

Reckoning

A Play in Three Acts

Gordon Daviot
[Elizabeth Mackintosh]
1954

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Reckoning

Gordon Daviot (Elizabeth Mackintosh)

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CHARACTERS

NELL
AN URCHIN
MR HIBBERT
MR BIDDLE
MISS GEM
MAN WITH A MUFFLER
YOUTH WITH A MAUVE TIE
A YOUTH WITH PAPERS
FLUFF WILLIAMS
MR MOSTYN
MAN WITH A RAINCOAT
TED HANNA
MAN IN PLUS-FOURS
BURT

ACT I

The Scene is the interior of a small tobacconist-newsagent-sweetseller's shop in a side-street somewhere in the Camden Town district. In the back wall is the door (left as one looks at the stage) and the window. The window is long and rather low, with panes a foot square, and it exhibits the usual mixed stock of tobacco, books, and sweets. The counter runs from the middle of the window parallel to the right wall, and is covered with newspapers and magazines. It ends on the down-side in a glass case containing boxes of cigars and pipes. Against the right wall are (next the window) shelves of glass bottles containing sweets, then a desk, open and much used, then shelves bearing packets of cigarettes. In the remaining space is the door into the living-room. The whole of the left wall is occupied by shelves of books in cheap editions. Down stage is a table on which is spread a collection of fashion papers, books on knitting, and similar publications.

It is an evening in early Spring. The shop lights are lit, and the pale-blue atmosphere outside is gradually growing deeper. Now and then someone passes in the street, and the faint rumble of traffic in the main street comes and goes. The shop at the moment is empty except for NELL, and she is present only in body. She is leaning on her forearms over the counter, absorbed in the book which she is reading. NELL is to a large extent the reason why Biddle's is such a prosperous concern. Customers like to exchange greetings with her, not because she is pretty (which she certainly is), nor because she is arch with them (which she certainly isn't), but because she has a quiet air of goodfellowship for all the world, and a ready wit. She takes a kind of mocking interest in life and finds it good.

A small URCHIN enters and advances to the counter.

NELL (*without looking up*) Yes?

URCHIN A tuppenny bottle of ink and fourpence change.

NELL (*looking up, her face softening*) Hullo, Bill. Got it all off pat, haven't you! No use trying to do you, eh?

URCHIN (*coldly*) No. And me nime ain't Bill.

NELL Oh? What is it, then?

URCHIN Algernon Leonard Parker.

NELL All that? (*Smiles at him as she gives him the ink*) Do you like sweets, Algernon Leonard?

URCHIN And how!

NELL (*taking a bottle of bull's-eyes from the shelf and scrabbling in it with her hand to detach one or two from the mass*) What did you say?

URCHIN I said, And how!

NELL Tut tut, Algernon. You bin going too often to the movies, haven't you? You're one of the degenerate youth of England, you are. Given over wholly to transatlantic whatsisnames. What you should say is 'Yes, thank you'. See?

[*Enter a MIDDLE-AGED MAN of the small-shopkeeping class; unnoticed by NELL, who is leaning over the counter to the boy. He pauses and watches the scene with an indulgent amusement.*]

NELL (*putting down three bull's-eyes on the counter*) Now, what d'you say?

URCHIN (*grabbing the sweets*) Thank you.

NELL It doesn't sound so enthusiastic as these low expressions, I admit. But you be a little English gentleman and don't show your feelings, see? (*Seeing the man*) Good evening, Mr Hibbert.

HIBBERT Good evening, Miss Nell. What's all this? Robbing your employer? I'm surprised at you!

NELL Oh, what's a couple of bull's-eyes?

HIBBERT At the present rate of exchange about a penny, I should say. And I thought I saw three, eh? That's a penny halfpenny you owe the till.

NELL You're a ready reckoner, aren't you? To say nothing of the quickness of your eye. You should be going round after one of those pea-and-nut shows. You'd put them out of business. (*To the boy, who is still waiting*) What is it, Bill?

URCHIN Fourpence change.

NELL (*giving him the change*) You're all right, Bill. You don't need any movies to educate you.

URCHIN Me nime ain't Bill.

[*Exit URCHIN.*]

HIBBERT (*putting his money on the counter*) The usual, please. You know, your good heart will get you into trouble one of these days, Miss Nell.

NELL (*weighing tobacco in the scales to her right*) That's a polite way of telling me that I'm soft, I suppose. Well, you're wrong. A couple of sweets to a kid is one thing, but you try robbing the till, and you'll see how soft I am!

HIBBERT What would you do if I did?

NELL I'd stun you with the scales and yell for the police.

HIBBERT (*laughing at the picture*) Not you!

NELL Indeed I would. What d'you think I'd do? Sit in a corner and dither?

HIBBERT No. You'd say 'Are you hard up? Poor man. There's two pound notes at the back that you've missed.'

[*Enter MR BIDDLE from the living-room. He is a little, elderly man, clean-shaven, with an aquiline face and white hair. He has a dry manner, a little pedantic, but kindly withal. More interested in -ologies and -isms than in Navy Cut.*]

BIDDLE Good evening, Mr Hibbert.

HIBBERT Good evening, Mr Biddle. A fine evening.

BIDDLE Yes, very fine, very fine.

NELL Mr Hibbert's just been telling me that I'm too good to live.

BIDDLE As long as she isn't too good to be assistant to a shabby old man, I shan't complain, Mr Hibbert.

HIBBERT A valuable assistant, yes. She threatened to bash me over the head with the scales because I talked of robbing the till.

BIDDLE (*not listening*) I sometimes think if she had really been my niece she couldn't stick to the business better.

HIBBERT If she was really——? Why, I always thought—I mean——

NELL Thought he was really my uncle?

HIBBERT Yes.

NELL Well, now, isn't that flattering for you, uncle! No, Mr Biddle took me in here when I was thirteen, and he didn't know any more about me than that I had never tasted a beefsteak. Eh, uncle?

HIBBERT Well, well! Fancy that. She does credit to your good heart, Mr Biddle. Or perhaps you've bin lucky. Not everyone's so well rewarded for bein'——

NELL Soft.

HIBBERT Philanthropic, I *was* going to say.

BIDDLE Yes, I've been recompensed beyond my desserts, Yes, beyond my desserts. The evening papers haven't come yet, I see.

NELL No, they'll be in any minute.

HIBBERT Arsenal got it in the neck this afternoon, I hear.

BIDDLE Yes? Did they? Yes.

HIBBERT You don't take much interest in football, Mr Biddle.

BIDDLE No. No, I'm afraid I don't. Cricket interests me so much, you see, that I haven't got over thinking about it before the next season begins. It would spoil it to take an interest in anything so—so different as football.

HIBBERT Like eating between meals.

BIDDLE Well—something like that. Cricket, my dear sir, is an art.

HIBBERT And what is football, may I ask?

BIDDLE Er—artfulness, I think.

HIBBERT You're a bit hard on football, aren't you, Mr Biddle? You come with me some Saturday afternoon and see Spurs play the Arsenal. See if you don't change your mind. There isn't anything in cricket—and, mind you, I'm speaking with knowledge, because I like cricket myself, I go quite a lot in the summer—there isn't anything in cricket that'll come up to a real good attack by a first-rate forward line against a good lot of backs. Mr Biddle, it's just suffocating. And it's *always* happening. That's the beauty of it. You don't have to wait for an hour because someone's got their bat in front of a wicket and won't take it away till he's taken away on a stretcher.

BIDDLE He may be taken away on a stretcher, but he isn't ordered off.

HIBBERT Oh, but that doesn't happen very often. The papers talk far too much about it when it happens, and then people shake their heads and say football's rotten. You come with me and see a real good side play another real good side. There isn't anything like it, Mr Biddle. There really isn't. Take last week, just before half-time. (*Demonstrating with boxes of cigarettes*) There was Jones and Evans and MacLean, see? As this might be the goal. That's the three Everton forwards, see? Outside right and inside left and centre. And here's the two backs and the goalkeeper, see? Jones had the ball here, see, well inside the circle. This back coming to tackle, and this one marking MacLean. Everyone thought Jones'd shoot before the back could tackle, but not him! 'E tipped the ball to Evans. That stopped the back for a tick, see? Evans tips it back, and Jones shoots 'fore the back's got off his heels, and catches the goalkeeper napping. Beautiful! Perhaps that wasn't a very

clear idea of it for you, and of course it doesn't sound very much, just said like that, but believe me, Mr Biddle, it just stopped your breath to see. You come with me some Saturday afternoon and see if you don't enjoy it. What d'you say, now?

[Enter MISS GEM. *She is lean and middle-aged, and her clothes are a pathetic travesty of last year's fashions. But her gloves are carefully mended, and she prides herself on the fact that she has a ladylike appearance unusual in her occupation, which is a 'cleaner'.*

[*Without taking notice of the others she comes down to the side table, props herself on her elbows, and begins to turn over the pages of a fashion book.*]

BIDDLE Do I make my will first?

HIBBERT No, and you'll not have to wait in a queue for tea, either. You can come home and have it at your own fireside with Miss Nell.

BIDDLE That certainly is an inducement, Mr Hibbert. I'll have to think it over.

HIBBERT (*taking his departure*) I'll hold you to it. I like cricket myself. None better. But to live for cricket and nothing else—well, it's a bit——

NELL Soft.

HIBBERT (*grinning*) Good night, Miss Nell.

[*Exit HIBBERT, touching his hat.*]

NELL Good evening, Miss Gem.

MISS G. (*without looking up*) Good evening, dearie.

[Mr BIDDLE *goes to the desk, climbs on to the stool, adjusts his glasses, and becomes absorbed in calculation.*]

NELL What's the good news?

MISS G. Ain't none. (*Turns pages*)

NELL No?

MISS G. Not since last Christmas. What d'you think of that new line to the 'ips? Unbecoming, I say. Difficult, if you know what I mean. All right on the right woman, but 'oo's the right woman? One in a thousand! (*Goes on turning pages*)

NELL There's an awfully nice frock in that red book at the end that you might like to see.

MISS G. (*suspiciously*) Has it panels?

NELL No, it's gored, with a bit of a spring to it.

MISS G. (*hunting in the red book*) I never was one for panels.

[A MAN WITH A MUFFLER *appears in the doorway.*]

MAN 'Standard'?

NELL Sorry. Not in yet.

[*Exit MAN.*]

MR BIDDLE These papers are very late, aren't they?

NELL Don't worry, uncle. They'll be in any minute. (*To MISS GEM*) Found it?

MISS G. Yes. I expect this is it. Bit on the youthful side for me, I'm afraid.

NELL Oh, I don't know. You're not just falling to pieces yet, you know.

MISS G. No? Well, it's a blooming miracle if I'm not. Life's a business, ain't it?

NELL Things been going wrong?

MISS G. You might say so! There was me goin' to the Honourable Mary's wedding this morning, and then they 'ad to send a boy round from the office to say they wanted an extra job of work done. 'Avin' a Board meetin' unexpected like. As if the kind of men who sit on Boards ever notice what a floor's like! Why, they can't see over themselves to begin with. It's a long time since some of them saw a floor near enough to criticise. So there's me puttin' on my old togs and toddlin' off round there instead of goin' to the wedding. I'd got a new 'at for it, too. And I know a fine bit on the railin's, just at the corner, where you can see lovely and it don't matter 'ow they shove they can't move yer. I was there at the Sills-Aberdon wedding, and it was as good as 'avin' an invite. 'Member that one? It was the one where they carried candles. Electric lights, they were, of course, but made to look like candles. Very chick and original.

NELL They're getting divorced now, that couple, aren't they?

MISS G. Yes. (*Judicially*) His fault, I should think. I thought he looked a bit prim, at the time.

[A YOUTH WITH A MAUVE TIE *appears in the doorway.*]

YOUTH 'News'?

NELL Sorry. Not come yet. We're just waiting for them.

YOUTH Know what won the Spring Cup?

NELL Dark Marine.

[*The YOUTH clicks his tongue with a backward jerk of his head, and having thus expressed his views on the result and life in general in unmistakable fashion, disappears.*]

BIDDLE What can be keeping those papers?

NELL Don't worry, uncle. They'll come. As sure as Judgement.

MISS G. She's a sweet girl, that Honourable Mary, ain't she?

NELL Yes, awfully pretty. And I like the way she dresses. Tailormades.

MISS G. You know the way she does her hair? With that little lick down on the forehead? That's what makes her so fetching. Seen he gave her a chinchilla coat? I thought chinchilla was out, but it seems to be coming in again.

[*A motor stops in the street outside; a BOY staggers in with a pile of papers and slaps them on the counter.*]

BIDDLE What is the matter tonight? We thought you were never coming. We'll be losing our customers if you can't deliver up to time.

BOY (*amiably*) Aw, put a sock in it, gov. You'll be ruining your own trade if you keep on wanting the papers earlier and earlier. Morning and evening papers'll meet, and then where'll you be?

[*Exit BOY, and the motor drives away. NELL opens the top paper idly.*]

MISS G. (*without coming away from the far more fascinating fashion papers*) Anything new?

NELL No. (*Reading*) Beaverbrook begins Crusade.

MISS G. That ain't new. D'you think a coat looks better three-quarters or full length?

NELL (*reading*) Don't know. 'Pends.

MISS G. Ain't there anything about the wedding?

NELL I expect there must be. (*Finds it*) Yes, here it is. 'Mm. 'The bride looked lovely in pink.'

MISS G. Well, I may be old-fashioned, but I always think nothing beats white for a bride. Virginal, you know. Not but what white would be a kind of a joke on some of them Society girls. It's a long time since some of them was virgins. But that Honourable Mary, she's a nice girl. She'd have looked all right in white. I think it was a pity to 'ave the pink. What did the bridesmaids 'ave?

NELL Sunset yellow, it says.

MISS G. Yellow! With a pink bride! They must 'ave looked like a vanilla-and-strawberry ice. That's 'er mother's taste, bet you anything. She was a Tarranter, you know. Nobodies. Tarranter's Dress Fasteners. She wouldn't dare wear them now. Only hooks and eyes'd stand the strain.

NELL The crowd broke the railings, it says.

MISS G. (*indignant*) What! Not *my* bit of railin', I hope!

NELL It says 'at the south corner'.

MISS G. (*mollified*) Oh, no. I know where that is. Down where the bobby stands. I expect 'e leaned against it 'imself. (*Flipping the pages disconsolately*) I don't see one 'ere that I just fancy.

NELL (*putting down the paper*) Is it a coat you're thinking of, Miss Gem?

MISS G. That's what. Something that'll do for everything. Meetings, and weddings, and christenings, and going to Brighton on Bank 'Oliday, and everyday, and goin' to the office in—eventual, that is.

NELL (*sympathetically*) It's difficult when it's got to do for a lot of things, isn't it?

MISS G. Not arf! If I ever wanted anything in my life it was to 'ave separate clothes for everything. But I never 'ad even the prospect of it. And I never will. Not this side of shopliftin'. That's life, that is! Well, I'll leave it for today, any'ow. There isn't anything I'm just in love with, as you might say. Nothing else in the papers? Well, I'll be off. You know that girl that lives two doors down from me? Well, she's got one of the coats with the new line. You 'ave a look at it next time you meet 'er, and tell me what you think of it. A bit long in the waist, I think, but see what you think. Good night, Mr Biddle. Toodle-oo, dearie.

[*Exit* MISS G. NELL *folds up the paper neatly, and in the silence* MR BIDDLE *peers over his glasses after* MISS GEM *in a puzzled way.*]

BIDDLE Is the good lady *continually* engaged in the construction of garments?

NELL Her? Why she practically never makes anything.

BIDDLE But she is continually here consulting the fashion papers.

NELL Yes, but that's just a kind of amusement for her, poor old dear. She likes to make-believe she's going to have something new. You wouldn't grudge her that.

