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THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE

A Farce in Three Acts

by

JOHN DIGHTON

SAMUEL



FRENCH

LONDON

NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY HOLLYWOOD

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THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE

Produced at the Apollo Theatre, London, on the 29th March, 1948, with the following cast of characters—

(in the order of their appearance)

DICK TASSELL, Assistant Master at Hilary Hall	<i>Myles Eason</i>
RAINBOW, School Porter and Groundsman	<i>Douglas Ives</i>
RUPERT BILLINGS, Senior Assistant Master at Hilary Hall	<i>Colin Gordon</i>
GODFREY POND, Headmaster of Hilary Hall	<i>George Howe</i>
MISS EVELYN WHITCHURCH, Principal of St Swithins School for Girls	<i>Margaret Rutherford</i>
MISS GOSSAGE, Senior Assistant Mistress at St. Swithins	<i>Viola Lyel</i>
HOPCROFT MI., Pupil at Hilary Hall	<i>Peter Davies</i>
BARBARA CAHOUN, Pupil at St Swithins	<i>Molly Weir</i>
JOYCE HARPER, Assistant Mistress at St. Swithins	<i>Patricia Hastings</i>
THE REVEREND EDWARD PECK	<i>Stringer Davis</i>
MRS PECK, his wife	<i>Betty Woolfe</i>
EDGAR SOWTER	<i>Douglas Stewart</i>
MRS SOWTHER, his wife	<i>Irene Relph</i>

The Play directed by RICHARD BIRD

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the Masters' Common Room at Hilary Hall School for Boys, in Hampshire

ACT I

The first day of the Summer term. Afternoon

ACT II

Saturday afternoon. Three weeks later

ACT III

Two hours later

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(See also page ii)

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THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE

ACT I

SCENE—*The Masters' Common Room at Hilary Hall School for Boys, in Hampshire. The first day of the Summer term, about 4 p.m.*

The room is furnished with the typical austerity of its kind. Up L.C. at the back are french windows with corner seats and heavy curtains, opening on to a terrace with a view of the school grounds beyond. Up R at the back are double doors, which lead to the hall, where the staircase, lit by two windows, winds up and out of sight L to R. A passage below the staircase leads off R to the boys' part of the building. The fireplace is C of the wall R, and down stage L a door, over which hangs a map of the world, leads to the Headmaster's study. A heavy oak refectory table dominates the centre of the room. There are elbow chairs R and L of the table and a dining-room chair above it. There is a moderately comfortable easy chair upstage of the fireplace, and another to R of the french windows. There is a row of four hat pegs, on one of which hangs the Headmaster's mortar-board, on the wall L, between the study door and the french windows. Beneath the pegs stands a dining-room chair. There are two small lockers for personal belongings, on the R wall, above and below the fireplace. A well-filled bookcase, with three silver cups on the top, stands between the french windows and the double doors. Underneath the downstage locker R is a small table with a telephone on a long flex, and some old magazines. By it stand a waste-paper basket and a stool. Above the fireplace there is another small table with a geographical globe on it. A marble clock and two bronze figures carrying candles with shades, stand on the mantelpiece, over which hangs an oil painting of a Victorian gentleman. A brass fender with fire-irons, and a rug in front of the fireplace, complete the furniture in the room. In the hall, above the L double door, is a small table. The school bell stands on the sill of the first window, and the school notice board hangs on the wall between the windows.

(See the Ground Plan at the end of the Play.)

When the CURTAIN rises the stage is empty. The R side of the french windows is open, and the sun is shining brilliantly. The double doors are closed but the Common Room, if not luxurious, looks bright and airy. After a moment the double doors are barged open from outside and DICK TASSELL enters. He is a tall, cheerful young man of about twenty-six, hatless and wearing a sports jacket and grey flannel trousers. He has had to shoulder the doors open, as he is laden with a suitcase, a cricket bag, a bag of golf clubs, a tennis racquet and a net bag of tennis balls. He staggers with all these to the table C and drops everything on it. He looks

around him with an air of resignation, then turning, moves to the double doors and calls.

