucy, don't go yet. What if Peter won't have me?

GHOST. Who's Peter?

PHYLLIS. Lucy, come back. Tell me what to do about Peter.

[Ghost brightens again.]

GHOST. Oh, Peter, yes. Tell him from me....

PHYLLIS. From you, Lucy?

GHOST. Yes, tell him from me, that if he isn't good to you, I'll haunt him.

PHYLLIS. Oh, Lucy, that is good of you.

GHOST. Good-bye now, child.

[She begins to fade. A heavy knock is heard.]

PHYLLIS. That's Papa.

*[Ghost brightens again and titters. Enter Traverne.
The Ghost folds demure hands and turns up
pious eyes as in portrait.]*

HER FATHER. What was all that noise you were making with the....

GHOST. Obey your dear father in all things and order your ways reverently.

PHYLLIS. Yes, great-grandmamma.

GHOST. You understand, my dear?

PHYLLIS. Yes, Lucy.

[Ghost vanishes.]

HER FATHER *(recovering from wainscot, against which he had reeled)*. I trust, I trust you have had a lesson.

[Phyllis bursts into laughter. Her Father runs for the smelling-salts, takes out the stopper, and comes towards her with it.]

**THE HOPELESS PASSION OF
MR. BUNYON**

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MR. MUFFEN.
MR. BUNYON.
MISS SLEGGIT.

**THE HOPELESS PASSION OF
MR. BUNYON**

SCENE: The interior of a shop. Mr. Bunyon seated at a table gazing out at the ridiculous wax figure in the shop-window. A brass curtain-rail is between him and the figure, but the curtains are both drawn back.

Enter the shopkeeper, Mr. Muffen.

MUFFEN. Mr. Bunyon. (*Bunyon continues his gazing.*) Mr. Bunyon. (*Bunyon still gazing.*) Mr. Bunyon.

BUNYON. Oh, I beg your pardon, sir.

MUFFEN. Oh, it's nothing of any importance.

BUNYON. But I'm listening, sir.

MUFFEN. Oh, please go on gazing out of the window.

BUNYON (*hastily closes window curtains*). But what was it, sir?

MUFFEN. Nothing of any importance.

BUNYON. Yes, sir?

MUFFEN. Only you're sacked.

BUNYON. Sacked, sir? Oh no, sir.

MUFFEN. Oh yes, sir.

BUNYON. But why, sir?

MUFFEN. Always gazing out of the window.

BUNYON (*who has been sitting neglecting an account book*). I'll finish this off in a moment, sir. I really will.

MUFFEN. 'Tisn't only that. Always drawing the curtains back the way you do, people can see inside.

BUNYON. But there's, there's not any harm in that. Is there?

MUFFEN. We do business in here. That's not a thing to be looked at.

BUNYON. I won't never do it any more, sir.

MUFFEN. You won't!

BUNYON. I won't really, sir.

MUFFEN. No, you're sacked.

BUNYON. I came for a very low wage. I took a very low wage indeed.

MUFFEN. I don't care.

BUNYON. You'll never get anyone to do the work for so little, sir.

MUFFEN. Daresay not, but I'm tired of it. Always looking out of the window.

BUNYON. Well, I'll tell you what, sir.

MUFFEN. You're sacked. See?

BUNYON. I'll tell you what, sir. I'll work with you for nothing.

MUFFEN. What do you mean?

BUNYON. For no wages at all.

MUFFEN. For nothing at all?

BUNYON. Yes, nothing, if you'll only keep me.

MUFFEN. Well, I'll think over it.

BUNYON. You'll do it, sir?

MUFFEN. I didn't say I'd do it. I must know what you're getting at.

BUNYON. What I'm getting at, sir?

MUFFEN. Yes, what you're getting at.

BUNYON. I'm getting at nothing.

MUFFEN. You aren't going to stop here and work for no wages.

BUNYON. Yes I am, sir.

MUFFEN. Why?

BUNYON. Oh, I don't know, sir.

MUFFEN. Then I don't accept your terms.

BUNYON. You don't accept them, sir?

MUFFEN. No.

BUNYON. Not when I do all your work for nothing?

MUFFEN. No. What's your game?

BUNYON. Oh, I—I couldn't tell you, sir.

MUFFEN. Then you're sacked.