BIDDLE Oh, I don't. Certainly not. (*He considers* NELL *kindly over his glasses*) I never see you hanging over that table, Nell. And yet you're young, and I suppose ought to be interested in clothes.

NELL But I am interested. Don't say I look as if I wasn't!

BIDDLE I never notice how you look, except that you look washed. It just occurred to me that it might be more natural if it was you that looked at fashions, and not Miss—Miss——

NELL Gem.

BIDDLE —Miss Gem, because you're young.

NELL But that's just why I don't. There are so many other things for me, see? But there isn't for Miss Gem, poor old rag-and-bones.

[Enter a MAN. He is young and slight, quietly dressed and quiet of manner, clean-shaven, with a fair, small-boned, well-modelled face. He smiles at NELL and lifts his hat.]

NELL (*welcoming*) 'Evening, Mr Williams.

WILLIAMS 'Evening, Miss Biddle. 'Evening, Mr Biddle. Going to be a fine weekend.

BIDDLE (*rather frigidly*) Yes. (*He turns back to his desk and continues to work.* NELL hands WILLIAMS a paper)

WILLIAMS And a packet of State Express, please. How are you tonight, Miss Nell?

NELL All right, thanks.

WILLIAMS I thought this was your day off.

NELL It is usually, but I had it yesterday so that I could go to the special *matinée* they had at the Palladium.

WILLIAMS Oh, yes. Variety, wasn't it? Was it good?

NELL Yes, the Queen was there, you know.

WILLIAMS (*smiling*) Well, that's a guarantee.

NELL Yes. I saw you, opposite Liberty's, but you were too much up in the clouds to look at me, and I was late, so I couldn't stay to point myself out.

WILLIAMS Oh, I'm sorry. I was late for my show, too. I suppose that's why I was star-gazing.

NELL Better than looking round for birds. Where were you bound for? A movie?

WILLIAMS No, I was going to Queen's Hall.

NELL Oh, yes. Ragatzy.

WILLIAMS (*surprised*) You fond of music, then?

NELL I like a fiddle playing alone, but I'm not very keen on orchestras and choirs. It's just a mess of sound, to my mind. But Uncle and I sometimes go to Queen's Hall. Did you like Ragatzy?

WILLIAMS Well—I nearly burned my fiddle when I went home.

NELL Oh, I forgot you played the fiddle. Do you play by ear?

WILLIAMS Yes. I never had any lessons.

NELL I like a fiddle, but my favourite instrument's a drum. Don't laugh, will you? It makes me all curled up and tight inside so that I want to get up to the top of a hill and yell. I expect that sounds mad to you.

WILLIAMS No, it doesn't. I don't feel like that, but I think I know what you mean. Do you put up with the orchestras for the sake of the drums, then?

NELL Yes. I often wish they would all die all of a sudden, and leave the drums playing alone.

WILLIAMS Bloodthirsty, aren't you! That's what a drum does. I'd never have said you had savage tastes, Miss Nell. You look like—well, I nearly said 'carpet slippers of an evening', but perhaps you wouldn't think that complimentary. Well, I must be getting on. What was the Variety like? You had Betel Nut, I see.

NELL Yes, but she did the same old things. Not that I minded very much, but it made me sorry for her.

WILLIAMS Yes. They say she lost a lot of money in that Macaulay swindle. Tough luck having to go on if she doesn't want to, isn't it? Well——(*To MR BIDDLE, who has come down from his stool and is evidently searching for something*) This a quiet evening for you, Mr Biddle. All your clients out of town for the week-end, 'm?

BIDDLE (*not smiling*) Yes, we are not very busy tonight.

[WILLIAMS *says good night and goes.*]

NELL (*after a pause*) You weren't very chatty to Mr Williams.

BIDDLE (*back at the desk, and not greatly interested*) No.

NELL Don't you like him?

BIDDLE I don't know him. I don't like his associates, that's all.

NELL How d'you mean?

BIDDLE Well, he's a friend of Ted Hanna's.

NELL (*surprised*) And what's wrong with Ted Hanna?

BIDDLE Hanna is a crook, and I expect Williams is too.

NELL Hanna! The Ted Hanna that comes in here? How, a crook?

BIDDLE Just the ordinary sort. I think it was burglary he was in for.

NELL In for? Where?

BIDDLE In prison, of course.

NELL (*after a short pause*) Has Ted Hanna been in prison?

BIDDLE Yes. At least once to my knowledge. Probably oftener. That is why he honours this district with his presence. I think Brixton was his previous home. Or it may have been Camberwell. That is the fashion with these people, I believe. They change their place of residence after each sojourn—er—abroad. That is one comfort. We shall soon be rid of them. That kind never stay out of prison for long at a time. Then when they come out they'll go somewhere else.

NELL How do you know all that? How do you know that it's true?

BIDDLE My dear child, it's common knowledge in the district. You have only to ask Sergeant Withers next time he is in. He'll tell you all about them. It is most unfortunately true! And we used to be such a respectable district.

NELL But they're not a bit like that! Why, they're just as respectable-looking as you or me.

BIDDLE You don't expect the modern craftsman—I think he calls himself—to go about in a muffler, do you? You read so many books, my dear, that I thought your knowledge of the world would have been more extensive.

NELL (*roughly*) My knowledge of the world's all right. I could pass an exam in it before I was ten. And not book-learning, either. But I never met anyone like—like these before. Are you sure it's true, uncle?

BIDDLE (*arrested by the urgency in her voice*) Why do you want it not to be true?

NELL (*controlling herself*) Me? I don't, not particularly. (*Leading him instinctively away from the thing that matters*) But it seems a pity that a nice quiet boy like Williams shouldn't be all right. Fluff, they call him, you know. I think it's because of his hair—so light and fair. And he's always so pleasant and nice to talk to. You couldn't imagine him doing anything really bad—like beating a woman, or something like that. That's what I call bad. It seems an awful pity that he should be off the straight any other way.

BIDDLE Oh, yes, he's pleasant enough. But pleasantness is cheap, my dear. You wouldn't expect him to go about growling with a knife between his teeth by day just because he breaks into houses at night.

NELL But Williams gave old Rogers the money to pay for his room one week when he was broke. Rogers told me himself.

BIDDLE My dear, I never accused him of meanness.

NELL Well, I think meanness is a lot worse than burglary. So there!

BIDDLE Yes? Well, that may be true. An excessive love for one's own property may be as degrading as an excessive love for the property of others. But that doesn't make burglary a desirable proceeding, or burglars admirable people. I hope you won't become too interested in Mr Williams, my dear. (*He smiles a little at her*)

NELL In Fluff Williams? Keep your hair on. Not me!

BIDDLE I *have* heard that women find the modern criminal extremely—extremely——Have you seen my red-ink pen anywhere?

NELL (*coming over to look for it*) It's probably in the little drawer. There you are.

BIDDLE Oh, thank you. Is this account of Markinson's correct, do you know?

NELL Yes, I think so. They haven't put in the new lot of shilling copies we got, but perhaps that's going on to the next quarter.

[*Enter MR MOSTYN. He is a plump little man with a pointed beard, a curious mixture of a naval petty officer and an East London Jew. He has a buoyant, teasing manner, which covers a shrewd understanding.*]

MOSTYN Now then, now then! Poring over figures and print when life is short and the Sun keeps good beer! Shocking! Shocking! Miss Nell, you shouldn't allow it. On a Saturday evening, too, when the awful abyss of the Sabbath is already yawning. Shocking! Shocking!

NELL Go along with you, Mr Mostyn. You're a riotous-liver, you are. And that's what you'll have tomorrow morning, too, and serve you right.

MOSTYN Ah, Miss Nell, if I could only have your good wit as well as your uncle's company at the Sun what happy evenings they would be.

NELL If Uncle weren't unspoilable you'd have made him as flighty as yourself long ago.

MOSTYN Flighty! Delicious word. God keep us all flighty in this most weighty of worlds. Eh, Mr Biddle? My dear Miss Nell, you'll find if you don't bounce the world up and down lightly that it falls on your chest with an enormous thud. And

stays there! (*Leaning forward and stabbing the counter with his forefinger at each word*) And stays there!

NELL (*considering him*) You wouldn't think that watching people popping their spare pants all day long would give a person that nice frivolous feeling.

MOSTYN Ah, that's just what does it. That's just why!

NELL Oh, well. I suppose it's human nature to feel superior about other people's worries.

MOSTYN (*horrified*) Miss Nell! You misunderstand me completely! Completely!

NELL Well, what? You don't want me to believe that you feel all nice and noble because you lend someone sixpence on a waistcoat worth five bob, do you?

MOSTYN No, my dear young lady, you misunderstand me completely. I don't imagine myself a Providence at all. I only wish I could be. It is because I am continually dealing with people who haven't a sixpence that I must look at the bright side of things. If I didn't I should be in an asylum. Nothing bears looking at too closely in this world, my dear Miss Nell. That way madness lies, eh, Mr Biddle? Look at things lightly, and look away again. Take things lightly, and go lightly on. That's the only way to be happy in this mistake of a world. Bounce it! Chuck it up in the air and laugh at it. Otherwise you'll have it on your chest. Eh, Mr Biddle?

BIDDLE I think your method is more like cowardice than philosophy.

MOSTYN Ah, Mr Biddle, it's only fools and saints that can see things straight in this world and be philosophical about it. Now you put away the ledgers and let's resume our argument about protection.

BIDDLE (*without conviction*) I'm really very busy tonight, you know. I had thought I would stay in tonight and finish these accounts.

NELL Oh, go along, Uncle. You haven't been out of the shop today. And since Mr Mostyn can't do you any harm it's quite on the cards that you may reform him a little. You'll be putting your evening to good use then, see?

BIDDLE Sophistry! Sophistry!

NELL I don't know what that is, but you go and get your hat, and I'll look after things for a while. Go along now. I'm a very good manager, though it's me that's saying it.

BIDDLE I know it, my dear, I know it. But I really should stay and straighten out these——

[*Exit BIDDLE through the living-room door.*]

MOSTYN And how is life with you, Miss Nell?

NELL I don't know, but judging by the feel it's on my chest.

MOSTYN Bounce it, my dear, bounce it!

NELL (*curiously*) What do you do when it doesn't bounce?

MOSTYN (*after a pause of consideration*) I go down to the Sun, I think.

NELL That seems to be easy. Not much good for me, though.

MOSTYN No. Well, if I were you I should go in for something. Take up something. That is to say, if the feeling is chronic, so to speak. Take up theosophy, or cross-country running, or something like that. Something new and interesting.

NELL I don't think running through puddles in drawers and a vest would make life look any nicer.

MOSTYN Well, get a crush on a movie-star. I know you have heaps of boy-friends, so I don't suggest that. But girls nowadays seem to get more emotion out of watching a chap kiss someone else.

NELL *That's* a fool's game, isn't it? Besides, you don't imagine that makes them happy, do you? Bless you! You know Miller the baker's youngest girl—the one with the green beret? Well, she drank a bottle of disinfectant when she discovered that John Gilbert had got married.

MOSTYN No! Dear goodness me! What for? What happened? Was she very ill?

NELL No, it was cough-mixture in the bottle. But she didn't know that. She did her damndest. I expect she was quite glad afterwards about the cough-mixture, though.

MOSTYN Goodness gracious me! I must take back what I said about a movie crush. It doesn't seem to provide a bright outlook on life.

NELL No, it's only for people who haven't enough worries of their own.

MOSTYN What's worrying you, Miss Nell? Too many admirers? I should choose one and settle down, if I were you.

NELL (*moving abruptly*) That's a nice prescription for a happy life!

MOSTYN Do I hear a trace of cynicism in that remark? Surely not!

[*Enter MR BIDDLE with his hat and coat on.*]

BIDDLE Well, my dear, I suppose you'll be all right without me for just an hour?

NELL Don't you worry. I'll be all right for even one of *your* hours.

BIDDLE If you have time you might just look at the Brinkley account. I've very

nearly finished it, but you might just see what they mean about six quires of Postal Bond credited, will you? That is, if you aren't too worried by customers.

NELL All right, I'll look at it. It's those faded ones we refused, I expect. Have a good time. And remember, only one pint!

MOSTYN Oh, come, Miss Nell! Beer makes the heart young.

NELL Yes? And the arteries old.

MOSTYN (*shaking his head*) I never get the better of you. I wish you were coming to the Sun with us.

[*He lifts his hat as he goes out with MR BIDDLE.*

[NELL stands quite still staring after them, her thoughts free to race about without the need for dissembling. She puts out her hand and straightens the papers, lets her hand fall and stands gazing unseeingly. Then the spell breaks. She seems to be possessed of restlessness and suspense. She moves round the shop without purpose, going here and there to stare at things for a moment in a distracted fashion. While she is down by the table of fashion books a MAN WITH A RAINCOAT comes in.]

MAN 'Standard', please.

NELL (*jerking her head at the counter and not turning round*) Take it.

MAN (*taking the paper and looking at her curiously*) What's biting happy Nell tonight? Backed the wrong horse?

NELL You know quite well I don't bet.

MAN Oh, there's more horses than those with four legs. You just looked like you'd backed a loser. Anything wrong?

NELL Yes. Indigestion.

MAN (*going out*) Well, that's almost worse than backing the fourth, blamed if it isn't. 'Night!

[NELL moves back behind the counter. She tries to hum a little tune, out of bravado, but gives it up because her voice breaks in spite of herself. She turns with an abrupt gesture away from the counter. A moment later she hears footsteps in the quiet street outside. She turns back to the shop and stands waiting.

[A MAN swings in at the doorway, and comes to a halt halfway to the counter, smiling at her. He is of middle height, dark, of a slightly

stocky build, and his most notable features are his abnormally watchful, bright dark eyes. He wears his clothes with an air, and carries himself well.]

HANNA Hullo. All alone?

NELL (*staring at him*) Yes.

HANNA Where's the old boy? Down at the Sun?

NELL Yes.

HANNA (*coming over to her and putting his hat on the counter*) Chatty little person, aren't you?

[She does not answer, but continues to stare at him.]

HANNA What's the matter? Have I got a smut anywhere? (*Runs his hand over his excellently shaven chin*) Or are you choosing the spot where you'll kiss me?

NELL (*almost to herself*) I shan't do that any more. Funny, isn't it?

HANNA (*amused*) Who says so?

NELL I do.

HANNA Ah, but there's two sides to the kissing game. And I'm the other one.

[He leans over and putting an arm round her neck draws her swiftly to him and kisses her. She is roused in a moment from her quietness to a blind fury. She pushes him away from her with a blow across the face, which staggers HANNA, who has been unprepared for any such demonstration.]

HANNA (*gripping his face and staring*) What the hell? Nell! What's the matter?

NELL I said I'm through with kissing. And what I say goes, see?

HANNA But what on earth's the matter with you? Flying out at a chap without any warning like that. You seem to have changed your mind very sudden. You liked my kisses last time I saw you, all right. What's eating you now?

NELL (*quietly*) Why didn't you tell me you had been in prison?

[HANNA looks slightly taken aback, but recovers himself.]

HANNA (*drawling slightly*) Oh, that's it, is it?

NELL Why didn't you tell me?

HANNA Apropos of what, I'd like to know! Just as a nice little tit-bit to keep the conversation going, eh? 'I was in Rome last month, and the weather was simply

unbearable.' 'I was in Wandsworth last year, and the food was absolutely vile. Quite a scandal!' Don't be silly. Anyway, there's no secret about it.

NELL So it's true.

HANNA (*hugging his face*) Strewth, you don't seem to've been in any doubt about it.

NELL (*considering*) No. Just at first I didn't believe it, but the minute I got a bit used to it I knew it was true.

HANNA Who's been doing the Dear Teacher business? Sergeant Withers?

NELL No, Uncle told me.

HANNA Oh! Keep away from that bad young man, or be cut off with a shilling!