TASSELL (*calling*) Rainbow. (*He moves to the locker above the fire-place, opens it and glances in. He is surprised and pleased at what he sees*) Good Lord! (*He pulls out a dusty-looking mortar-board and gown. He blows the dust off the mortar-board, puts it on to avoid holding it, and moving down R starts to shake the gown*)

(RAINBOW comes down the stairs and enters the room. He is a gloomy-eyed man of middle age. Employed as school porter-cum-groundsman, he achieves a compromise by wearing a porter's trousers and waistcoat but no tunic. He carries a duster. His tone of voice matches his lugubrious expression)

(*In a friendly tone*) Hullo, Rainbow.

RAINBOW (*gloomy but pleased*) Mr Tassell. (*He moves L of TASSELL and shakes hands with him*) Well, well. Very pleased to see you back, sir.

TASSELL (*wryly*) Not so sure that I am. After being airborne for five years, I'm afraid I'm going to find Hilary Hall a bit slow. (*He points to his luggage*) I just want a thing or two out of these, then you can take them up. (*He looks around reminiscently*) Five years. (*He looks at Rainbow*) You don't look a day older. (*He crosses below the table to the hat pegs, looking at the gown*) A bit moth-eaten, that's all.

RAINBOW. Eh?

TASSELL (*indicating the gown*) This. Never expected to find it still in my old locker. (*He takes off the mortar-board and hangs it with the gown on one of the pegs*)

RAINBOW (*shaking his head*) The school was evacuated, soon after you'd gone. Only come back this term.

TASSELL (*moving above the table c and opening the cricket bag*) Gosh, you've had a long holiday. (*He takes a pair of white cricket boots out of the bag and places them on the table c*)

RAINBOW (*moving R of Tassell; lugubriously*) Holiday—I've had mice in the music-room, dry-rot in one of the class-rooms, and beetles all over my basement.

TASSELL. Sounds most unpleasant. (*He grins resignedly*) Same old Rainbow, can see that, and same old Hilary Hall. Might as well get used to it, I suppose. (*He rummages in the cricket bag*)

RAINBOW (*mysteriously*) The same, yet not the same.

TASSELL (*looking up*) Mm?

RAINBOW. It won't be what it was—whatever it possibly may be, perhaps.

TASSELL (*confused*) Say that again. (*He takes a cricket bat from the bag*)

RAINBOW (*profoundly*) Mark my words—two into one won't go. It isn't feasible.

TASSELL (*moving with the bat below the table c*) What the hell are you talking about? (*He makes some practice strokes with the bat*)

RAINBOW. I'm sorry, Mr Tassell—but I can't go over the head of the Head.

TASSELL (*leaning on the table c*) Sounds to me as if you'd gone off the head of the head.

RAINBOW (*moving below the table c to R of Tassell*) I'm telling you confidential, he says to me.

TASSELL (*placing the bat on the table c*) Who says?

RAINBOW. Mr Pond says.

TASSELL (*enlightened*) Oh—and you can't go over Mr Pond's head. (*He eases L*)

RAINBOW (*patiently*) The Head's head, that's what I said.

(RUPERT BILLINGS *comes down the stairs and enters the room. He is in the thirties, has a cynical disposition and a dry way of talking. He is carrying an armful of books, a folded woollen scarf in the Hilary Hall colours of red and yellow, a mortar-board and gown and a folding leather frame with four photographs in it*)

BILLINGS (*as he enters*) I say, Rainbow, my bedroom door's locked.

TASSELL (*easing down L*) Hullo, R.B.

BILLINGS (*pleased to see Tassell*) So the prodigal son is home again. (*Still laden, he crosses to Tassell and endeavours to shake hands with him*) I thought I heard a faint whisper of your arrival. (*He turns to Rainbow*) You might unlock it when you go up, and take my cases in. (*He puts the books, mortar-board and photograph frame on the table c*) I left 'em on the landing. (*To Tassell*) Well, how are you? No, don't tell me; (*he puts the gown and scarf on the table*) we'll save all that for the long summer evenings. (*He picks up the bag of tennis balls*) The weapons of peace once more. Glad to see you're well armed. (*He replaces the bag of balls on the table and picks up some of his books*)

TASSELL. I suppose you've been taking games in my absence?

BILLINGS (*crossing with the books to the locker below the fireplace; dryly*) I have. For that reason—if no other—I'm delighted to see you back.

TASSELL (*moving to the french windows; to Rainbow*) How's the pitch, by the way?