BUNYON. Even if I work for nothing?

MUFFEN. Yes. I want to know why.

BUNYON. But, but what does it matter to you, sir?

MUFFEN. Never you mind. Well, if you must know; in business knowing the other man's game, its worth, well, it's everything, there's nothing more *in* business besides that. If you don't tell me, you go.

BUNYON. Oh, do keep me, sir. Keep me for nothing.

MUFFEN. No.

BUNYON. Well, it's like this, sir.

MUFFEN. Well?

BUNYON. It's like this, sir. Oh, it will seem very silly to you. But, well you know, sir, every man has his fancy. They go about and they meet them in one place or another. But I'm always here in the shop so much and hardly ever go out, so that one way and another I haven't had other people's opportunities, not so that I could make comparisons, and....

MUFFEN. Well?

BUNYON. Well, sir, the fact is, you see, the one in the window is the only one I really know, and——

MUFFEN. Well?

BUNYON. And so she's come to mean as much to me, much more really, as all the other young things that go about outside seem to be to other young men.

MUFFEN. You mean? What? That!

BUNYON. She is to me, sir.

MUFFEN. That?

BUNYON. She is to me, sir.

MUFFEN. But. What on earth can you find in a wax figure?

BUNYON. Oh, a lot, sir.

MUFFEN. But what?

BUNYON. Oh, I'm afraid you'd laugh at me, sir. But I see such a lot in her, sir.

MUFFEN. It.

BUNYON. I beg your pardon, sir. I meant It.

MUFFEN. Well, what can you see in it. That's what I want to know.

BUNYON. Well, sir. There's her colour, you know. Its colour, I should say. I do admire colour. And she's more colour, *it* I should say, than any of them. Her cheeks, *its* cheeks, I should say. And then the lips. They paint their lips a bit, sir, all of them, but they're none of them like hers. *Its*, sir, I mean to say. None of them.

MUFFEN. Well, I thought it was pretty natural. I don't know what fault you have to find with its lips.

BUNYON. Fault, sir. Oh no, sir. I shouldn't presume to find a fault. There's no fault to be found, sir. They're lovely, those lips. There's none like them, none in all London.

MUFFEN. There you go again. I tell you they're quite natural. They're just the colour that's worn now.

BUNYON. Oh yes, sir. I know, sir. They're unique.

MUFFEN. Yes, that's what I've been telling you. But that's not enough to make you like this about her, *it*, I mean. I want to know what you see in it.

BUNYON. That wonderful colour, sir. (*Muffen opens his mouth. Bunyon continues hastily.*) But that's not all. No, sir, there's something far more than that. Oh, I could hardly tell you, sir.

MUFFEN. Go on. I want to know what on earth you think you can see in a wax figure, if you're speaking the truth.

BUNYON. The truth, sir. Oh, it's the truth. It's no fancy, sir, no young dream; it's the romance of my life, sir.

MUFFEN. Well, I want to know what on earth you think you can see in it.

BUNYON. Well, it's like this, sir: I haven't had much opportunities of seeing the real smart ones, working in here as I do, and all that: and then when you brought her here, *it* I should say, I recognized all at once what it was about her that's so perfectly wonderful, sir. Why, you must see it yourself.

MUFFEN. I? I'm blowed if I do. I'm asking you.

BUNYON. Fashionableness, sir. That's what's the matter with her, *it* I should say. Fashionableness. She's got more fashionableness than anyone in the world. There isn't a queen so fashionable. Look at that sort of affected way she stands, and that simper, sir, if I may call it so; all pure fashionableness. I've never seen anyone like her.

MUFFEN. It.

BUNYON. It, I should say, sir.

MUFFEN. But look here, you know, it's all silly nonsense. I grant you it's fashionable, rather uniquely perhaps, and of course highly artistic.

BUNYON. Oh very, sir.

MUFFEN. But you can't marry it. The idea's absurd.

BUNYON. I know I can't. Oh, I know I can't, sir. But not absurd, sir, on that account. I've done a bit of reading, sir: I have really. And, if you'll believe it, sir, there've been scores of cases of what's called hopeless passions. There have really, sir. Men have loved queens, sir; they really have. Just ordinary men, sir. And did they think anything could come of it? Well, I ask you. But they didn't give up their love, sir, not on that account.