NELL No, nothing like that. Uncle thought I had enough sense to know what you were. I wasn't brought up in a glass case. It didn't occur to him that I'd fall for a crook.

HANNA Well, you fell for me when you didn't know I was one. What's the difference? I'm still me, aren't I?

NELL Yes. But I'm still me. You changed into a crook, but I'm not changed into anything. I'm still me. That's why it's all off. That's why I'm biting myself that it was ever on. When I think of all I thought of you! And all you are is a jail-bird!

HANNA (*roused*) Stop that! You don't have to be insulting, do you, just because you happen to have made a mistake?

NELL (*quiet again*) Why is it insulting to call a jail-bird a jail-bird? What do you call yourself? A hero?

HANNA No, but I'm no worse than most of the men who go to church every Sunday. And a darn sight better than lots of them. I get found out now and again. That's all.

NELL Do you think that saying you're no worse than other rotters makes you any better?

HANNA Oh, see here, Nell. Why all the righteous indignation? Everyone's a rotter some ways. And breaking into houses is as decent a way of being rotten as I know.

NELL You don't seem to have any shame about you.

HANNA (*genuinely surprised*) Why should I be ashamed? We've just got different ideas about things, that's all, see? If I was an M.P. you'd probably throw your arms round my neck. Wouldn't you? Well, I wouldn't shake hands with an M.P. You see!

NELL You're just talking. And all the talking in the world won't make what's wrong into what's right. (*She pauses and leans forward, pleading*) I say, Ted, won't you give it up and go straight?

HANNA (*watching her earnest face in amusement*) You're lovely when you look all stained-glass like that. (*With a change in his voice, and a slight movement forward*) Only your mouth isn't stained-glass, is it?

NELL (*disappointed*) Ted!

HANNA You don't know what you're talking about, kid. No one'd give me a job to begin with. And even if they did I don't see myself being the perfect little nine-till-six hero five days a week for the princely sum of three quid. Forget it!

NELL But Ted, where will it all end? What are you heading for? Are you going on doing this all your life? You can't be! What is there in it?

HANNA What is there in it? Money! And fun! What more do you want?

NELL But there's more. There's prison.

HANNA Only when you're unlucky. Better get it in the neck after a good time than a poor one.

NELL Oh, give it up, Ted! It's a mug's game.

HANNA That's what the people who aren't in it say. I think it's a mug's game to work for another man from nine till six for three pound a week, see?

NELL (*pleading again*) Wouldn't *anything* make you give it up?

HANNA D'you know, Nell, you've got Garbo beaten the length of the straight.

[NELL *draws back in disappointment just as a MAN IN PLUS-FOURS comes in.*]

MAN Navy cut, please. Nice evening.

NELL (*in her cheerful business voice*) Yes, lovely. Going to be a fine weekend?

MAN Looks as if it might be for once. Hardly seems possible, does it? Thank you. Good-night.

[*Exit MAN.*]

HANNA Go on trying to reform me. You don't know how fetching you look when you're on the repentance stunt. It's a mercy you never joined the Salvation Army, or the C.I.D.'d be out of work.

NELL Doesn't it matter a bit to you, Ted, that it's all over?

HANNA What is?

NELL You and me.

HANNA (*in mock dismay*) What! Am I getting the push, then?

NELL Yes. Unless you give up this sort of thing and go straight. I'm not having anything to do with a crook.

HANNA Well, Fluff Williams will be out of the running too. That's one comfort. Poor Fluff thinks quite a lot of you. It was a race which of us got to you first. If I'm disqualified so is Fluff. That's a comfort.

NELL (*marvelling*) It's difficult to believe that Fluff isn't on the level.

HANNA Mother's blue-eyed baby boy! Fluff's a long sight better at the business than I am. Fluff's a toff at breaking into houses.

NELL Listen, Ted. This is your last chance. Mine too. Change your mind and give it a trial. Just a trial. You don't know how easy it would be if you just gave it a trial.

HANNA I know too much about trials. You're wasting your sweet breath, lovely.

NELL All right then. You'd better go now. I was a fool, that's all. I'm not blaming you. It was my own fault. I wasn't brought up in a bandbox, and I should have known. Get out now, and don't come back.

HANNA (*taking his hat*) Meet me outside the Empire at nine, and let's go on arguing.

NELL I'll never meet you anywhere again.

HANNA No? Well, I'll be in tomorrow afternoon. You can think up some more arguments and try them out on me. I'm going to get you used to arguing with crooks.

NELL You won't come back here tomorrow afternoon, or ever again if you're wise. I'm going to tell Uncle whenever he comes in what a fool I've been. There's not going to be any going back in this business, Ted Hanna. This is the finish.

HANNA (*arrested*) Nell! (*Coming back*) Don't be silly, Nell. You're only feeling sore just now. Things'll look quite different in the morning. Don't do anything foolish that you'll be sorry for afterwards.

NELL No, I won't do that.

HANNA Nell. Nell, I say, don't be so hard on a chap. Who are you to sit on the bench and condemn?

NELL I'm not condemning you. I'm only deciding what's right for myself.

HANNA Yes, but you are! I can't do without you, Nell. You don't imagine I can do without you now, do you?

NELL If you cared for me like that you'd go straight.

HANNA But the two things aren't connected. You don't understand. I couldn't go straight if I tried. But I'm crazy about you, Nell. Just crazy. I'd do anything for you but that. Don't turn a chap down just because his ways aren't your ways. (*Puts a hand on hers, and she does not withdraw it*) Don't you think I can be just as good to you as a chap that adds two and two all day for a living? I'd be awfully good to you, Nell.

NELL (*withdrawing her hand with an effort*) It's no use, Ted, it's no use. You're only prolonging it.

HANNA Listen, kid. Just listen. You want me, and I want you, and what does anything else matter?

NELL Lots of other things matter. Even if I could love a crook, there's Uncle. It would break Uncle's heart if I had anything to do with you, and I wouldn't hurt him for the world.

HANNA He needn't know anything about it.

NELL How d'you mean—needn't know?

HANNA Let him think you've reformed me. He won't believe that anyone wouldn't be reformed by you, Nell. If I wasn't such a hopeless case you'd have actually done it. So why let him worry. Don't turn me down, Nell. Think of not seeing each other any more. Think of living close to each other every day and not seeing each other. You can't think of that and turn me down deliberately. Can you? Nell!

[He puts his hand on her arm, and seeing the sudden indecision in her eyes seizes his chance. He leans nearer and puts one hand against her cheek, running it up so that it brushes her hair from her ear. As she does not shrink from his touch, he leans forward and buries his face in the hair he has disarranged, bringing his other arm up to embrace her. Her face quivers like that of a child who has failed in something it has tried greatly to achieve.]

NELL (*in a despairing cry*) Oh, Ted, I love you! Isn't it awful? I love you!

CURTAIN

ACT II

The living-room of a small flat fifteen months later. In the left wall is the door to the tiny hall, and down from it the door to the kitchen, at the back a tall window, and in the right wall the fireplace and down from it the door to the bedroom. The furniture is of the kind that is delivered in a plain van, but there are evidences of NELL'S taste in the details. The shade of the electric lamp on the side table above the fireplace matches the curtains and the cover of the divan below the window. In the corner between the window and the hall door is a combined bookcase and desk, and between the hall door and the kitchen door a sideboard. There are three easy-chairs covered in synthetic leather. The table, which occupies the middle of the floor, is circular and gate-legged. At the moment a supper-party is in progress. NELL is sitting to the left with her back to the kitchen door, to her left is MR MOSTYN, to her right MR BIDDLE and FLUFF WILLIAMS, and opposite her HANNA. There is a burst of laughter as the curtain rises, and a thumping of hands on the table.

WILLIAMS (*as the laughter dies down*) That's a good one, Mr Mostyn.

MOSTYN You like that one? I made that one up myself. The jokes you make up yourself are much better than the ones you read.

HANNA Maybe, but you've got to have the gift. You'd have made a fortune on the halls, Mr Mostyn. Why didn't you try it?

MOSTYN For two reasons, my boy: (a) I don't like Sunday travelling, (b) I inherited the family business. They say a family business is a millstone, but I found it a cushion—and a very comfortable one at that. Your turn to tell a good one now, Mr Biddle.

BIDDLE I'm afraid that's not much in my line. (*His tone is very dry, and his remark is succeeded by a little silence. It is obvious that MR BIDDLE is not being the shining light of the party*)

WILLIAMS (*breaking into the awkwardness*) Do you know the one about——

[*The electric bell shrills. There is an instant silence, and on the part of WILLIAMS and HANNA a sudden immobility. After a swift glance at each other they avoid each other's eyes.*]

HANNA (*seeing NELL about to go*) Don't you go, Nell, I'll see who it is.

[*Exit HANNA.*]

MOSTYN Someone else for your party?

NELL More likely it's the wrong number. I'm not expecting anyone, but we're always having wrong numbers. Tell us the story, Fluff.

WILLIAMS I forget what it was now. Oh, yes, I know.

[*He tells his story, and as the laughter dies HANNA comes back leading in MISS GEM. MISS GEM is in her very best, and is bearing with great care a bunch of yellow tulips.*]

HANNA Look who's here. (*He casts a comical glance at FLUFF as the others turn to MISS GEM*)

MISS GEM Oh, dearie, I didn't know you 'ad a party, or I wouldn't 'ave butted in. I just came to wish you all the best and many happy returns.

NELL Oh, isn't that lovely of you! Fancy you remembering the day. And the flowers! Oh, Miss Gem, you shouldn't have. Such lovely flowers. (*On a sudden impulse she kisses MISS GEM, who looks considerably startled*) You know everyone here, don't you. Oh, no, perhaps you don't know Fluff. Mr Williams, Miss Gem. Take off your coat and sit down. You're just in time.

MISS GEM Oh, but I didn't come to eat. No, no. I just looked in to wish you all the best. I couldn't be at your wedding, but I can be at your anniversary, dearie.

HANNA (*taking off MISS GEM'S coat*) Come on, Miss Gem, sit down and taste Nell's ice-cream.

NELL She's going to have some of the turkey first. She can have the ice-cream afterwards. You just wait. It's still hot.

[*MISS GEM makes noises of protest, but NELL disappears into the kitchen with the flowers and MISS GEM is given a seat beside MR MOSTYN.*]

MR BIDDLE This is very nice of you, Miss Gem. Very nice indeed of you.

MISS GEM It's not a case of being nice at all, Mr Biddle. I miss that girl so you wouldn't believe it. She was always that pleasant and cheery it was a treat just to see 'er now and again. I'm not saying anything against that boy you got, but in comparison 'e gives me a pain in the neck. (*To HANNA*) I 'ope you realise your luck, young man.

HANNA You bet I do!

MISS GEM Well, you'd no business to run away with 'er and prevent 'er friends from bein' at 'er wedding. I bin at more weddings than I can count. Weddings of people I didn't care tuppence about. And then when it comes to someone I'm real fond of you do me out of it. To say nothing of Mr Biddle there. Inconsiderate, I call it!

HANNA Quite right, Miss Gem. It was a mistake. But we'll not do it again.

MISS GEM Oh, it's all very well to joke.

[Enter NELL, bearing in one hand the tulips in a bowl and in the other a generously supplied plate of turkey. She sets the plate in front of MISS GEM.]

MISS GEM What! Am I supposed to eat all this?

NELL Every bit of it.

MISS GEM (*looking round at the other plates*) Oh, but dearie, I couldn't, and everyone else at the pudding!

MOSTYN Don't mind us, Miss Gem, we're still busy.

HANNA And we'll leave lots of pudding for you, so don't be afraid.

MISS GEM Cheeky!

NELL Lovely flowers! It was lovely of you to think about it. Lovely! (*She is strangely rapturous over the incident. She puts the tulips on the table in place of the roses which have been there*)

MISS GEM Oh, but dearie, the roses!

NELL The roses are only Ted's. I can have them any day.

MOSTYN That's you put in your place, Hanna.

HANNA Would you like some bread, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM I would now you mention it.

[HANNA fetches bread from the sideboard and FLUFF pushes the salt over to her.]

MISS GEM Bread on the sideboard, and everything! You *are* getting toney.

NELL And how's everything with you, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM Oh, just the same as ever. Life's a business, ain't it! Biddle's used to be the bright spot in the street for me, and now it's as dull as all the rest. With all respect to Mr Biddle there.

BIDDLE Oh, I agree with you, Miss Gem. I most heartily agree with you.

MISS GEM It isn't that there's anything wrong with the shop, you know. It's just that there isn't anyone to chat about things to any more. That boy—well, 'e's just as much good as a slot-machine. My, this is fine turkey, ain't it?

MOSTYN You come along and have a chat with me now and again, Miss Gem, and we'll comfort each other.

MISS GEM I ain't got to that state yet, thanks all the same.

MOSTYN Don't be cruel. Do you think I don't think of anything but business? Nell there thinks I don't think enough of it.

MISS GEM Oh, no. But what would the neighbours say if they saw me in and out of yours? I don't look like one that would be looking for curios, do I! No, nobody'd give me the benefit of the doubt if you and me was to get thick, Mr Mostyn. They'd say inside a week that I 'adn't a stick left in the 'ouse, and they'd all be coming round with excuses to 'ave a peep in. Don't I know them! You're a fine cook, dearie. Ain't she, Mr Hanna?

HANNA (*smiling at NELL*) Not bad!

BIDDLE No one could cook a steak and onions like Nell.

NELL Listen to Uncle getting sentimental over his stomach! You know, these two call themselves philosophers, but if anyone cut off their beer for one night they'd be bally Bolsheviks.

MISS GEM Well, if I 'ad a little money I'd be a Bolshie myself.

NELL Money! What for?

MISS GEM To pay me fines and tip the police.

MOSTYN You'd find tipping the police about as dangerous as being a Bolshevik. The only time I tried to tip a bobby he threatened to charge me.

WILLIAMS I suppose it wouldn't be tactful to ask what you were tipping him for?

MOSTYN No, it wouldn't, young man. But he gave me to understand that if I ever tried it again I'd be for it. My five bob threatened the British Constitution, it seemed.

HANNA Oh, well, you saved your five bob.

MOSTYN Saved! Oh, dear, no. He had pocketed the five bob before he gave me the lecture.

NELL Well, I expect you got off lightly, if everything was known. Have some more greens, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM No, dearie, I'm doing fine. I never thought when I came out tonight I

was going to get a Ritz dinner like this. Matter of fact, I was sort of afraid to come in case you might be out. I thought to meself, young couples nowadays don't stay in and 'old 'ands on their anniversaries. I made sure you'd be out at a show, or something, and I nearly turned back once or twice. You could 'ave knocked me over with a feather when I found you were 'aving a family party. Girls don't think of their families nowadays. But it's just like you, dearie. I might 'ave known it, but I didn't give you the credit, more shame to me.

NELL Oh, well, you see, we went to a show last night, Ted and me. We went to The Purple Parasol, everyone said it was so good.

MISS GEM Good! Well, I should say so. I walked round there last night just to 'ave a look at the queues. All down the street and round the corner, they were. It's a wonder you got in. Could you see?

HANNA Oh, yes.

MISS GEM Well, there may be a seat in that pit that 'asn't got a pillar in front of it, but I've never been lucky enough to sit in it. 'Ow long did you queue for? Or perhaps you go to the upper circle, nowadays!

HANNA Yes, we booked this time.

MISS GEM Well, the upper circle ain't much better. I been there too. If you don't keep your toes tucked in you can't see the stage for them.

WILLIAMS That's right. Gives you the jim-jams.

NELL See anyone interesting in the queue, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM No, but I went round to see the nobs go in. Falling over themselves, they were. 'Ave you noticed that 'air's getting longer again? Most of them 'ad it curly at the back like the year before last. Guess 'oo went in, though.

NELL Don't know. Duchess of York?