RAINBOW (*moving above the table c*) It's all right now. What it'll be in a week's time it's not for me to say.

(BILLINGS, *before opening the locker, puts his books down for a moment or two on the table below it, and glances at an article in one of the magazines*)

TASSELL (*glancing out of the window*) The weather looks all right to me.

RAINBOW (*shaking his head*) It's the other I'm referring to. (*He*

picks up Tassell's suitcase and cricket bag) Grass needs a rest, same as we do. After all—it's only human.

(RAINBOW *shakes his head again, moves into the hall, carries the case and bag upstairs and exits*. TASSELL *looks after him curiously, then moves to the double doors and closes them*. BILLINGS *puts down the magazine, opens the locker and puts his books in it*)

TASSELL (*moving above the L end of the table c*) You know, I think old Rainbow's beginning to go at the edges.

BILLINGS. Nothing to go. (*He takes a pair of boxing-gloves out of the locker and looks at them in surprise*) How the devil did those get in there?

TASSELL. You confiscated them from Hopcroft last term—my last term, I mean.

BILLINGS (*remembering*) So I did. Five years ago. (*He moves above the table c*) You've got a memory. Little blighter was wearing them in chapel—for a bet. (*He drops the gloves on the table c*)

TASSELL. He's been saying the most extraordinary things.

BILLINGS. Hopcroft?

TASSELL. No—Rainbow. Seems to think something funny's going to happen here.

BILLINGS (*picking up the remainder of his books*) Be the first time it ever has. (*He moves to his locker*)

TASSELL (*picking up his bag of golf clubs*) Hopcroft's left by now, I suppose? (*He leans the golf bag against the back of the easy chair above the fireplace*)

BILLINGS (*placing the books in his locker*) Yes. But his brother's here—Hopcroft Mi. The same thing, only a good deal worse. (*He brings the remains of a stick of pink rock out of his locker*) Ugh!

TASSELL (*moving to the table c*) What's that? Another pre-war confiscation? (*He picks up the boxing-gloves and slings them into the easy chair above the fireplace*)

BILLINGS. Yes. (*He licks his sticky fingers, about to return the rock to the locker*) Oh, it's one of my favourites. (*He puts the rock in his jacket pocket*)

TASSELL (*sitting in the chair R of the table c*) Thirteen weeks in the heart of darkest Hampshire. First term back seems a bit of a grisly prospect.

BILLINGS (*moving to the table and picking up his mortar-board and gown*) You should have been with us for the last fifteen terms. (*He takes the mortar-board and gown to the pegs L*)

TASSELL. Yes, Rainbow said you'd been evacuated.

BILLINGS (*hanging the mortar-board and gown on the pegs*) That's putting it mildly. We were moved three times. The first was a boarding-house—St. Moritz.

TASSELL (*surprised*) Switzerland?

BILLINGS (*turning*) No, Swiss Cottage. We then went to share a veterinary college.

TASSELL. You mean with a whole lot of animals?

BILLINGS. Yes, but to prevent any misunderstanding we were always referred to as their honoured guests. We ended up in a disused fire-station near Ludlow. Up the pole to bed every night. (*He wanders up to the french windows*) Thank Heaven to be back in Hampshire. (*He steps just outside the window and looks around*)

TASSELL. Well, I don't know. Twelve miles to the nearest flick, forty to a theatre.

(*BILLINGS turns and re-enters*)

And as for feminine society—nil.

BILLINGS. There's always Mrs Hampstead.

TASSELL. Mrs Hampstead may be the matron of this school, but she's certainly not feminine. Female possibly, but feminine certainly not. Damn it, she's got an R.A.F. moustache.

BILLINGS (*moving L of the table c*) Better known as Hampstead Heath. Yes, there is that, I admit.

TASSELL. It's all very well for you—you hate women, anyway.

BILLINGS. If you had to live with four aunts, all wanting to mother you . . . Look what they've done this time. (*He moves below the table c, picks up the scarf and lets it unroll. It is about ten feet long*)

TASSELL (*rising*) Great Scott! (*He picks up the end of the scarf and helps Billings roughly roll it up*)

BILLINGS (*eyeing the scarf gloomily*) They did a yard each.