MUFFEN. I don't say they did. I don't say they did. But what's all that got to do with it.

BUNYON. Well, sir, I won't give up, not when they wouldn't.

MUFFEN. You must be mad.

BUNYON. Ah yes, sir. But how sweet it is, that madness. You'd never know.

MUFFEN. If you loved anything that could love you in return, why, that I admit would be another matter. But this——

BUNYON. Ah, that's where all the romance is, sir; that she can never love me in return. It's all the sweeter for that, sir. It's like the queens in those books. They admitted they were mad, the men I was telling you of; but they wouldn't give it up, they weren't crazy enough for that. It's the light of one's life, sir.

MUFFEN. Well, you'll have to get out of this. I can't have a madman here.

BUNYON. No, sir! No! I'll work for you for nothing. You said if I told you why I wanted to stay you'd keep me. You said you would, sir: you said it. And I've told you the story of my life. Let me stay and look at her, sir, working for nothing. That fashionableness! Those brilliant lips!

MUFFEN. No, I can't keep a crazy fellow like you about the place. Why, it wouldn't be safe.

BUNYON. Oh, it would, sir.

MUFFEN. Not half it wouldn't. I've got the respectability of the firm to consider. Out you get.

BUNYON. Then let me see her once before I go.

MUFFEN. To say good-bye, do you mean?

BUNYON. To say farewell.

MUFFEN. You can do that from outside.

BUNYON. No, thousands see her from there. I have loved her at this angle.

MUFFEN. Oh, all right then, so long as you hop it.

[He jerks curtain aside.]

BUNYON. Star of my dream.

THE WAX FIGURE. Ow reely, Mr. Bunyon.

MUFFEN. Miss Sleggit, I told you never to move. How often have I told you?

THE WAX FIGURE. Ow. I'm sorry, Mr. Muffen.

MUFFEN. Don't I pay you to stand in that window?

THE WAX FIGURE. Ow, yes, Mr. Muffen.

BUNYON. Alive!

THE WAX FIGURE. Ow, quite, Mr. Bunyon.

MUFFEN. Well, you're both sacked.

BUNYON. Shall we come along?

THE WAX FIGURE. Yes, let's, Mr. Bunyon.

MUFFEN. And I'll tell you one thing, Miss Sleggit. Yes, both of you. I'm going to buy a real one this time, whatever it costs.

THE WAX FIGURE. Good-bye, Mr. Muffen.

[Strikes the absurd attitude of her work in the window.]

BUNYON (*almost kneeling, stretching out adoring arms*). Ah, what adorable fashionableness.

THE JEST OF HAHALABA

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SIR ARTHUR STRANGWAYS.

SNAGGS, *his butler*.

AN ALCHEMIST.

HAHALABA, *the Spirit of Laughter*.

THE JEST OF HAHALABA

SCENE: The Smoking Room, Sir Arthur Strangways' house in London.

Time: The last moments of 1928. Bells are ringing in the New Year. Sir Arthur is in an armchair.

Enter Snaggs, his butler.

SIR ARTHUR. A happy New Year to you, Snaggs.

SNAGGS. A happy New Year to you, Sir Arthur, and many of them.

SIR ARTHUR. Ah, thank you, Snaggs.

SNAGGS. There's a man to see you, Sir Arthur, who....

SIR ARTHUR. Oh yes, yes.

SNAGGS. . . . who says he wants to see you, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, show him up, please.

SNAGGS. He's, if I may say so, Sir Arthur, a very strange person.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, I know. Show him up.

SNAGGS. Very strange indeed.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, I was expecting him.

SNAGGS. And it's very late, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, never mind.

SNAGGS. As you wish, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, show him up, please.

SNAGGS. As you wish.

[Exit, leaving Sir Arthur sitting thoughtful.]

*Re-enter with the Alchemist in a dull maroon cloak, elderly,
bearded, and dressed like nobody later than Teniers.*

SNAGGS. The man to see you, Sir Arthur.

[Snaggs lingers.]

SIR ARTHUR. Thank you, Snaggs. Thank you.

SNAGGS (*reluctantly dismissed*). Thank you, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. You have the stuff? (*Alchemist shows an old snuff-box and taps it, nodding his head.*) And the words?

ALCHEMIST (*in a sort of whisper*). Yes.

[Sir Arthur takes the snuff-box.]