MISS GEM No, not quite as good as that, but very nearly. Give it up? Lady Gollanfield! Ursula Boore, that was. And 'im with 'er!

NELL No! But guess who sat next us! Gladys Cooper!

MISS GEM (*gaping*) In the upper circle!

NELL (*after a dismayed pause*) No. You see, we were in the stalls for once.

MISS GEM Stalls!

HANNA Yes, it was a celebration, you know, Miss Gem. You only have a first anniversary once, so we thought we'd do things in style.

MISS GEM Well! You're *some* commercial traveller, to be able to take your wife

to stalls.

HANNA (*improvising*) It was either that or a day at Brighton, and I couldn't get away to Brighton, so we went to stalls instead.

MISS GEM Well, well! You are getting on in the world, dearies.

[*There is an awkward pause, and WILLIAMS breaks it by rising.*]

WILLIAMS I don't want to break up the happy party, but I'm afraid I've got to go, Mrs Hanna. I got a date.

NELL Oh, must you go, Fluff? It's early yet.

WILLIAMS Yes, I know. But I've got to go, worse luck. Don't anyone move. I'll slip out by myself, and nobody need be upset. I've enjoyed my evening awfully, Mrs Hanna. Don't you bother to come out with me. I'll find my own way. Good-night, everybody.

NELL Good-night, Fluff. It's been nice to see you. And thanks again for my lovely brooch.

WILLIAMS Oh, that's nothing.

HANNA I'll just see that he doesn't take the umbrellas.

[*He takes WILLIAMS by the elbow, and they go out together. There is a pause as the door shuts behind them.*]

BIDDLE I thought you didn't see Williams nowadays?

NELL Neither we do. But he's an old friend of Ted's, and he came to wish us luck just the way Miss Gem did. He didn't know anything about a party.

BIDDLE Then Hanna is still friendly with him?

NELL Yes, of course. You don't change your friends because you change your job, do you?

BIDDLE It depends on the friend and the job, doesn't it?

MISS GEM Oh, come on, Mr Biddle, don't you nag at 'er. She couldn't 'elp the man bein' 'ere if she didn't ask 'im, could she? Any more than she could 'elp me bein' 'ere. And 'e may be a bad lot, but I must say 'e looks as a nice young man as ever I see. Real polite, with 'is Mrs Hanna, and all.

NELL (*reflectively*) Yes, he always calls me that.

MISS GEM Shy, is 'e?

NELL (*abruptly*) A bit, perhaps. Have some more turkey now, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM Not me, dearie. Thank you all the same.

NELL Just a little bit?

MISS GEM No, dearie, that was a helping, that was.

NELL Come, just an atom.

MISS GEM Not an electron!

NELL Well, I'll get you some ice-cream. You won't mind if Uncle and Mr Mostyn smoke, will you?

MISS GEM Not me! I'm sorry, I'm sure. I didn't notice they weren't smoking. I bin kippered long ago, you see.

[Exit NELL.]

MOSTYN Do you smoke yourself, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM No. I thought of starting when it got fashionable, you know. But I decided it was silly to get to like something I'd never miss if I didn't 'ave it. Throwing money away. I'd rather 'ave a 'at I could wear than a lot of smoke to blow through my nose for no earthly reason.

MOSTYN I wish I could get back to the point of making my choice again!

BIDDLE Do you flatter yourself that you would be an abstainer?

MOSTYN I do—and don't dash me; please not dash me. I like to think I'd do everything differently if I had a second chance. And since no one can put it to the proof, no one can contradict me. That's very comforting.

BIDDLE How can it be comforting when you know it's nonsense?

MOSTYN But I don't know it's nonsense. At this moment I am quite sure that if I could choose again I'd go on the halls, make a fortune and a name for myself. Get married and have a family of four, two boys and two girls, and a wife who'd stay at home and bring them up to be a credit to me while I went round the world on farewell tours.

MISS GEM Sheek!

BIDDLE But you are necessarily presupposing that the knowledge——

[Enter HANNA.]

MISS GEM 'Ere, Mr Hanna, come and save me. They've started physiology or something. Make them stop.

HANNA Arguing, are they? Well, let them. It's their idea of enjoyment. I'd have thought you'd like a good argument yourself.

MISS GEM Oh, none better. But you don't know what them two are like when they're well away, or you wouldn't be encouraging them. They're so learned, it makes me sweat to listen to them.

MOSTYN I thought it was you who mentioned electrons a minute ago?

MISS GEM You don't call that learned, do you?

MOSTYN You can't know about electrons without reading, anyhow.

MISS GEM Read! Not me! I got a crystal set.

[Enter NELL.]

NELL Still going strong, is it? (*She sets down a plate of ice-cream before Miss Gem*)

MISS GEM I should say so. I just love to 'ear——Oh, dearie, what a lovely ice! —I just love to 'ear——Such a colour! Peach, is it? I just love to 'ear Big Ben. You know, I lived all my life in London, and I never 'eard Big Ben till I got a wireless. Nice friendly sound it's got.

HANNA But you don't pay ten shillings a year just to hear Big Ben?

MISS GEM Don't imagine it! But that's the thing I like best. It's always the same, and it doesn't try to be funny.

NELL Don't you like the Variety, then? I'd have thought you'd like that best. It's awfully good some nights.

MISS GEM Oh, I like Variety all right. It isn't that kind of funniness I mean. It's the gent 'oo tries to put a laugh into telling you 'ow tadpoles legs come out, or why the kettle gets black. It's coves like that that get my goat. Lettin' you down gentle. That's what they think they're doin'. And only making fools of themselves.

NELL But they're only trying to make dry subjects interesting.

MISS GEM Why 'ave dry subjects?

MOSTYN But some people like dry subjects.

MISS GEM Then they're not dry! Ah, ha! That's just what I was sayin'. If you *want* to find out why the kettle gets black you listens and 'ears about it, and you don't want to be patted on the back for listenin', either. You don't expect the gas man to be funny about the meter.

MR BIDDLE I think you are rather ungrateful, Miss Gem. There are so few jokes in the world that we should be grateful for anything that adds to the gaiety of nations.

MISS GEM I don't like bein' patted on the back. A good old laugh's a different

thing. I like Variety all right. But Big Ben's the pick of the bunch. Big Ben and the Specials.

NELL Specials?

MISS GEM Yes. Would Mr So-and-so go to such and such a place, and gale warnings, and people wanted by the police. That's life, that is. (*Becomes aware of a self-consciousness in the atmosphere*) Perhaps I shouldn't 'ave said that. There's two sides to everything, I suppose.

HANNA It's all right, Miss Gem. I'm not wanted by the police any more.

BIDDLE But you *are* still friendly with Fluff Williams.

HANNA Yes, of course.

BIDDLE It hardly seems consistent, does it?

HANNA Consistent? How?

BIDDLE Has Fluff Williams given up his old method of living?

HANNA I don't know anything about that. It isn't my business.

BIDDLE But if you are still friendly with him, you must know how he makes his living.

HANNA I don't, but even if I did what difference would it make?

BIDDLE I should expect it to make a lot of difference if you are determined to give up those ways yourself.

NELL I say, Uncle, don't let's——

HANNA Look here, Mr Biddle, Fluff's been my pal for six years, and we've had some pretty thin times and pretty hot times in those six years, and Fluff's never let me down once. You don't expect that I'm going to stop being chummy with him just because I've turned respectable?

MOSTYN That's understandable, Mr Biddle. Hanna couldn't very well ignore his friend, you know.

BIDDLE No, but he needn't see so much of him, when he knows how that friend makes his living.

HANNA I tell you I don't know anything about it. What Fluff does is none of my business.

BIDDLE But it should be your business. It should be your business to keep out of the company of practising crooks. You know perfectly well that Williams is wanted by the police, but they haven't enough evidence to arrest him.

HANNA Oh, indeed? What do they want him for?

BIDDLE For the Hill Street affair.

HANNA Oh? You seem to know a lot! A lot more than Fluff, I'll be bound.

BIDDLE I make it my business to follow his career, you see. Since Nell married you he's almost a connection, isn't he?

MOSTYN Oh, come, Mr Biddle, I think you're being too hard on Hanna.

BIDDLE I didn't expect to meet Fluff Williams when I came here tonight, and I am dismayed, to say the least of it.

MISS GEM Well, I don't see what you're making such a fuss about, Mr Biddle, really I don't. Mr Williams may rob a bank now and then, but he looks a nice young man for all that. So what's the odds! I should worry!

BIDDLE I come to supper, meet a notorious crook here on friendly terms, find that he has given my niece a valuable brooch, and you expect me to be pleased about it!

NELL Oh, Uncle! I told you, Fluff only came here because it was our anniversary. He never comes here.

BIDDLE But he brought you a diamond brooch, and you took it.

NELL What was I to do with it if I didn't? Refuse it in front of everybody? Who am I to hurt his feelings? You must feel awfully sure of yourself, Uncle, to be so superior. Fluff's a good sort, whatever else he is—Miss Gem's right about that—and I wouldn't hurt him for the world. It isn't like you to want to hurt people. Being good seems to be going to your head. Didn't you ever do anything you shouldn't have? Didn't you ever steal jam when you were a kid?

BIDDLE That seems to be beside the point. What shocks me is not Williams' crimes but his friendly standing here.

HANNA I thought I explained that. Fluff is my friend.

NELL And I've told you that he never comes here, though he's my friend too.

BIDDLE What I'm trying to do is to convince you that it is disgraceful—disgraceful and dangerous—to have him here as a friend.

HANNA And all you are doing is spoiling Nell's party.

BIDDLE (*recollecting himself*) Am I doing that? I'm sorry, Nell. I didn't mean to do that.

MISS GEM (*in a sudden burst*) Well, you are a one! What did you think you was doin'? Just making things amusing? You oughter be ashamed of yourself, so you ought, bullying your niece and you full of her turkey and ice-cream. I'm surprised at you.

BIDDLE Miss Gem!

MISS GEM Don't Miss Gem me, old high-and-mighty! You oughter be ashamed of yourself. You don't deserve to 'ave a niece like Nell to find fault with just because she's nice to a crook! An 'ard 'eart is a deal worse than——

MOSTYN (*laughing*) Wo, Miss Gem, wo! Don't be so hard on him. It's only his anxiety for Nell that makes him so fault-finding, you know. Even Mr Hanna'll acknowledge that it was a bit upsetting for the good uncle to come to see the heroine and find the villain in possession. Eh, Mr Hanna?

HANNA Oh, granted.

BIDDLE (*watching NELL'S face*) I'm sorry, Nell. Williams being here did upset me, but I shouldn't have let it worry me like that. I should have trusted you more, I suppose.

MISS GEM (*tartly*) Of course you should!

MOSTYN And now that you've worried everyone into fits with your fussing you're going to do penance by coming out to Streatham with me to see old Joe.

BIDDLE Oh, not tonight, Mr Mostyn, not tonight!

MOSTYN Yes, tonight, and that's letting you off easy. If I was dragging you all the way from Camden Town that would be what I call a penance. But it's only ten minutes from here. And it'll be a godsend to Joe. Not many penances are as much good to other people as this one'll be. (*To HANNA*) D'you know old Joe Miggs? Used to be a crack across a country.

HANNA That the man who won the Sefton with his saddle under the horse?

MOSTYN That's the man. They used to say the fences used to melt when he came to them. His language, I suppose. Then he met one that didn't melt, and he'd got so used to the melting that he met it about the bottom. He's been on his back ever since. His hobby now is Theosophy, though you mightn't credit it. It's Theosophy that we're going to talk tonight. Come along, Mr Biddle.

BIDDLE If I've been bullying you, my dear, my punishment is going to be very appropriate.

MOSTYN I suppose we can get a bus somewhere?

HANNA Yes, the bus route's the second turning on the left. I'll go down to the bus-stop with you, though, if you're really going. But won't you stop and have a game of cards or something?

BIDDLE I don't think it would be any good saying I would. I seem to be going to

talk Theosophy to old Joe. But anyhow, it will be late enough before we are back in Camden Town. Good-night, Miss Gem.

MISS GEM Good-night, Mr Biddle. No 'ard feelin', I 'ope?

BIDDLE No, no, certainly not. (*A little wistfully*) We are both a little mad on Nell, aren't we?

HANNA It's a way folk have. (*He goes out and comes back with overcoats*)

BIDDLE And you'll come over and see us a little offener, Nell? And then we shan't be so anxious about you.

NELL I'll be over very soon. Perhaps the beginning of the week.

[*She takes her uncle's coat from HANNA and helps him to put it on, while HANNA assists MOSTYN, and MISS GEM continues to lick her ice-cream slowly and luxuriously from the spoon.*]

NELL Then I'll have another look at that boy that gets Miss Gem's goat and see if he's as bad as she makes out. (*Kissing him*) Good-night, Uncle. Take care of yourself. Good-night, Mr Mostyn.

MOSTYN Good-night, my dear. You're a wonderful cook. Thank you for my good dinner.

NELL And thank you for my lovely bag.

MOSTYN Good-night, Miss Gem. Look in and have a chat sometime.

MISS GEM (*waving her spoon airily*) I may, Mr Mostyn, I may.

HANNA When I come back I'll take Miss Gem to the Tube.

NELL But Miss Gem's not going for ages yet.

HANNA Isn't she?

MISS GEM No, she's going to stay and help wash up.

HANNA And what about her beauty-sleep?

MISS GEM Go on with you!

HANNA You be ready when I come back! Washing up is my job.

MOSTYN Let the husband wash up if he wants to, Miss Gem. Washing-up husbands are scarce.

[*HANNA goes out with MOSTYN and BIDDLE.*]

MISS GEM Would you be very offended, dearie, if I licked my plate?

NELL Don't you go licking any plates! There's heaps more in the freezer.

MISS GEM Yes, but any more in me might 'ave an awful effect.

NELL (*taking her plate and going into the kitchen*) Risk it.

MISS GEM It's a long time since I was so greedy and took such a pride in it, so to speak.

NELL (*in the kitchen*) Well, you have my blessing.

MISS GEM I always knew you could cook, dearie, but where did you learn all these frills?

NELL (*coming back*) Oh, love, I suppose.

MISS GEM Don't you believe it. Love's an accident, but cooking's a gift. Oh, my, you do want me to be sick! Let me see your presents, dearie, won't you. Where's the brooch that Mr Williams gave you?

[NELL *takes a little box from the sideboard, opens it and shows it to* MISS GEM.]

MISS GEM Oh, my! My! Ain't that stunning. Simple, but awful good, eh? (*She twists it to look at the back and moves it so as to catch the light*) Between you and me, dearie, where d'you think 'e got it?

NELL He bought it, of course.

MISS GEM Think so?

NELL Certainly. You don't think he'd give me anything that he hadn't come by honestly?

MISS GEM (*after consideration*) Well, no. I shouldn't think so. 'E 'as a nice face. A lot nicer than your good 'usband's, if you'll excuse me sayin' so. But I suppose beauty's only skin-deep—a snare and a collusion. It's a pity, but there it is. And any'ow, that's the only consolation us plain people 'ave in this world. (*Indicating the brooch*) Ain't your 'usband jealous?

NELL (*a little sadly*) No. He knows only too well he hasn't any need to be.

MISS GEM Don't you spoil 'im, dearie. You start the way you mean to go on. I never 'ad a 'usband, but I 'ad a father. And 'e was all the education in men that a woman could want. A university course, that man was. And my mother spoiled 'im, of course. That was the days when a woman 'ad to be married to be anything. And she was so thankful to 'ave 'im that she treated 'im like God Almighty for the first year or two, and then spent the rest of 'er life complaining that 'e thought 'e was. Don't you spoil 'im, dearie. You bring 'im up the way 'e should go now while 'e's soft. (*Wistfully*) 'E's awfully keen on you, isn't 'e?

NELL Yes, I suppose he is.