TASSELL. A little warm, isn't it, for the summer term? (*He picks up the photograph frame and looks at it*)

BILLINGS. They were knitting it for next winter, but I stopped them at the end of the March quarter. (*He puts the scarf on the table c*)

TASSELL (*indicating the photograph frame*) This is new, isn't it? The portrait gallery?

BILLINGS (*sadly*) Last birthday. And they always make sure I pack it.

TASSELL (*looking at the photographs*) So this is the Big Four. (*He opens the frame and stands it on the table c, facing the audience*)

BILLINGS (*picking up the cricket bat and using the handle as a pointer*) Reading from left to right. Aunts Flora, Nora, Dora, and Auntie Ethel.

TASSELL. Why Ethel?

BILLINGS. I don't think my grandmother expected her. (*He puts the bat on the table*)

(*POND enters down L. He is a small, pompous man of about fifty, dressed in a dark suit, and wearing his gown. He is carrying a letter, a telegram, some school lists and a notebook*)

POND. Ah—good afternoon, gentlemen.

BILLINGS. 'Afternoon, Headmaster.

POND (*shaking hands with Billings and then with Tassell*) Return of the warrior? Splendid. (*He pats Tassell on the shoulder*) And delighted to be back in harness, I've no doubt.

TASSELL. Oh yes, rather.

(*BILLINGS eyes Tassell dryly*)

POND. Capital. (*He crosses Billings to the pegs, takes down his mortar-board and dons it*) We have all pulled together in the past. I am sure we shall continue to do so (*he moves down L*) in the circumstances about to prevail.

BILLINGS. In the what?

POND. Of—of course, you haven't heard the news. It was very sudden indeed. In fact I've had no time to inform the parents as yet.

(*BILLINGS moves to L of Tassell below the table c and folds up the photograph frame*)

TASSELL. Nothing bad, sir, I hope?

POND. No, no—inconvenient, shall we say? No more. (*He opens out the letter*) I received the following two days ago from the Ministry of Devacuation. (*He reads*) "Dear Sir." (*He stops and looks at Billings and Tassell*) Sit down.

(*TASSELL sits on the arm of the chair R of the table c, and BILLINGS perches himself on the front edge of the table c*)

(*He resumes reading*) "Under the Emergency Powers Act, nineteen forty, Sub-section three, para. fifteen—Schools, Boarding and Private, Elementary and Preparatory, Secondary, Kindergarten and Grammar—this Ministry is empowered to allocate educational premises. Some schools returning from evacuation have, unfortunately, lost their original buildings, and it has become unavoidably necessary to ask you to share your own with another school of similar size and type. You will receive a further communication in due course. Your obedient servant, C. C. Frap-hampton, Deputy Sub-Controller of Premises, Schools Division."

(*BILLINGS and TASSELL rise*)

TASSELL. So that's what Rainbow was blithering about—two into one won't go—

POND. You know what these Ministries are—their yea is yea and their nay is nay.

BILLINGS (*easing L of the chair L of the table*) In due course, he says, doesn't he? That's probably two or three years. Very likely it'll never happen.

POND (*crossing below the L end of the table c*) It has happened. (*He puts the Ministry letter and the school lists on the L end of the table c*) Yesterday afternoon this wire came from Hastings. (*He reads the telegram*) "Staff and pupils arriving four-fifteen tomorrow. Whit-

church, Principal of St Swithins." (*He hands Billings the telegram to look at*)

TASSELL (*curiously*) St Swithins—

BILLINGS. Now I suppose it'll rain for forty days.

POND (*taking the telegram back from Billings; severely*) This is hardly the time for Fourth Form humour, Billings. (*He glances again at the telegram*) Staff and pupils at four-fifteen. (*He crosses below Tassell to the fireplace and stands with his back to it*) That's only a few minutes after our own boys arrive. Before then, we've got to get everything settled. Accommodation, of course, will be the principal problem. Perhaps one of you'd take down the details—

(BILLINGS signs to Tassell to do it)

Billings.

(BILLINGS crosses below Tassell to Pond)

(*He gives the notebook to Billings*) Now, to start with—sleeping quarters.

(BILLINGS takes a pencil out of Tassell's breast pocket. TASSELL perches himself on the R end of the table c)

(*To Billings*) I propose to put you in Mrs Hampstead's room.