SIR ARTHUR (*extending hand*). Give me the words.

ALCHEMIST. They may not be written.

Re-enter Snaggs.

SNAGGS. I will wait up, Sir Arthur, in case you should ring. If you should ring I would come at once.

SIR ARTHUR. Thank you, Snaggs. Thank you. (*Exit Snaggs. Sir Arthur goes to door and locks it.*) You will tell me the words?

ALCHEMIST. There's laws in England against the likes of me.

SIR ARTHUR. Laws?

ALCHEMIST. Any time since the days of Edward the Confessor.

SIR ARTHUR. But you will tell me the words.

ALCHEMIST. Aye. But we must proceed softly.

SIR ARTHUR. All is quiet. We may start now.

ALCHEMIST. You have another door.

SIR ARTHUR. Oh, no one ever comes that way.

ALCHEMIST. It is better locked.

SIR ARTHUR. Perhaps it is. (*He locks it.*) Now.

ALCHEMIST. The powder then is placed upon the floor in a ring, wide enough to contain two feet, and two and a half times as wide should you dare to call up Eblis.

SIR ARTHUR. No, no. I shall not call up Eblis.

ALCHEMIST. That is something, Master. That is something. That is one thing to be thankful for in all this bad business. I couldn't have borne it, Master. His mouth alone: I couldn't have borne to look at it.

SIR ARTHUR. No, no. I do not wish to see Eblis.

ALCHEMIST. I couldn't have borne to see him.

SIR ARTHUR. You shan't see him. Tell me the words.

ALCHEMIST. Well, Master, you put the powder in a ring, wide enough to hold common feet, scarce larger than ours. And then, Master, if you must, you light it. If you must, Master, if you must. And it smoulders and the smoke goes away to the left and the right, and goes round the ring. And just as the two smokes meet, just then you say (*he whispers*). And you name the spirit that you would call up. And he must come. And he must grant one wish, the first demand that you make of him. And I wish I had never told you, and I wish I had never come.

SIR ARTHUR. Never mind that now. Let's get on with the business.

ALCHEMIST. Well, Master; then, there be many spirits. There's the spirit of Death, the spirit of Drought, the spirit of Fever.

SIR ARTHUR (*now preparing the ring*). No, no. I'll have some jolly spirit.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, call up the spirit of Death, the spirit of Fever, even the spirit of Terror, but not the spirit of Laughter.

SIR ARTHUR. The spirit of Laughter? Why not? I like the sound of him. We'll have the spirit of Laughter.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, not that spirit.

SIR ARTHUR. Why not?

ALCHEMIST. Why, Master, because all these spirits, they are all at enmity with man, and are over full of ingenuity: it always was so. And they sit for ages planning how to prevail against man. For ages, Master. You would hardly believe it. And when they have formed a plan they won't rest until they have tried it; you would not credit their malice. And

most of all are they like this, most of all when they have been compelled to grant a wish. They are like it then most of all.

SIR ARTHUR. Then we won't have the spirit of Death.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, the spirit of Laughter is the worst of all but one. His contrivances are beyond the wit of all the lesser spirits. You are not making the circle too wide, Master?

SIR ARTHUR. No, no. We'll only have the spirit of Laughter.

ALCHEMIST. Be warned, Master, and have none of him.

SIR ARTHUR. Come, tell me his name.

ALCHEMIST. Be warned, Master.

SIR ARTHUR. I've paid you well for this.

ALCHEMIST. Yes, Master, but be warned.

SIR ARTHUR. His name, then.

ALCHEMIST. His name, (oh, Master, call never upon this spirit,) his name is Hāhālābā.

SIR ARTHUR. So that's his name. The spell again.

[Sir Arthur now holds a matchbox. Alchemist whispers in his ear. Sir Arthur ignites the powder and mutters the spell, ending with the name Hahalaba. Hahalaba steps through a curtain and stands in the ring, an athletic spirit, with small cloak slung over dark nude breast.]

HAHALABA. What is your will of me?

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, nothing that he can turn to his advantage.

SIR ARTHUR. It shall be nothing. I have thought of all.

ALCHEMIST. Only a trifle, Master. Something too small for his contrivances, or....

SIR ARTHUR. It is only a trifle.

HAHALABA. What is your will of me?