MISS GEM I should say so! I bin watching 'im. You know, these last years I got so as I was glad to 'ave a room of me own to go back to, and the wireless, and not even a cat to bother me 'ead about. But tonight, seein' the way your 'usband looked at you, I began to wish again I 'adn't been born plain. It's not so bad to be plain when you're oldish, but it's awful to be born that way.

NELL Don't, Miss Gem. What do looks matter!

MISS GEM I know what you're goin' to say. 'It isn't the superficial beauty that matters, it's the beauty of the soul.' That's what all the women writers in the papers say in the articles they write between their beauty treatments! Believe me, the beauty of your soul don't matter a damn if you 'ave a face like a penny toy off a street barrow.

NELL But you haven't! And you have a nice figure. And a figure's awfully important.

MISS GEM (*slightly comforted*) Oh, my figure's not so bad. Perhaps it's just that I 'adn't IT. We didn't talk about IT when I was your age, and, as I said, I'd got to be glad that I 'adn't. But seeing you and your 'usband tonight—well, it made me wish I'd 'ad a bit of the movie stuff when I was young.

NELL You won't believe it, I know, Miss Gem, but you're the lucky one. To be free of all that. Just to be happy your own way and not be torn about inside with having to consider someone else. That's being really happy! I'd give anything to be like that. You don't know your luck. Being in love's not worth all the—all the—oh, I can't explain. There's no peace in it. It isn't being happy at all. Being happy is what I was when Uncle first took me to live with him and I was a kid of fifteen, and there wasn't anything in life but food and clothes and pictures twice a week and the shop and Uncle. That was being happy. Being in love's not being happy. They used to torture people by tying them to horses and making the horses pull different ways at the same time. That's what being in love's like.

MISS GEM You got it bad, dearie, 'aven't you?

NELL Yes—I've got it bad.

MISS GEM Well, don't you spoil 'im. It may be difficult not to when you're like that about 'im and 'e's like that about you, but you'll be layin' up trouble for yourself if you fetch and carry for 'im now. Let's see the rest of your presents before 'e comes back.

NELL (*going to the sideboard*) There aren't very many. Uncle gave me a

cheque.

MISS GEM A cheque, indeed! I 'ope it's as good as it sounds.

NELL Oh, yes, Uncle was always generous. Poor Uncle! I didn't treat him very well after all he did for me. *That's* what love does. Makes you a skunk. That's Mr Mostyn's bag. (*Hands a bag to MISS GEM, who opens it and examines it thoroughly inside and out*) He's a dear, Mr Mostyn.

MISS GEM That's a bit of all right, ain't it? That never came out of Mostyn's!

NELL (*smiling*) You don't think he would lift something just as he was coming away and bring it along, do you?

MISS GEM Oh, well, you never know. Some are mean, and some are forgetful, but there's not many aren't one or the other. What did your 'usband give you?

NELL He took me to the theatre yesterday, you know.

MISS GEM (*dryly*) Took 'imself, too, I suppose!

NELL (*smiling*) Don't begin thinking Ted's mean, because that would be almost funny. The difficulty with Ted is to make him save anything for tomorrow morning.

MISS GEM Yes, but what about tomorrow morning when 'e's got just twopence? Does 'e give you a fair 'alf?

NELL He gives me the whole of it, and says it's got to go as far as sixpence. It's difficult to believe you haven't been married, Miss Gem!

MISS GEM I told you, I 'ad a father. But didn't you get anything from your 'usband, really?

NELL Not yet. He's taking me up town tomorrow to choose what I want.

MISS GEM (*settling down to it*) And what are you goin' to 'ave?

NELL (*in sudden weariness*) I don't think I'm having anything.

MISS GEM Are you sickening for something, dearie?

NELL There isn't anything I want. Nothing like that, I mean.

MISS GEM What do you want, then, I'd like to know?

NELL I'd like to be a drop of dew and be sucked up by the sun till I was just vapour. Light, and cool, and not caring.

MISS GEM (*setting down her spoon and looking at her in dismay*) You got some queer ideas, dearie. You're not——Are you——Is there anything the matter with you?

[NELL, *her thoughts far away, stares at her uncomprehending.*]

MISS GEM Women do 'ave funny ideas, you know, sometimes. Nothing to worry about, but just——

NELL (*light breaking on her*) Are you imagining I'm having a baby? Don't worry yourself. There's nothing like that, thank God!

MISS GEM Why, thank God? It's a bit early as things go nowadays, but quite natural.

NELL Yes, a lot too natural. There'll never be anything like that.

MISS GEM Oh, dearie, don't say that. I just thought to meself as I was coming up the stairs that the next time might be to a christening. You've got to pass on these good looks; you know. And with a 'usband doing so well it would be a shame——

NELL Stop it. Stop it!

MISS GEM (*surprised and offended*) Oh, well, dearie, I beg your pardon, I'm sure. It isn't my business, I know, but I didn't mean any offence.

NELL Don't mind me, Miss Gem. Don't mind me. Uncle got me upset, about Fluff, and I lost my rag, that's all. Don't mind me. (*She brushes away a tear with the flat of her palm*)

MISS GEM (*rising and patting her shoulders*) There, there, dearie. I ain't offended. I know. It must make things a bit thick to 'ave a pack of men squabbling over you like a lot of hyenas. I'd sooner be a football referee. Thank God I ain't got no relations. There is something to be said for a room of your own and a crystal set. But don't take on about it. What does it matter as long as you and your 'usband's 'appy?

NELL Yes, but if someone's happy, someone else isn't. You can't be happy all at the same time, ever.

MISS GEM Life's a business, ain't it! But don't you spoil them eyes over it. Let's wash up before 'e comes back, shall we? (*Begins to collect the dishes on the table*) You get a tray.

NELL Oh, but you mustn't! You're a guest of honour, and it wouldn't do to——

MISS GEM Go on, dearie, buzz off and get the tray.

NELL No, but, Miss Gem, listen. I——

MISS GEM If you don't buzz off and get that tray I'll stay and do the floors, ten o'clock or no ten o'clock.

[*Exit NELL to the kitchen. MISS GEM continues to pile plates together, pouring the dregs of beer into one glass and drinking it at a gulp.*]

There are sounds of HANNA'S return. The brooch is still lying exposed on the table. She shuts the case, after a last admiring glance, and replaces it on the sideboard. She is back at the table when HANNA comes in.]

HANNA Steady on! That's my job.

MISS GEM Looks like you're going to lose it.

HANNA Am I? Who says so?

MISS GEM I do.

HANNA What makes you think that?

MISS GEM Possession is nine points of the law. That's what.

HANNA You put on your coat right now, and I'll see you down to the station.

MISS GEM You're very anxious to see my back, aren't you? What makes you so keen to dry a few dishes?

HANNA Little hobby of mine.

MISS GEM Hobby? Well, it's the passion of my life.

HANNA (*lowering his voice*) See here, Miss Gem, joking apart, this is the first time I've been alone with Nell today.

MISS GEM Oh? Oh, that's it, is it? Well, why couldn't you say so before? What did you do with my coat? (*Calling*) Dearie, Mr Hanna's going to take me down to the Toob.

NELL (*at the door*) That's sensible, now. But thank you for wanting to clear up.

[TED *comes back with coat and scarf.*]

NELL It won't take more than a few minutes, you know. Ted's a nib at it. Aren't you, Ted?

HANNA We'll get her over some day just to watch me. No account really does me justice.

MISS GEM (*wistfully*) I'd like to come back someday, dearie, but it's a long way, and you mightn't be in, and——

NELL Yes, I wouldn't like you to come all that way for nothing. Suppose I write to you and make a date. That would be the best way, wouldn't it?

MISS GEM It's very kind of you, dearie. I 'ave enjoyed seein' you again—like a breath of Spring, it is. And my evening and the supper and everything. I'm sorry I butted in like that, but I 'ave enjoyed meself.

NELL Well, d'you know what the nicest part of my evening was? The flowers you brought. So there!

MISS GEM Well, well. It's very kind of you to say so, dearie.

[They move into the lobby.]

HANNA I'll be back in five minutes, Nell. As soon as I've seen Miss Gem into her train.

NELL Righto. I'll have the water boiling.

MISS GEM As if the likes of me needed to be seen into trains! Why, I could run the 'ole service. Good-night, dearie, and many 'appy returns!

NELL *(from the sitting-room door)* Good-night.

[She comes back to the table, but before she has reached it the outer door opens again and HANNA is heard saying 'Just a moment, Miss Gem. I think I left them on the table.']

HANNA *(in a hurried undertone, as he takes his gloves from the table)* Three o'clock, probably. Don't wait up, beauty.

NELL All right. But be careful, Ted. Promise!

HANNA Don't you worry! *(Gives her a long kiss without embracing her, and goes out. NELL begins listlessly to put the dishes on the tray)*

[The curtain is lowered to denote the passing of three hours.]

[The curtain goes up on the sitting-room in darkness except for the glow of the dying fire. A key is heard fumbling in the outer door, and the door opens and shuts quickly. There is a pause, and the living-room door opens very slowly and HANNA comes in. He shuts the door and stands there for a moment. Almost as an afterthought he switches on the light. He stands there staring a little, like one slightly drunk. He is still wearing his overcoat, and is still carrying his hat. His clothes are slightly but not noticeably dishevelled.]

[NELL comes in from the bedroom in a dressing-gown, a comb in her hand.]

NELL You're very early? Is anything wrong? *(As she looks at him)* What's the matter, Ted? What is it?

HANNA *(indistinctly)* ... made a mess of it.

NELL (*crossing to him*) What is it? What's happened? Tell me, Ted. For mercy's sake, tell me.

HANNA I never meant to do it. I swear I didn't.

NELL Do what? What is it?

HANNA ... just an accident.

NELL Oh, God! don't stand there like a talking doll! Tell me what's wrong.

HANNA Everything's wrong. Made a hash of it.

NELL Did you run into the police? Do they know it was you? What is it?

HANNA No, they don't know yet.

NELL What is it, then? Did you leave your kit behind?

HANNA Not my kit, but I——

NELL What then? You did leave something, then?

HANNA Yes, I left the revolver. I dropped it somewhere.

NELL But Ted! I never knew you carried a revolver.

HANNA I only bought it the other day.

NELL Is that all you left?

HANNA Yes. Quite enough. Quite enough.

[*After a moment's pause NELL turns away and pours him out a drink at the sideboard.*]

NELL (*giving him the glass*) Here! You're a lovely crook, losing your nerve for a thing like that!

[*HANNA tosses down the drink greedily. She takes his coat from him and his hat and goes out to hang them in the hall. He stands rubbing the backs of his hands slowly, as if cold, and as she comes back he moves over to the fire and stretches out his hands to it.*]

HANNA It's cold.

[*She sits down in the chair by the hearth and pokes the fire into a blaze.*]

NELL There you are! Now tell me about it. Let's hear the worst.

HANNA (*sinking down suddenly on the pouffe at her feet*) Oh, Nell, be nice to me. I'm scared to death. Be nice to me. Don't go back on me now, Nell!

NELL (*amazed*) But who's talking about going back on you? What's the matter

with you, Ted?

HANNA I'm afraid, I tell you, I'm afraid. I've made an awful mess of it. I'm afraid.

[He buries his head in her lap. Her face softens, and her hand plays with his hair.]

NELL Poor, little frightened crook! What went wrong, Ted?

HANNA Well, I didn't know he was there till I turned round.

NELL Didn't know who was there? A flatty?

HANNA The owner.

NELL You mean the man who owned the house?

HANNA Yes. I thought he had a gun, you see. There wasn't time to think. I never meant to do it. The thing just went off. I thought it must have wakened everyone in the street it made such a row. And then——

NELL *(seizing him by the shoulder and pushing him up so that she can see his face)* What are you talking about! What are you talking about!

HANNA I tell you I didn't mean to do it! I thought he had a gun. I hadn't time to think. I didn't know I'd done it till he fell. Don't look at me like that, Nell. *Don't look at me like that!*

[He throws out his arms and hides his face in her lap again. She does not move to repulse him, but draws the upper part of her body away from him, her elbows supported on either arm of the chair. He is sobbing now. She watches him for a moment without moving.]

NELL *(in a slow whisper)* So that's what you've done!

HANNA *(looking up)* I didn't mean to do it. I swear I didn't, Nell. You've got to believe me.

NELL *(not listening)* God!

HANNA Nell! You believe me, don't you? *(Shaking her a little to force her attention)*

NELL Believe what?

HANNA That I didn't mean it.

NELL What's that got to do with it? You've killed someone, haven't you?

HANNA Yes, but I never meant to. He shouldn't have threatened me. I wasn't out for any rough stuff. The bloody fool was asking for it. How was I to know he was behind me! I just turned round, and there he was. No warning or anything. What did

he expect? I didn't know I'd shot him till I'd done it. I'd never have done it if he'd given me time to think.

NELL Are you blaming him for getting in the way of your gun?

HANNA Nell, don't! I didn't have time to think, I tell you.

NELL You shot him because you had the wind up?

HANNA Nell, don't go back on me! Don't go back on me just because I've made a fool of myself.

NELL Is that what you call it?... What's going to happen now?

HANNA Listen, Nell, if you say I was here all the time they can't do anything to me. They can't touch me. You've only got to swear that and I'm safe.

NELL But you said you left the revolver there.

HANNA Yes, I know. But I don't think they can trace it to me.

NELL Who will they trace it to, then?

HANNA I don't mean that. I mean it might be anybody's. It hasn't any marks on it.

NELL Then why did you mind that you'd left it?

HANNA Oh, I was all rattled. I couldn't think straight. Even if they suspected it was mine they couldn't get past your testimony, see? See? The chap I bought it from wouldn't say anything. I'll be all right if you say I wasn't out of here all night.

NELL But what if other people saw you? Saw you go or come, I mean?

HANNA There wasn't anyone, and it's foggy. They'd not be able to swear to me. But you could, see? See? You'll do it, won't you?

NELL But supposing ...

HANNA Supposing what! Oh, Nell, don't go on swithering. You couldn't not do it, could you?

NELL It isn't much good swearing to something they can prove a lie, is it? And what about the man you bought it from? How do we know he'll be all right about it? What's to hinder him splitting?

HANNA Because he won't want to have anything to do with the police. I know him. He hadn't a licence for it himself. That bit's safe.

NELL But is it all safe? It sounds too simple, Ted. There must be a snag somewhere.

HANNA (*on his feet*) I don't believe you want to save me. I believe you're just making excuses. What is it? Are you tired of me? Do you want to go to Williams? Is

that it?

NELL Ted! Ted, are you crazy?

HANNA (*beside himself*) That's it, isn't it?

NELL You know quite well that your little finger is more to me than the whole of Fluff Williams. You know it far too well, Ted. What are you making all this fuss about?

HANNA If that's true, why are you going back on me? Why won't you promise to swear I was here all night? What are you swithering and torturing me for?

NELL I'm only trying to make sure that if we're going to tell lies we won't be telling them for nothing. *Someone's* got to do the thinking in this business.

HANNA But what's wrong? It's all plain sailing if you swear I was here.

NELL You're sure you haven't left anything but the gun behind? You're sure of that, Ted? Stop and think.

HANNA I don't need to think. I know.

NELL And there's no name or anything on the gun?

HANNA No, nothing. I swear.

NELL And you're sure the man who sold it to you won't split?

HANNA Absolutely certain.

[*There are sounds outside of footsteps coming up the stairs. They both pause, listening, with their eyes on the door.*]

NELL (*whispering*) It's the top floor. He often comes in late.

HANNA Shut up, damn you! Listen!

[*The footsteps mount to their floor, pause, and go on, dying away as they ascend.*]

NELL There, I told you.

[*HANNA sinks trembling to the pouffe again and buries his face in his hands.*]

HANNA Give me another drink. That one was no use.