BILLINGS (*outraged*) What!

(TASSELL grins)

POND. You and Tassell.

(TASSELL rises in horror)

It's a large airy room—

BILLINGS. Yes, and she's a large hairy woman—

POND. Mrs Hampstead's peculiarities are neither here nor there.

BILLINGS. They may not be here, but they will be there.

TASSELL. Surely we shan't be as overcrowded as all that?

POND. It will be a severe squeeze for everyone.

BILLINGS. Well, I refuse to do any squeezing in Mrs Hampstead's room. (*He thrusts the notebook into Tassell's hands*) I'd rather go back to my aunts. (*He turns and moves up stage to the double doors*)

POND (*catching Billings and hurrying him back; pained*) Billings, if you're going to be unreasonable from the start—

(TASSELL perches himself on the R end of the table c)

BILLINGS. Unreasonable— (*He puts the pencil in his breast pocket*)

POND. Mrs Hampstead agreed most readily.

BILLINGS. Oh—did she?

POND. She made no difficulties whatever about moving into your room.

BILLINGS. Into mine? (*He understands*) Oh. Objection overruled.

TASSELL. Same here.

POND (*eyeing them reprovingly*) We must try to remember that we are the hosts on this occasion. St Swithins are our honoured guests. Kindly bear that in mind.

BILLINGS (*to Tassell; ominously*) Honoured guests.

POND (*crossing below the table c to l*) Now—we've got Matron in your room, and you two in hers. (*To Tassell*) Make a note of that.

(*TASSELL takes his pencil back from Billings' breast pocket and makes an entry in the notebook*)

That leaves Tassell's room free for the St Swithins staff.

TASSELL. They'll certainly have a squeeze.

POND (*correcting himself*) For one of their staff. I'm not quite certain about the rest. (*He puts his hands behind him, bunches up his gown, moves to the french windows and stands looking out*) There are no more rooms in the staff wing—

BILLINGS (*moving above the table c; casually*) Except yours, of course.

POND (*turning his head; taken aback*) Mine?

BILLINGS. It's the largest and airiest of the lot. Quite a few of them could sleep with you in there.

POND. Not with someone in my position.

BILLINGS (*curiously*) What position d'you sleep in?

POND (*dropping his bunched-up gown and turning*) My position as Headmaster. (*He moves down l*)

TASSELL. Well, perhaps you could just share with their Headmaster—Whitechapel, or whatever his name is?

POND (*picking up a few of his lists from the l end of the table c; firmly*) I suggest we leave the question of my room for the moment. We must avoid favouritism at all costs. I hope that's quite clear?

BILLINGS (*crossing to the stool down r*) Clear as crystal. (*He sits, takes the stick of rock from his pocket and surreptitiously starts chewing it*)

POND. Good. Well then—it occurred to me we could probably sleep most of their masters in the carpenter's shop— How does that strike you?

TASSELL. I think you've hit the nail on the head, Head.

BILLINGS. Convenient, too—they could make their beds and then lie on them.

POND (*crossing to the fireplace; dryly*) There will be no shortage of beds. (*He turns*) We have all those camp ones in the loft. We can set . . . (*He half catches Billings sucking the rock and stops speaking*)

(*BILLINGS looks up and hastily hides the rock*)

(*He resumes*) We can set up the requisite number in the carpenter's shop and the remainder will do for the boys.

BILLINGS (*surprised*) Our boys?

POND. No, no—theirs, naturally. (*He moves a little up R*)

(*BILLINGS takes a bite of rock*)

(*He turns suddenly*) The only question . . . (*He sees the rock*) Give me that. (*He moves to Billings, takes the rock, and puts it in his jacket pocket*) The only question is where to put them. Our boys could give up one of the dormitories, I suppose—

BILLINGS. Seems a pity to move them.

POND (*with his hands in his jacket pockets, moving thoughtfully up R*) Just what I was thinking. But where else could they go? There isn't anywhere.

BILLINGS. That passage in C wing is fairly wide, and there are doors at both ends.

POND (*taking the rock from his pocket*) So there are. Excellent idea. (*He absent-mindedly takes a bite of rock*)

(*BILLINGS sees him do it. POND hastily puts the rock behind his back*)

TASSELL (*mildly surprised*) C wing? Outside the stinks room, d'you mean?