SIR ARTHUR. Only a trifle. I wish to see a file of the *Times*.

HAHALABA. For what year?

SIR ARTHUR. For the year 1929.

ALCHEMIST. 1929!

HAHALABA (*pulling cloth from table and revealing a file of one year of the Times*). It is there.

SIR ARTHUR. Ha!

HAHALABA. Within an hour of midnight it will vanish.

SIR ARTHUR. Oh. We have not long then.

HAHALABA. It has far to go, and must be there by dawn.

SIR ARTHUR. Where?

HAHALABA. In the deeps of time.

[Exit.

SIR ARTHUR. Where has he gone?

ALCHEMIST. He has gone back.

SIR ARTHUR. To work, then.

ALCHEMIST (*as Sir Arthur gets half sheets and pencil and turns to the heap*). Oh, Master, I'm glad you asked for a little thing. It's a mercy, Master, a mercy.

SIR ARTHUR. A *little* thing, indeed!

ALCHEMIST. Aye, Master. For had you asked a great thing of such as him, he would have triumphed surely.

SIR ARTHUR. A little thing!

ALCHEMIST. Aye, Master, I know the ways of them.

SIR ARTHUR. A little thing, be damned. I shall make millions on this. Millions.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, beware Hahalaba. Beware the spirit of Laughter.

SIR ARTHUR. I tell you I shall make millions. This alone for instance, this alone: December 31st, 1929: I see he's got December on the top the way the newspaper people keep it, they put the fresh paper on top of the one of the day before all the year round, and keep the lot like *this*: this number alone is worth all the money I've got, or you either. Patangas 104. You go down to the City and buy Patangas. But you don't understand.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I go to no city guided by Hahalaba.

SIR ARTHUR. He's got nothing to do with it. He's gone. But I read* in the *Times* that Patangas are 104. (*Jots down a word on half sheet, saying aloud "Patangas".*) I shall soon know if this file is genuine by waiting a few days and checking these. (*He lays his hand on the edges at bottom of heap.*)

* Present tense.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, it is genuine. He may not lie. But he is frivolous and cunning. I know Hahalaba.

SIR ARTHUR. If this is genuine (*reads a line or two*), as it evidently is, I shall make millions. There we are again, there we are again. Pocohontas 37. Who'd have thought it? I haven't paid you enough, old fellow. I haven't paid you enough.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I ask no more. I ask no more that comes from Hahalaba.

SIR ARTHUR. Nonsense. It comes out of the *Times*. And I'm the only man that's got a copy. November 20th this is, 1929. And the only one in the world. If you'd care for half a million you can have it. It will be nothing to me.

ALCHEMIST. No, Master. No.

SIR ARTHUR. Or a million for that matter.

ALCHEMIST. No, Master, I have no uses for it.

SIR ARTHUR. As you like. (*Lower down the file.*) And here again. Tangerines at 80. Hullo. Here's old Perrot dead. He should have kept himself fit: he was no older than me. If he'd have played golf. Well, well. October 27th.—Fancy that. (*Takes another paper.*) Hullo, hullo. (*Makes brief note.*) I'll play hell with the Stock Exchange.

ALCHEMIST. Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Ha, ha! Lord! Bolivian United. Well, I never.

[*Makes note.*]

ALCHEMIST. Master.

SIR ARTHUR. *And* Ecuador Guaranteed. Millions!

ALCHEMIST. Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Well.

ALCHEMIST. I have given you your desire, and you have paid me well. Our account is settled. May I go hence?

SIR ARTHUR. Go hence? Yes, if you like.

ALCHEMIST. Thank you, Master; for of all spirits of evil I fear most the spirit of Laughter.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, you told me that. No one's keeping you. But wait a moment. Wait a moment. There's one thing I'll give you that you'll understand how to use. Wait a moment.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I go not to that city.

SIR ARTHUR. No, it's not the City. Wait a moment. Ah, here we have it. The Derby. Aurelian won. You back Aurelian for the Derby. (*Writes on a half sheet and gives it to Alchemist.*) There. Aurelian for the Derby.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I make no wager, lest in my hour of gain Hahalaba mock me. (*He puts paper down on a table.*) And Master——

SIR ARTHUR. Well, never mind now. There's only a few more minutes, and I can't waste them talking. They're worth a million a minute.