[*NELL mixes another drink and brings it to him. She watches while he drinks it and, taking the glass from him, replaces it on the mantelpiece. She sits down slowly in the chair she has previously occupied.*]

NELL All right, Ted. I'll say you were here all the time.

HANNA Oh, bless you! Bless you! You promise, do you? No matter what happens you'll say I was here. No matter what happens?

NELL No matter what happens.

HANNA Swear it, then. Swear it before God.

NELL I don't believe in God. I'll give you my word. You'll have to take it or leave it.

HANNA All right, Nell, I'll take it. Between us we'll fool them yet, won't we? They can't do anything to me now that you've given your word. Oh, Nell! (*He leans nearer as if to embrace her, but she shrinks*)

NELL No, don't.

HANNA You don't hate me, do you?

NELL Does it look as if I hated you!

HANNA No. You're being a sport. I realise that. But we're safe, you know, quite safe. I promise you that. You stick to your story, and nothing can touch us.

NELL You mean the law can't. But the thing's happened to us. Nothing can alter that.... That man—was he married?

HANNA I don't know.

NELL It's awful, Ted. Awful.

HANNA Nell! Don't keep reminding me! Don't you think he's in front of my eyes enough without that?

NELL Is he?... Poor Ted!

[*He puts out his hand tentatively and lays it on her knee, and she covers it with her own.*]

HANNA I never thought things would turn out like this.

NELL No, it wasn't part of the programme, was it?

HANNA But it's going to be all right, you'll see. And once this business is over I'll give it all up and go straight. (*She says nothing*) Aren't you glad?

NELL I probably shall be when the time comes.

HANNA Nell, don't be so hard.

NELL What do you expect me to be? Sympathetic?

HANNA You do hate me!

NELL No, I love you, worse luck.

HANNA Nell! (*After a moment's glance into her face he puts his forehead down on the hand that is covering his own*) There's only you between me and —You do think it's going to be all right, don't you? If it isn't, it'll be the rope for me.

NELL And a matter of—ten years, is it?—for me.

[He lifts his head as if that had occurred to him for the first time. He drops it again.]

HANNA Yes, but it's going to be all right. It'll be all right as long as we stick together. You'll see!

NELL Life's a business, isn't it! Do you know who says that? Miss Gem. And this evening she was envying me! She was envying me!

[She begins to laugh to herself under her breath, bitterly, as THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN.]

ACT III

SCENE I

The scene is the same as in the second act. It is about three o'clock in the afternoon, two days later. It is a bright day and the window is open from the bottom so that the sparrows can be heard twittering. Distant chimneys are shining in the sun. NELL is ironing garments of lace and crêpe-de-chine on the gate-legged table which she has folded and removed to between the window and the fireplace. The electric iron is plugged in place of the reading-lamp. She irons without enthusiasm, testing the heat of the iron as though she were testing theories instead of fact.

As she irons footsteps are heard faintly, mounting the stairs. She pauses and listens intently until they have passed her door and gone upwards. She leans on the table for a moment as if the relief were overwhelming, and then resumes her work.

Presently, without warning, the outer door bangs and HANNA comes into the room quickly, shutting the door behind him and leaning against it.

NELL swings round startled, but is reassured by the sight of him.

NELL Oh, it's only you! What a fright you gave me, Ted. I didn't hear you come up. How were you so quiet? (*Sees the fury on his face and falters*) What's the matter, Ted?

HANNA (*advancing slowly on her*) You damned slut! You've told them.

NELL Told them? What d'you mean.

HANNA I mean what I say. You've been talking. That's what. You're no better than the rest of the women. Loose-tongued little devil! D'you know where I've been? D'you know where I've come from? The station!

NELL What station?

HANNA Don't be a damned fool. The police-station. 'Inspector Wilkins presents his compliments and would Ted Hanna have a chat with him at the station for a few minutes!' Yes! That's a nice thing to have sprung on a man in the middle of the High Street, isn't it? Now, what did you tell them? What did you say to them?

NELL Say to who? What are you talking about, Ted?

HANNA A little less of the innocence! To the police when they were here.

NELL There haven't been any police here. There's been no one here this morning but the milkman.

HANNA Don't tell me! They know I was out on Thursday night. Do you hear me? They know I was out. If you didn't tell them, who did?

NELL (*as one considering a specimen*) The trouble with you, Ted, is that you've been running too long with people who tell lies on oath just as a hobby. I've told you I would say you were here, and I can't do more. You must take it or leave it.

HANNA (*holding her by the arm*) Mean to say you didn't tell them? Then who did?

NELL Oh, take a pull on yourself, Ted! It's a mystery to me how you ever had the nerve to take a penny from a kid's bank. About a hundred strangers saw you on Thursday night, didn't they? What's to prevent someone who knew you taking a look at you too?

HANNA But it was foggy. No one could have recognised me in that fog.

NELL Well, it was probably only a guess. Or perhaps the police are just fishing. You seem to have risen, all right.

HANNA Risen! Not me. They didn't get any change out of me.

NELL You waited to take it out of me instead?

HANNA Well, you'll admit it was a bit of a facer. Everything depends on your word, see? Will you swear there was no one here today?

NELL No, I won't. I told you before I didn't believe in swearing. And anyhow, what's the good of swearing to you? You'd go back on an oath if it suited your book. How are you to believe other people wouldn't?

HANNA I'd believe it if *you* swore it.

NELL And yet the first time there's a little snag you fly off the handle and come and curse me.

HANNA Well, I tell you, it was a facer for me. They're not just fishing. I know their little ways well enough to know that. They've got some kind of information. That's a facer. Where did they get it?

NELL You're sure you didn't leave anything else behind that night?

HANNA Oh, no, it isn't that. If it was that they'd have kept me on suspicion. They hadn't enough on me to keep me. That's a consolation.

NELL Not enough on you? But you said last night that they had no evidence against that man they've got, and yet they've detained him.

HANNA Oh, he's all right. They haven't got a thing on him. They've got to do

something to keep their reputation up. If they hadn't got him handy they'd have kept me, just to keep the public quiet. Forget it!

NELL But are you sure that——

HANNA Oh, stop arguing! Having to deal with Wilkins' jaw is quite enough for one day without having to——Did you darn the blue socks?

NELL Yes.

HANNA Where are they?

NELL In your sock drawer.

[He goes into the bedroom and she turns slowly and resumes her ironing. There is the sound of drawers being opened and shut angrily in the bedroom, and the thud of boots dropping.]

HANNA *(in the bedroom)* I can't find any handkerchiefs.

NELL The fresh ones are on the top of the chest of drawers.

[After a pause HANNA comes in more slowly, shutting the door behind him. He moves over to NELL and puts a tentative hand on her shoulder. She takes no notice.]

HANNA I'm sorry, Nell. I shouldn't have said that to you. Wilkins had me all frazzled.

[She does not answer.]

HANNA Don't be sore with me. I didn't mean any of it, you know. If I'd stopped and thought——But I came straight here from Wilkins and Wilkins had me all——

NELL Oh, it doesn't matter. Have you had something to eat?

HANNA Yes, I ate before I got Wilkins' message. Well, I shan't be long. *(Pausing on the way to the door)* You know, Nell, that fog was a great bit of luck. They haven't a thing on us as long as you keep your head.

NELL *(turning to look at him with the iron in her hand)* You're awfully funny, Ted, if you only knew it.

HANNA Funny, am I? Well, it's better than being the other way. So long. Back in a jiff.

[He goes out, but as he reaches the outer door he is heard in animated conversation. NELL puts down the iron in a frightened way and turns to meet whatever may be coming. The living-room door opens, and

HANNA *ushers in* MISS GEM.]

HANNA It's Miss Gem.

NELL (*relief adding to her welcome*) Why, Miss Gem! Well, I never. I am glad to see you.

MISS GEM I know it ain't the done thing, dearie, to plant meself on you so soon again. Specially after coming to a party I wasn't asked to, and all. But I thought you might be feelin' blue with no one of your own to talk to about——

HANNA Shan't be long, Miss Gem. See you when I come back.

[*Exit* HANNA.]

NELL Oh, but you needn't make excuses. You know quite well I'm glad to see you any time. Take off your things.

MISS GEM No, dearie, no, I ain't come to stay. I'll just loosen my wrap. (*Loosens the large scarf which is draped round her*) 'Ot, isn't it? You're looking very cheerful, I must say.

NELL (*lightly*) Oh, yes, why not?

MISS GEM Well, I don't know. I always thought you were one of the soft-hearted kind that took other people's troubles on their shoulders when they needn't. But I'm glad to see you so bright, anyway. Havin' an ironing? My, that's a pretty camisole. Hand-made, too. Make it yourself?

NELL No, Ted gave it to me. I saw it in a window in Brook Street, and he went in and bought it.

MISS GEM (*examining it minutely*) I thought it was West End! I like that line of drawn-thread work. You always 'ad good taste, dearie. 'Member that brown frock with the pique collar you used to wear in the shop? I always thought that the height of taste. Plain but not severe, and with a cachett, as they call it. You could 'ave been a duchess, dearie, if you 'adn't gone and married that Hanna man.

NELL Now don't you be rude about Ted. And anyway, there isn't a Duke available nowadays.

MISS GEM Not in England, there isn't. Not till the next divorce, that is. Did you 'ear that the Standenshires don't live together any more? Bet you anything you like they'll be the next. But there's 'eaps of the foreign kind. The kind you see in silk trousers and not much else in pictures of the Lydo. Not that I could *see* you with that kind of 'usband, you know, but there wasn't anything to 'inder you '*avin*' that kind if you wanted. Nowadays anyone marries anyone. You don't even 'ave to *look* a

lady any more. There's that boy of Besselden's—the heir, mind you—been and married the girl that 'ad the bathin'-machines at Brightling. And 'er so fat she couldn't get into one of 'er own machines. Me own idea is that she took away 'is trousers and forced 'is 'and. You 'ad only to play your cards right, dearie, and you might 'ave bin living in a palace in Venice or somewhere instead of living in a flat you couldn't swing a cat in.

NELL I never want to swing a cat, and I've always heard that palaces in Venice didn't have any baths.

MISS GEM *Or* W.C.s. You *could* do without a wash at a pinch. But it would be rather nice to 'ave people say 'Your Grace' and gondolas to go about in, and all that.

NELL And how was all this to come to me, selling papers in Friar Street?

MISS GEM Things don't *come*. You go out and get them. That's what I'm saying. If you'd liked you could 'ave bin anything.

NELL And now I'm nothing?

MISS GEM Oh, now, dearie, don't make me out worse than I am. I may be plain-speaking, but I'm not downright rude. Anyway you're 'appy, and that's the main thing. I just wish you'd fallen in love with someone more—more thrilling than Mr Hanna.

NELL Ted's quite thrilling enough for me!

MISS GEM Oh, I know. That's what love does. There was a woman in the bus with three kids. All sprawling and all sticky, they were, and she not able to find 'er purse, or sit quiet or 'old 'er 'ead up. And I just said, 'There but for the grace of God!' Don't know 'oo said it first—someone in history—but I'm well acquainted with the feelin'.

NELL You'll get it in the neck on Judgement Day for being a Pharisee, see if you don't!

MISS GEM Pharisee? People 'oo can't appreciate pictures and what not?

NELL No, people who think themselves better than other people.

MISS GEM I never said better. I said luckier. An electric iron is a treat, ain't it? That's one thing I don't 'ave in my room. Mine's the kind that would go through the floor if I let it fall. I thought once of savin' up for one of them methylated-spirit ones, but I spent the money on something else. Just as well, perhaps. If I'd bought methylated, regular, Friar Street would say I was drinkin' meself to death. There isn't anything Friar Street wouldn't say. They put two and two together and make

twenty-five. And an 'alf. I expect they'll be gloatin' now over poor Mr Williams and sayin', 'I told you so'.

NELL Mr Williams? D'you mean Fluff?

MISS GEM Yes, of course.

NELL Why, what's wrong with Fluff?

MISS GEM Wrong with 'im! (*She pauses in dismay and continues in a small voice*) 'Aven't you seen a paper today?

NELL Only the early-morning one. What is it?

MISS GEM They've arrested 'im for that murder.

[*There is a long pause while NELL stares at her.*]

MISS GEM (*pointing to the iron which NELL is holding motionless on the garment*) Mind, dearie, you're burning it.

[*NELL puts the iron on its stand.*]

NELL Fluff! What's he got to do with it?

MISS GEM It said that the revolver they found was 'is.

NELL What!

MISS GEM You know they were looking for the man that owned that there revolver. And it seems they've proved it was 'is. Here, dearie, come and sit down. I didn't mean to bring bad news to you. I thought you'd know all about it. That's why I came over. There, sit down there. By rights I should be in the Temple this afternoon—it's Mr Thrale's day away from the office, and 'e doesn't like cleaning when 'e's there—but I knew you'd be upset at them taking Mr Williams, so I come over. I was sort of surprised at you bein' so merry and bright, but it never crossed me mind you wouldn't know.

NELL What else did it say? Have you the paper?

MISS GEM No, I didn't think you wouldn't 'ave seen it, see?

NELL What else did it say?

MISS GEM It didn't say much. Just that he was goin' to be brought up this morning. If I'd 'ave known in time I'd 'ave gone to the court. I don't believe 'e did it, do you? A mean murder, like that. He 'ad too nice a face.

NELL But what about the other man?

MISS GEM What other man?

NELL The man it said they had detained.

MISS GEM There wasn't anyone else. It was 'im they 'ad all the time. 'The man the police have been detaining for the last two days is now known to be'—that's what the paper said, see?

[NELL *buries her face in her hands.*]

MISS GEM Don't take on, dearie. It'll all come right, you'll see. I'm sure 'e didn't do it. And they don't 'ang innocent men, not in this country they don't. Don't you worry about it. You be thankful your 'usband reformed in time. It might 'ave bin 'im in Williams' place. That would 'ave been a pretty mess!

[*The electric bell rings. NELL sits up startled.*]

MISS GEM Shall I see 'oo it is, dearie, and send them away?

NELL No. No, I'll have to go.

[*She goes to the front door.*]

A VOICE (*at the door*) Is this where Ted Hanna lives?

NELL Yes.

VOICE Could I see him for a minute?

NELL He's not in. Will you leave a message?

VOICE Well, if it's all the same I'd like to wait for him.

NELL Yes, certainly. Come in.

[*She comes back leading a LARGE FAIR MAN who has plain-clothes officer written all over him.*]

NELL This is Miss Gem.

BURT Pleased to meet you. My name's Burt.

[MISS GEM *glares at him. He spells his name.*]

MISS GEM (*enlightened but not mollified*) Pleased to meet you.

NELL Won't you sit down?

BURT I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs Hanna, but I'd like to see your husband for half a minute.

MISS GEM You an old friend of Mr Hanna's?

BURT Well, not exactly, but I've known him for quite a while now.

NELL (*busy clearing away her ironing*) This place is an awful mess, but in a flat

this size you do things where it happens to be handiest. If you'll excuse me a minute, I'll put on the kettle and we can have tea.

MISS GEM Not for me, dearie. I didn't come to stay.

BURT Please don't bother, Mrs Hanna.

NELL Oh, but we might as well have tea. It isn't too early for you, is it, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM Tea's never too early for me, but I said when I came that I wasn't stayin', and I didn't come to eat, so no tea for me.

NELL Oh, what nonsense. *(She carries the linen and the iron into the kitchen)* I won't be a minute.

[MISS GEM *stares in a hostile silence at BURT.*]

BURT *(doing his best)* Wonderful day, isn't it? Just like summer.

MISS GEM Might be worse. *(She stares at his boots until he moves them uncomfortably)* It's a mystery to me why they don't issue you with fancy boots for this kind of work. These regulation number tens are as good as an advert.

BURT Number nines, Miss Jewel.

MISS GEM The name's Gem. Well, let me tell you you're wasting your time nosing round 'ere. Ted Hanna reformed ages ago.