POND (*speaking as if his mouth is full of rock*) Don't be irrelevant, Tassell, please. If the passage in question runs past the scientific laboratories, what of it? It may be a little (*he removes a piece of rock from his teeth with one finger*) awkward for our science classes, but we must put up with these things.

BILLINGS (*to Tassell*) After all, St Swithins are our honoured guests.

TASSELL (*making entries in the notebook*) "Masters—carpenter's shop. Boys—passage outside stinks."

BILLINGS. Any over can always sleep inside.

POND. That's true.

TASSELL (*sarcastically*) And I suppose they can all use the sinks as wash-basins.

POND. Which sinks?

TASSELL. The sinks in the stinks.

POND. So they can. I'm glad you thought of that. I was afraid they might have to do without. (*He moves L of the table C, puts the rock on the tennis racquet and wipes his fingers on Billing's scarf*) So much for sleeping quarters. Now for meals. As far as I can see, Cook will simply have to stagger them.

BILLINGS. That won't be difficult.

TASSELL (*to Pond*) I don't quite follow, sir.

POND. Simple enough. We shall have a first and second service.

TASSELL. Oh—like the railways?

BILLINGS (*dryly*) First service hot, second—cold.

POND. Oh, I was proposing the same menu for each.

BILLINGS (*looking meaningly at Pond*) So was I.

POND. Ha! I see your point. Well, I expect they'd like to lunch

at one, so as a matter of courtesy we might take the first service. At twelve-thirty.

(BILLINGS nods and indicates to Tassell to make a note of it.

TASSELL complies, making a "thumbs up" gesture with one thumb to Billings)

Next—classrooms. (*Grudgingly*) I'm afraid we shall have to allot them some of those.

TASSELL. Unless, of course, they worked a night shift or something.

POND. There's no need to be flippant. I have the classrooms worked out already. (*He sits L of the table c*) It involves a certain amount of general post, but that's inevitable. (*He looks among his papers and finds the relevant list*) I suggest as follows: (*He reads rapidly*) "Upper Fourth combines with Lower Fifth. Lower Third to Upper Fourth's room. Upper Fifth and Middle Fourth to Upper Third. Fifth to Sixth, and vice versa." I think that's quite straightforward.

BILLINGS. Oh, quite.

TASSELL (*a little dizzy*) What about Remove?

POND. Remove stays where it is. (*He indicates to Tassell that he wants the notebook back*)

(TASSELL passes the notebook to Pond)

Thank you, Tassell. Oh, one other point. I'm afraid St Swithins staff will have to use this common room. There's no alternative to that.

BILLINGS (*rising and moving above the table c*) What about your study?

TASSELL. Don't be silly—Mr Pond'll be sharing that with Whitechapel.

BILLINGS. Of course—I hadn't thought of that. (*He moves up L*)

POND (*unhappily*) Neither had I.

(RAINBOW, putting on his green baize apron, enters up R, leaving the door open)

RAINBOW (*to Pond*) Beg pardon, sir—the bus is just arriving.

POND (*absently*) Bring it in. (*He realizes*) Oh. (*He rises*) I mean—there are two parcels of books on it, for me. Just put them in my study. (*He moves above the table towards the doors up R*)

(TASSELL rises, and he and BILLINGS move to the pegs L and put on their mortar-boards and gowns)

RAINBOW. Two parcels of books. In the study. Yes, sir.

(RAINBOW exits up R leaving the R door open)

POND (*hurriedly*) Billings—Tassell—see the boys in, will you? (*He moves to the door up R, then pauses, having thought of something*) Oh,

and by-the-by, you'd better prepare them for the coming—ah—
invasion. I shall, of course, address the school after roll-call, but
in the meantime, you might just impress upon them that—
er——

BILLINGS (*nodding*) Honoured guests.

TASSELL. No favouritism.

POND. Exactly. (*Briskly*) Now, I must go and talk to Mrs
Hampstead about the stinks in the sinks—I mean—er—vice versa.

(POND moves into the hall leaving the R door open, goes up the stairs
and exits)

TASSELL (*moving to the french windows*) I say, R.B., what are you
going to say to your lot?

BILLINGS (*moving to the french windows and opening the L half of
them*) I shall suggest that they give our honoured guests a very
warm welcome.