ALCHEMIST. As you will, Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Well, good-bye then, and thank you very much. (*Alchemist tries the door, it is locked.*) Ah, the door. Give me a moment and I'll let you out. (*He takes key from pocket, but continues reading papers and making notes.*) Another of them. Tromkins now. Why can't they keep themselves fit? Mexican Airways Limited! Well, well. (*Another note. Hastily turns over papers, making brief notes, till he nears the bottom of the heap.*) Yes, yes. Well, that'll be enough. There's millions in it. I'll let you out now.

[*Walks to the door with key in one hand, the last paper in the other.*]

ALCHEMIST. Thank you, Master, thank you.

SIR ARTHUR. And your friend Hahalaba will find it hard to laugh over this deal, for I'm the richest man in England now.

ALCHEMIST. Not yet, Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Well, I soon will be.

[*Unlocks door.*]

ALCHEMIST. And Master. Read no more of these hidden things. It is surely enough. Tempt Hahalaba no further.

SIR ARTHUR. I won't. I've read all I want. I've enough knowledge to put against the brains of all the financiers in London.

ALCHEMIST. Then read no further, Master. Put it down.

SIR ARTHUR. That? Do you know what that is? That is to-day's paper. January 1st, 1929, the last of the heap. I shall read to-day's paper before I go to bed. We're in 1929 now. Well, good-bye, and a happy New Year.

ALCHEMIST. Farewell, Master.

[*Exit. Sir Arthur returns to his chair and settles down to the British habit of reading the day's Times.*]

SIR ARTHUR. Nothing of interest. Dull, I suppose, after the other. Hullo! What's this? What? What? But it can't be! But this is to-day's paper! But I'm alive! Good God. (*With breath coming short he goes to decanter of brandy, pours out, mixes, and drinks. He stands a little steadier, hand to heart now and then.*) Bit of a shock that. Read that kind of thing. Silly Jugginses. Who can have been fool enough to invent a yarn like that? It's to-day's paper and I'm quite well. (*But the improvement was only momentary and he rings for Snaggs, then he goes panting to the sofa and lies down.*) Bit of a ... shock, that.

Enter Snaggs. Goes to Sir Arthur on sofa. All the copies of the Times have vanished.

SNAGGS. Hullo. What's this has happened? (*Goes to table and sees Sir Arthur's notes on half sheets.*) Patangas? Mexican Airways? Nothing to account for it there. (*Almost absently he crumples them and throws them in the fire; then turns to the business in hand.*) Now what should I do? (*A glance towards the sofa. Then he goes to the telephone.*) Ah, would you please give me the *Times*. I don't know the number. Yes, the *Times* Office, please. Is that the *Times*? Oh, could I speak to the Editor?... Oh, well, perhaps he'd do. But it's important.... Tell him something sudden.... Oh, yes. I'm butler to Sir Arthur Strangways. Mr. Snaggs is *my* name.... Well, I thought you'd like to know Sir Arthur has just died.... Sudden like.... Yes. (*Leaving the 'phone, he passes the other table on which Alchemist had put down his slip. He picks it up and reads.*) Aurelian for the Derby. *He's* no good.

CURTAIN

BY LORD DUNSANY

THE GODS OF PEGANA
TIME AND THE GODS
THE SWORD OF WELLERAN
A DREAMER'S TALES
THE BOOK OF WONDER
FIVE PLAYS
FIFTY-ONE TALES
TALES OF WONDER
PLAYS OF GODS AND MEN

TALES OF WAR
UNHAPPY FAR-OFF THINGS
TALES OF THREE HEMISPHERES
THE CHRONICLES OF RODRIGUEZ
IF
PLAYS OF NEAR AND FAR
THE KING OF ELFLAND'S DAUGHTER
ALEXANDER AND THREE SMALL PLAYS
THE CHARWOMAN'S SHADOW
THE BLESSING OF PAN

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

The pre-title has been deleted and the list of other works by the author moved to the end.

Hyphenation is inconsistent, with both chessboard and chess-board present.

Two minor spelling errors have been corrected and can be identified in the body of the text by a grey dotted underline:

(...) draw any influence ou of the shadows (...)

(...) draw any influence **out** of the shadows (...)

If no influence of her's can reach you

If no influence of **hers** can reach you

[The end of *Seven Modern Comedies* by Lord Dunsany]