BURT Oh?

MISS GEM Yes, 'e married the nicest little girl in London, twelve months ago, and stopped associating with the police. 'E's got a business of 'is own now. 'E's reformed, I tell you.

[NELL *comes back, crosses to the sideboard and begins to prepare a tea-tray.*]

MISS GEM Mr Burt says it's time they reformed the way they number the 'ouses round 'ere.

NELL Yes, it is a silly way, but this part used to have fields and things between the houses, and when they built new ones they were rather up the gum-tree about the numbers, see?

BURT Awful how every place is getting built over, isn't it? You been long in this district, Mrs Hanna?

NELL *(choking and recovering)* Twelve months.

BURT Nice district. Nice shops, and all that. Some of them'll beat the West End

for bargains. At least so I've heard the wife say.

MISS GEM You married, Mr Burt?

BURT I am, Miss Gem.

MISS GEM (*nastily*) Fancy!

BURT When people haven't to pay big rents they haven't to charge about twice what the stuff is worth. I expect you've found that, Mrs Hanna?

NELL I don't buy anything but food down here, I'm afraid. It isn't only rent you pay for in the West End, you know. It's cut and finish.

MISS GEM Of course it is, but you wouldn't expect a——(*She is going to say 'bobby', but stops herself in time*) man to see that.

BURT Oh, I expect most women'd like West End clothes if they could afford them. But not many husbands can afford Bond Street prices, eh, Mrs Hanna?

NELL There are such things as sales.

BURT Oh, I know. Where you ruin the clothes you have on trying to get something that won't go on when you get it. Ha, ha!

NELL Oh, come, Mr Burt! You don't call Oxford Street the West End, do you?

BURT (*punctured*) Not the West End? What is it, then?

NELL (*shrugging*) The waste end, I should say.

BURT Ha, ha! You're a wit, Mrs Hanna, you are. And what do you call the West End, if I may be so bold?

NELL I don't know if you'll recognise it, but it's the kind of place with a piece of tweed and a string of beads in the window, and 'nothing at that price, modom' inside.

BURT Well, you seem to know, Mrs Hanna, you seem to know. Do you go up often?

NELL Once a week, perhaps. But I don't buy clothes every time.

BURT I suppose you go up to theatres. That's one thing you miss down here.

NELL Oh, I don't know. There's always the cinemas.

BURT Yes, it's a good district for that. You could almost go to a different one every day of the week. And fine houses, too, most of them. They had a big star—forget his name—appearing in person at the Playhouse one day last week. Thursday, I think it was. You didn't happen to be there?

NELL Thursday? No we had a party here on Thursday. It was the anniversary of

the day Ted and I (*she looks defiantly at BURT*) got married.

BURT Oh? A party?

MISS GEM Yes, and what's more, I was there.

BURT Oh?

MISS GEM Six of us was there.

BURT Quite a celebration. Was it a gay night, Miss Gem?

MISS GEM If you mean were we tiddly, then the answer is no.

BURT Oh, I didn't mean that. You misunderstand me. I only meant did you keep it up late?

MISS GEM Oh, late enough to be satisfactory and not late enough to be awkward.

BURT Awkward?

MISS GEM Last Toob, you know. My Rolls is bein' over-hauled.

BURT I see. Tubes were very handy that night, too. Nothing like a Tube in a fog.

NELL Yes, it was pretty bad. I was quite anxious till Ted came back from seeing Miss Gem to the station.

BURT Oh? Did he take long?

NELL Not very. It was striking eleven as we locked up, I remember.

BURT Oh? Glad to drop into bed, I suppose.

NELL Well, we washed up first. I never can bear to see dirty dishes in front of me in the morning. But we were in bed by half-past, I should say.

BURT Very respectable. It's about time they found some way of stopping these fogs. They say there is a way, but they haven't found it out yet. So I suppose we live in hopes. They're worse this side of the river than the other, too. That's about the only bad thing that can be said about this district. When there's a fog it is foggy. But bar that, it's the nicest suburb in London. I've always had a soft spot for South London myself. Smells of the sea more than up Hampstead way, and the sea was one of my ambitions. I did want to be a jockey once, but I grew a bit too much. Then I wanted to go to sea, till they took me for a row at Margate. But I still like to see the masts and funnels over the roofs when I'm crossing the river. Quite worth living on the south side for, that is. You don't have anything like that up Hampstead way. That was a nasty affair Hampstead way last week.

NELL Yes.

BURT Awful to be done in like that, without any warning, just because someone lost his nerve. Nice chap, he was, too.

NELL Yes. Dreadful.

BURT The kind that feeds birds in the parks, that's what he was. Wouldn't harm a fly. The kind that puts spiders out the window. Well, that Williams chap is for it, that's one comfort.

NELL Fluff didn't do it!

BURT No? Why d'you think that?

NELL It isn't—it isn't his line of business, for one thing.

BURT That's true. More your husband's preserve, eh? Isn't he jealous?

NELL Ted's out of that now. But he wouldn't believe that Fluff did it, either.

BURT No? Well, I'm a little surprised at Williams, myself. I never knew Fluff lose his nerve before. But they've got him with the goods on him this time. Unless a miracle happens he'll be taking a short walk one of these days.

NELL But he didn't do it, I tell you! No one who knew Fluff could believe he did it. What have they got against him?

BURT They've got about ten finger-prints on the revolver, and he admits it was his.

NELL But that doesn't prove anything!

BURT Not alone, it doesn't. But he has no alibi for Thursday night. He was 'walking', if you please! Walking, in that fog!

NELL But that is just like Fluff! I tell you, if you knew him——Fluff liked mooning round by himself.

BURT Yes? Well, it's going to prove an expensive hobby for him, I'm afraid.

NELL Oh, how can everyone be so stupid! Fluff wouldn't do a thing like that.

BURT You'd be surprised at the things people'll do. You seem to know Williams pretty well?

NELL Yes, he used to come to my uncle's shop for tobacco. And—he used to be a friend of my husband's.

BURT Used to be? Aren't they friends any more, then?

MISS GEM Of course they're not! Mr Hanna has a respectable business of his own now.

BURT Yes? Then you haven't seen Williams for a long time?

NELL (*after a pause*) I hadn't till last week.

BURT Last week, eh?

NELL He happened to look in to wish us many happy returns when we had that party last Thursday. Just for old sake's sake.

BURT I see. Pity you finished the party so early. If you hadn't locked up so early you might have given him an alibi. That's to say, if he didn't do it. Sure you locked up at eleven?

NELL *(after a pause)* Yes, quite. Surely Fluff has some kind of defence!

BURT Oh, he says he sold the gun to a man he met in a teashop a week ago. Doesn't know the man, or anything about him. That's a fine defence for a murder charge!

NELL But they haven't charged him yet, have they?

BURT *(looking at his watch)* They have, by now. I expect by this time he's committed for trial. I say, it's later than I thought. I think I'll change my mind and not wait for your husband, Mrs Hanna. *(Stands up)* If you tell him that——

[The outer door opens and shuts, and HANNA comes briskly into the room. He stops abruptly on seeing BURT, but recovers himself.]

HANNA *(smiling)* Well, if it isn't Burt! Looking for me?

BURT Not exactly. Inspector Wilkins would like to have a talk with you first time you're passing the station.

HANNA What! another one! He's getting quite gossipy, isn't he?

BURT Oh, have you seen him already?

HANNA Yes, we had a jaw about an hour ago.

BURT Oh, in that case it's all right. Someone got in before me with the message. Sorry to have bothered you, Mrs Hanna. Thank you for the interesting conversation. Good-bye, Miss Gem.

[MISS GEM bows coldly.]

BURT Pleased to have met you. You've got a very nice little place here, Hanna. Well dug in, aren't you?—every way. How's the commercial stunt doing?

HANNA Oh, enough to keep the—wolf from the door.

[They go out. NELL moves over to the window and stands staring out.]

MISS GEM Good riddance! *(She looks uneasily at the back of the silent NELL, and begins to gather her scarf round her)* I'm goin' too, dearie, as soon as that's off the doorstep. I wouldn't be seen dead on the same flight of steps with it. I

suppose they've got to 'ave them, but it's a pity. Ever notice what a lot of necessary things are nasty? Castor-oil and ants and things. I didn't know about ants bein' any good till I listened on the wireless, but it seems they are. I can't remember what they do, exactly. Not go about asking silly questions, anyhow. Fancy getting paid for asking questions! Easy money, I call it. And all that about Mr Williams bein' for it! All swank, that is, dearie. I should worry! Something'll come to light in a day or two, and then they'll get the skunk that done it, and Mr Williams'll be out, as free as a bird. I shouldn't wonder if this didn't make 'im reform. It's an ill wind, you know.

[Enter HANNA. MISS GEM stands up.]

MISS GEM Well, I'll be goin'. I only looked in to cheer up your wife there about Mr Williams. All nonsense them taking 'im up, I says. But nothing to worry about. They'll 'ave the right man in a day or two and then 'e'll be out, and no great 'arm done.

NELL (*who has turned round during MISS GEM'S speech and is watching HANNA, who is avoiding her eye*) Oh, but Miss Gem, you were going to stay for a cup of tea.

MISS GEM Excuse me contradicting you flat, but I was nothing of the sort. I said distinctly I wasn't goin' to 'ave a meal in this 'ouse this day. I 'aven't got to the stage of coming for me food yet. You and me'll 'ave a date, one day, dearie, and I'll come and *call*. You know! Cake in the saucer.

NELL (*half-heartedly*) Oh, but the kettle's boiling.

MISS GEM Don't you shake me. I'm not 'avin' tea 'ere today. Any'ow, I think there's still time to do a little in the Temple. It'll only be a lick and a promise for more, but I don't expect Mr Thrale'll see any different. Gentlemen are like that. If you see a man that goes trailing his fingers to see if the mantelpiece 'as been dusted, you can bet your bottom dollar 'e ain't no class. The real kind never notices. Not that I don't do my work proper. I give them all a fair deal. Soap and water and plenty elbow-grease, that's me. A gentleman once said that I'd take a hose to the pearly gates. I never knew rightly whether 'e meant it nice or nasty, but I gave 'im the benefit. It sounds a bit blasphemous to me mind, though. Well, good-bye, dearie, don't you spoil them looks with worryin'. Good-bye, Mr Hanna. (*She goes out with NELL*) You'll find it's as I said——(*The door shuts*)

[HANNA walks restlessly round the room listening to the murmur of MISS GEM'S departure. When NELL comes back she shuts the door and leans against it, and he turns slowly to face her. There is a moment's

silence.]

NELL So it was Fluff's gun? (*He does not answer*) Why didn't you tell me it was Fluff's gun?

HANNA What did it matter whose gun it was?

NELL No, but you were afraid if I knew whose it was I wouldn't promise.

HANNA What difference did it make whose gun it was?

NELL Oh, Ted, you're like water—running through my fingers every time I try to—to feel you. How long have you known it was Fluff they had?

HANNA Only today. (*But it is obvious that he is lying*)

NELL How did you find out?

HANNA At the station.

NELL You knew when you came in after dinner?

HANNA Yes.

NELL And you didn't tell me.

HANNA I was far too upset about things to tell you. Don't you think it was a knock-out for me? Fluff's my pal. Don't you think it was a facer for me to find out that they had him.

NELL Yes.... I expect it was.... It's awful, Ted.... You didn't mention finger-prints when you wanted me to promise on Thursday night.

HANNA It wasn't because I wanted you to promise! Don't be trying to make me out a rotter. You'd think you were doing your best to put wrong motives to everything I do. How was I to think of Fluff's finger-prints being there? I'd had the gun nearly three weeks. How did I know it was going to be traced back to him?

NELL No, but I wish you'd told me it was Fluff's. What's the good of any kind of promises if we don't trust each other? And how am I to trust you, Ted? You keep me in the dark, keep back things that matter a lot, and then expect me to stand by you. I've done a lot of things for you since I began to be crazy about you, and most of it's been telling lies. About your reforming, and letting Uncle think we were married, and all that. And now I'm willing to tell lies on oath for you, but you don't trust me enough to tell me the truth.

HANNA But I did tell you the truth! I told you everything except whose gun it was, and I didn't tell you that because it wasn't of any importance. It never entered my head to tell you. Why should it? The gun was mine. If it wasn't traced to me I didn't expect it was going to be traced to someone else. It's just a bit of bloody bad luck,

that's all.

NELL Yes, it's bad luck, all right.... What are we going to do now?

HANNA Do? How, do?

NELL About Fluff. What can we do to get him out?

HANNA There isn't anything we can do at the moment. But don't you worry. They'll never convict him on the evidence they have. No jury'd stand for it.

NELL But you're not going to let him be tried for it, are you?

HANNA That's the best thing. How can we stop it? They won't convict him, I promise you.

NELL Ted! Do you know what you're saying? You're not going to let Fluff go through all that and not lift a finger to stop it, are you? Why, even if they didn't convict him he'd never be able to hold up his head again. A murder trial! Think of it. When he didn't do it!

HANNA My dear girl, I'd move all ten fingers willingly if you show me how that would help him.

NELL There must be a way—perhaps more than one way—if we think properly, both of us. (*With a sudden access of bitterness*) I suppose a crook can use his brains for other people instead of for himself for once in a way?

HANNA Well, suppose you lead the way, since you're so sure of yourself. You suggest!

NELL Well—suppose we went abroad, and you write a confession from there. There are places in the world where they can't send you back from. We could live there, and they couldn't touch us, could they?

HANNA (*laughing*) You don't know much about the ways of the English police, do you? Why, the taxi wouldn't be at the door for your luggage before half the C.I.D. would be inquiring where we were going and why, and suggesting reasons why we shouldn't go. They wouldn't give us a passport to begin with.

NELL Well, there's such things as forged passports. You're getting very squeamish, all of a sudden.

HANNA What would be the good of a forged passport if you were never given a chance to use it? I tell you, we wouldn't be able to move a step before they'd be down on us. It would be giving the show away. As soon as they'd stopped us they'd begin delving to find out why we were beating it at such a bat. And there's no saying what they might unearth. They couldn't get me for that affair on Thursday, but they

could get me for other things. The money that got your last set of crêpe-de-chine, for instance.

NELL Oh, yes, I'm as bad as you are. You didn't need to rub it in.

HANNA Well, be sensible, kid. We can't afford to do anything that would get us in bad, and not be a scrap of good to Fluff.

NELL Be sensible! Be sensible! Be selfish, you mean. D'you think Fluff is being sensible? Sitting there and saying nothing, though he knows you did it. What kind of a pal do you think you are? Isn't he expecting you to get him out of it? What are you going to do about it?

HANNA Oh, don't be silly. There's only one thing I can do. Go and give myself up. D'you want me to do that?

[*There is a moment's silence.*]

NELL (*in a quiet, curiously surprised voice*) D'you know, I've just discovered how surprised I would be if you did. You're a poor thing, aren't you, Ted? I used to think you so dashing. (*She gives a short scornful laugh*) I used to think you were a fine man wasted because you were a crook. Why, you're not even a good crook! But you're not low enough to let another man take your medicine for you, are you, Ted? I won't believe that of you. You're not going to stand by and do nothing while they try Fluff—on the off chance of him getting off in the end?

HANNA But I tell you, it's a cinch. He knows it. (*With a too obvious grasping at inspiration*) That's why he's saying nothing. *They* know they've got the wrong man too.

NELL How do they know it?

HANNA It isn't Fluff's line of business, or his way of working, or anything. They're not fools.

NELL No. 'More your husband's preserve.' That's what that man said. He said he'd never known Fluff lose his nerve before, (*HANNA winces*) Yes, you don't like that, do you? You coward!

HANNA Shut up, will you! It's enough to be worried to death with things happening like this, without you nagging me into fits and throwing names at me.

NELL Worried, are you? Oh, God, Ted, how funny you are! (*She sinks into a chair crying and feeling for her handkerchief*) How funny you are!

HANNA Oh, Lord! Oh, shut up! You'll be having hysterics in a minute and running out into the street with the story. Shut up and pull yourself together.

[NELL *cries for a moment into her handkerchief, wipes her eyes resolutely, and puts it away.*]

NELL Don't worry, I'm not having hysterics. And if anyone's got to pull themselves together it's you. You've got to think of a way out, Ted. You've got to think of something that will clear Fluff and save him having to go through all that.

HANNA Look here, kid, you're getting yourself all worked up because you're imagining things worse than they are. You'd hate to have to go through it, so you think Fluff will. Well, you're dead wrong. If anything, Fluff'll enjoy it. Lot's of chaps would give something to be in his place if they were as sure of getting off. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about.

NELL You think you do. But I know Fluff, see? I think he'd rather die now, on the quiet, than have to go through what he'll have to go through.

HANNA D'you think you know him better than me, who's been his pal for six years?

NELL Some pal! Oh, Ted, you can't be going to leave him in the lurch like this. You can't be!

HANNA You show me what I can do, and I'll do it.

NELL But why should I have to show you! You should be thinking, planning, half-crazy to find a way. But you're not. You're taking it all for granted. And he's in there keeping his mouth shut and waiting for you to move.

HANNA I tell you, he's only keeping quiet because he knows he's safe. They can't prove it.

NELL But that man said they could. They wouldn't charge him if they hadn't a good case. You know that, Ted. You know how careful they are.

HANNA Yes! And I know how they feel when the papers are making a song and dance and they've got nobody! They're only too glad to have anything that looks like a case so as to stop the racket. Be sensible!

NELL Sensible! You said that before. (*Going over to him and holding the lapels of his coat*) Oh, Teddy, don't be like this! It's like seeing something lovely come to pieces. I can't bear it. I can't bear it. Fluff in there saying nothing, and you coming to pieces here.

HANNA I told you you were getting hysterical.

NELL And I tell you I'm not. Ted, let's beat it out of the country now, tonight. There must be some kind of fishing-boat or something that would take us for money.

If we go now, before they're wise to us, we could manage it. I feel sure of it. I'll go and do all the arranging, and they'll never suspect me. With all that smuggling on the South Coast there must be a way of getting to the Continent without being stopped. Then you could——

HANNA Oh, for goodness' sake! You are a one-ideal little idiot. I tell you that way's no use.

NELL You mean you don't want to try it.

HANNA I don't want to try it, because it's a fool's game.

NELL That is something you should be good at!

HANNA Look here! I've had about enough of it. (*Reaches for his hat*) I'll have tea where the company's brighter.

NELL Listen, Ted. If you don't agree to do something in the next two days, I'll go and tell them all I know.

HANNA Oh, no, you won't.

NELL Why not?

HANNA Because you're in love with me.

NELL I think I hate you.

HANNA You think you do just now, but tonight you won't.

NELL There won't be any tonight if you don't do something.

HANNA Besides, you're a sensible little person at bottom. You know quite well that the minute you'd told the dicks that story you'd be damned sorry. You couldn't bear the thought of me being hanged, you know. And there wouldn't be any doubt about my being hanged. Don't forget that. In five weeks from now Fluff'll be coming round to tea. But in five weeks from now I'd be buried.

NELL (*coaxing again*) Listen, Ted. If you were to confess to something small and say that Fluff was with you when you did it, and that that was why he——

HANNA Oh, give it a rest!

NELL (*flaring*) I won't give it a rest! Why should you be allowed to rest? I'm going to go on suggesting things till we find one we can try.

HANNA Oh, you are, are you? Thanks for the warning. I'm not beating it out of the country, but I am beating it out of here. (*Takes a wad of notes from his pocket-book and counts it*) Here you are, beauty! You can go on suggesting things to these until you're tired of it. When you're tired of it put an ad to that effect in the agony of the *Daily Mail*, and we'll set up house again.

NELL Ted, don't be foolish. (*Lifting the notes and trying to return them*)
Please, Ted, don't be foolish.

HANNA Coming to pieces, am I? Well, you're growing into a shrew, and I never liked the wordy kind.

NELL Listen, Ted, don't go where I can't reach you. Don't go away. I must talk to you—persuade you—or I'll go mad.

HANNA Yes? Well, then there'd be two of us mad. And I'm not ending my days in an asylum if I know it. When you stop fussing, I'll come back.

NELL Ted, I *will* tell them, if you don't do something.

HANNA Yes? And tell your Uncle that you've been living with a crook for twelve months, and telling lies as if you were born to it? Besides, you wouldn't do it anyhow, because——(*He grips her suddenly so as to pinion her arms, and with his other hand presses her head back so that he can kiss her. After the first instant she struggles violently, and he releases her*) So long, beauty. I'll be back when you're feeling better.

NELL All right, go, then! But it isn't me you're running away from.

HANNA No?

NELL No, it's from yourself. And you can't do that. You'll come to your senses and see what you're doing, and then you'll have to face it. You can't go on running away.

HANNA Oh, you talk like a bloody revivalist. You should be wearing a bonnet. When you're tired of the tambourine let me know!

[*He goes out, banging the door.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The scene is the same as the previous one. It is nearly midnight, about six weeks later. The room is in darkness except for the moonlight, which illuminates the chimney-pots beyond the uncurtained window but does not shine into the room. After a pause there is the sound of a key in the lock of the outer door. The outer door opens and shuts, not noisily, but with no attempt at concealment. As the inner door opens the lamp by the fireplace is switched on, illuminating HANNA in the act of reaching for the switch by the door, and NELL in bed on the divan which she has drawn from the window to the lamp, so that it now protrudes at right-angles from the right wall. She is lying curled up on her left side. After a brief pause she lowers the hand which has switched on the light, and continues to look at him, wordless and motionless. He desists from his intention of switching on the main light, so that the scene is played in the light of the lamp.

HANNA Hullo, kid. Still here? Didn't know whether I'd find you here or not. Thought you might be so sore with me that you might have chucked it. Or perhaps got tired waiting. But you waited after all!

NELL Yes, I waited.

HANNA Well, that's very comforting for a chap, not to say flattering. How did the pony I left spin out? All right? I was short enough myself, I can tell you. I nearly came back, once, for some of that wad, but I didn't know how the sight of me might take you. Sort of hysterical ideas you had, eh? You're not still feeling sore with me, are you? You wouldn't have liked me in the 'Only Way' part, you know. I'm not cut out for it. And Fluff was born to it. Seen reason, now, though?

NELL Yes. I've seen reason.

HANNA You've no idea the time I had down in that hole of a place. Nothing to do but listen to their hell of a band and watch the waves break. Not a bean, and afraid to go out and get some in the normal way, because the dicks were too interested in me. And wondering all the time when you were going to blow the gaff on me. Why didn't you? You're a loyal pal, if ever there was one. I'll hand you that. Not that I didn't believe in your promise, but I was afraid of your conscience. Either that or that you'd have influenza or something and spill the beans when you had a temperature. Believe me, I spent sleepless nights over your having a temperature, and there were you in the best of health all the time.... Well, kid, got nothing to say to

me after all those weeks? Glad to see me back, even if I'm not a hero? You're looking a bit tucked up, aren't you? Why've you taken to dossing in here? (*He goes over to her*) Find the bed too lonely for one, is that it? (*Makes as if to sit down on the divan*)

NELL (*sharply*) Don't sit there! Keep away.

HANNA (*arrested*) What's the matter? Have you still got a grouch at me? Or are you ill? You haven't got anything infectious, have you?

NELL No, I'm not ill. You're quite safe that way.

HANNA Quite safe every way. We're sitting pretty now, my girl. And believe me, I'm going to be good to you, beauty. I never thought you'd stick to me the way you did. You're one in a million, Nell. Ask for the moon, and it's yours. I was thinking, coming up in the train, we might beat it out of England now, like you suggested, and give the Continent the once-over. You'd look good in Paris, and I suppose Paris would look good to you, eh? I'll have to collect some money first, but that won't be awfully difficult. I'll have a hundred by the end of the week, and that'll do us to start on.... You're not exactly chatty, are you? Didn't you expect me to come back? You'd think you weren't glad to see me.

NELL Yes, I hoped you'd come sooner or later.

HANNA Well, that's good hearing, but you might brace up a little. No one's smiled at me for so long. The girls down at that place have faces cut out of the native rock. The kind of thing you take away as souvenir and hate the sight of ever after but can't throw away. And the only alternative was a couple of dicks who never let me out of their sight except when I was in bed. And even then I used to feel exposed. The Yard are a one-ideal crew! Were they shadowing you?

NELL I don't know.

HANNA How, don't know?

NELL I never went out.

HANNA Not go out! Oh, moping, is that it? Not much wonder you're looking tucked up. You'll have to change that, or I won't take you to Paris with me. I want you to be a credit to me. We're going to have some good times, you and me. I'm dead sick of staring at the dam' sea and eating hash and having the Yard look sideways at me. I want a bit of life to take the taste out of my mouth. Besides, the farther away from the Yard we are the better we'll feel, eh? I don't think the Yard are awfully pleased with their work just lately, and when they get mad there's no saying where they'll end. Not that they can put anything on us—we're safe now—

but I played pool with one of those dicks one night, and he said some very nasty things. All wrapped up and polite, but insinuating. You know. Wilkins took them off when the business was finished, of course. They can't do anything to us now. But we'd be more popular in France. And you've never seen Paris. Just give me a week to get the dibs. Got anything to eat in the house? I could put away six courses.

NELL In the kitchen cupboard.

[He takes off his coat, flings it over the back of a chair, combs his hair with his fingers in front of the mirror over the fireplace, and goes into the kitchen. She raises herself to a sitting position on the divan, moving with the deliberation and lack of unnecessary movement that a sleep-walker uses. She sits there unmoving until his return. He comes back with cold sausage on a plate, half a loaf, butter, a bottle of beer, and a glass.]

HANNA I don't think much of your larder. But you always were one of the bun-and-milk brigade. It's good I'm too hungry to look even a sausage in the mouth. *(He cuts a slice of bread and butters it, produces a corkscrew and opens the bottle of beer and pours the beer into the glass)* I couldn't find any mustard. Isn't there any?

NELL No.

HANNA Another of your queer tastes. *(Watches critically as the beer flows into the glass. Looking at her over the bottle and glass)* Have some?

[It is then that he sees the automatic which is lying in her loosely curved right hand. He pauses with the bottle and glass held at right-angles in the air while one might count five.]

HANNA For God's sake, put that thing away! Where did you get it? *(He puts the glass and bottle down)*

NELL Stay where you are, I want to talk to you.

HANNA Nell, don't be foolish. Put that thing down. It isn't the kind of thing to play around with. You should know that by this time.

NELL Yes, I know it very well.

HANNA Well, give it to me and don't let me see you——

NELL *(as he is moving across to her)* Stay where you are. I want to talk to you.

HANNA But look here——What d'you mean? I'm not going to hurt you! What are you afraid of?

NELL I'm not afraid of anything.

HANNA Then why that thing? What's the idea? Have you gone dippy? What do you want with——?

NELL Be quiet, and get on with your supper. I want to talk to you. I've been thinking. Thinking more than I ever thought in my life before. I hadn't anything else to do all those days. My mind was in a dreadful mess trying to get things straight. A man who's done what you've done isn't fit to live. I didn't think there were men as low as you anywhere. Not English, I mean. I couldn't begin to tell you what I think of you. And yet I love you far too much to be able to live without you. Sounds dam' silly, doesn't it? But it's true. There'd be no point in living at all with you not there. That's why I'm going along too. I couldn't——

HANNA Stop that nonsense, will you, and give me that——

NELL Stay still, or I'll shoot you before I'm ready. And get on with the food. They always have a meal first, don't they? There's some salad. Would you like some salad? You're allowed to choose what you like within bounds. That's what the paper said. And there was a big photo of Fluff. I suppose you saw it. Fluff was a real man. It's a pity I didn't fall in love with Fluff instead of you. Then I wouldn't be going west tonight.

HANNA Look here, kid——

NELL Don't interrupt. I want to talk to you. I've got it all straight in my mind now. Simple, and clear, and easy. I've been waiting for you to come back so that I could finish it. This is the finish. Funny, isn't it? when you think of it, that this is what came out of your buying a packet of Gold Flake that day. If only I could have seen you then as I see you now—before you got me! You've still got me, Ted. I should have been free of you when you did that to Fluff. There must be something rotten in me to let me go on caring for you after that. But I'm still silly about you. The way you turn your head and move your hands and—all that bunk. That's love! That's what people write poems and things to! Love! You're not getting on very fast with your supper.

HANNA Look here, kid, a little less of the theatrical business and a little more honesty. You've worked up this to spring on me when I came back. Well, I'm back, but I'm not having any. You were sweet enough on me to let another man hang for me. I guess you're not going to shoot me now. That's logic. So a little less of the high falutin'.

NELL I didn't let Fluff die because I was sweet on you. You flatter yourself. I'd

given you my word. It was my word I'd given. I couldn't go back on that. I was nearly crazy trying to think of a way out. I couldn't find a way to save Fluff. Poor Fluff. He was joking when they killed him. I suppose you read that too? I wish I could have loved Fluff. He was worth while. He kept his mouth shut because of me, not because of you. I expect perhaps it made it easy in the end to think he was doing it for me. But I wish I could have thought of a way to get him off. I'm a poor reason for a man to sacrifice his life. Me! The person who's still silly about the man who let him do it! God, what a rotter you are, Ted. I never imagined anyone like you. But you're not getting away with it. Did you think you were? Did you think you could do that and go on living and enjoying yourself, eating and drinking and making love, without there being a reckoning? Well, you can't. This is the reckoning. There isn't any God, or Fluff wouldn't have been allowed to die. But I'm God now. All the God that's necessary. You can't do what you did and go on living. I can't live without you. So we go together. That's logic. You're keen on logic, aren't you? So get on with your supper. If I'd known you were coming tonight I'd have made it a nice one. Anything within reason, they said.

HANNA I say, Nell, for God's sake drop it. You've been thinking about things till you've got them all wrong.

NELL Yes, I've been thinking, but I've got things straight. Clear and straight and easy. Go on with your supper. There's some salad if you want some. I wanted to tell you what I thought of you so that——

HANNA I say, kid, you're not well, or you'd——

NELL Don't interrupt. I'm doing the talking. I'm not mad, if that's what you're thinking. I've never been so sane in my life. Nothing to be afraid of any more. Nothing to torment me. Everything straight and clear.

HANNA Look here, kid, I'll call your bluff. That gun isn't loaded. Even if it was, and you had the nerve to shoot me, you'd never have the nerve to shoot yourself. Don't imagine it.

NELL I don't imagine it. I don't like the idea of shooting myself at all. I'm not going to. I'd hate to be a mess, even when I'm dead. I always hated messy things. I'm going by the gas oven. Quite a pleasant journey. Reserved compartment, and no change. (*She laughs a little, and he is reassured*) Stay still! (*As he begins to advance*) I'll give you ten minutes to—keep away, Ted. Keep away! All right, then!

[*She pulls the trigger, holding the automatic at full stretch of her arm, amateurishly. HANNA hesitates in his stride at the impact of the bullet,*

and comes on stumblingly.]

HANNA (*in surprised fury*) You bitch! It was loaded. You bitch!

[He collapses across the end of the divan. After a pause NELL puts the revolver gently on the table at her side. She gets slowly out of bed, holding the right elbow where the kick of the revolver has hurt it. She moves to HANNA and looks down at him almost curiously. A sort of compassion comes into her face. She puts out her hand and touches his hair.]

NELL Poor Teddy! Poor Teddy!

[She goes out slowly through the kitchen door.]

CURTAIN

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Reckoning* by Gordon Daviot]