(TASSELL and BILLINGS exit by the french windows. An old-
fashioned door-bell rings off. There is a pause, then the silence is
broken by several imperative knocks on the front door. There is another
pause and silence)

WHITCHURCH (*off; calling*) Hullo. Someone.

(MISS EVELYN WHITCHURCH, a formidable woman of about fifty,
severely dressed in travelling clothes, enters by the french windows and
sails across the stage to R. She is carrying an attaché case, a handbag
and an umbrella.

She is followed by MISS GOSSAGE, who is hearty and bespectacled,
with a red, scrubbed-looking face. She is in the middle thirties and wears
tweeds with sensible shoes. She is carrying a kit-bag with a zip-fastener,
and has a haversack slung across her shoulder)

(*Looking around the room*) The Staff Common Room, I can only
suppose. Huh! Encouraging. Outside—no answer. In here—no
staff.

GOSSAGE (*standing up L*) Not very home from homey, is it?

WHITCHURCH (*putting the attaché case on the R end of the table c*)
I've warned you, my dear Gossage, one cannot expect other
schools to provide the comforts of St. Swithins.

GOSSAGE. Oh, I know, Miss Whitchurch. (*She moves L of the
table c*) Still, I think they should make an effort. After all, atmo-
sphere's jolly important. (*She puts her kit-bag down on the floor*)

WHITCHURCH. So is someone to answer the door. (*She moves to
the doors up R, opens the R door, goes into the hall and calls up the stairs*)
Hey there! Coo-ee! (*She calls again, exasperatedly*) Oh, coo-ee! (*She
re-enters the room, leaving both doors open, and stands R of the table c*)
The place is badly run, that's quite evident. We shall have to put
a stop to that. Idle servants beget an idle staff. It spreads to the
girls, and before you know where you are, your moral tone is in

ribbons. (*She turns to the fireplace and runs her finger along the mantel-piece*) Look at that—inches thick.

GOSSAGE (*moving to the bookcase and running her finger along the ledge*) I say. You can write your name in it. (*She writes with her finger in the dust*) G-O-S-S . . .

WHITCHURCH (*moving above the R end of the table C*) Why bother. (*She looks at her brooch watch*) The girls will be here before we have even broken the ice. Did you watch our luggage on to the bus?

GOSSAGE (*turning from the bookcase*) Miss Harper took charge of it. (*She moves down L*) You wouldn't think any mistresses worth their salt would tolerate such a barracky old comm. (*She crosses to the fireplace*) Still, I expect we can soon jollify it up a bit.

WHITCHURCH. The room, possibly. Its occupants—I very much fear the worst. (*She puts her umbrella on the R end of the table C and surveys the clutter on the table*) Anyone content to live amid all this . . . (*She picks up the stick of rock*) Now I'm sure of the worst. Sucked at both ends.

GOSSAGE (*moving R of Miss Whitchurch*) What is it?

WHITCHURCH (*looking at the end of the piece of rock*) It says "Ilfracombe". Put it in the waste-paper basket. (*She hands the rock to Miss Gossage*) How nasty.

(MISS GOSSAGE moves to the waste-paper basket and drops the piece of rock in it)

(*She moves L of the table C, wipes her gloved fingers on her handkerchief, and notices the cricket bat*) Cricket, I see.

GOSSAGE (*moving below the table C, licking her sticky fingers*) Yes. You know, I'm afraid we shall have trouble with some of the girls. Netball in summer makes them absolutely melt.

WHITCHURCH. I thought that subject was closed, Miss Gossage. (*She starts to take off her gloves*) Melt or not, St Swithins has always played netball winter and summer. Cricket is no game for growing girls.

GOSSAGE. Most colls play it nowadays.

WHITCHURCH. If other schools choose to ruin their girls' figures, let them do so. (*She puts her gloves in her handbag*) Cricket thickens the biceps, enlarges the bust, and makes for very large hands and feet.

GOSSAGE. We don't really know that it does.

WHITCHURCH (*acidly*) Don't we? Look at these. (*She picks up Tassell's cricket boots*)

GOSSAGE. Perhaps you're right, Miss Whitchurch.

WHITCHURCH. Of course I'm right. (*She gives the boots to Miss Gossage*) Why, they're big enough for Don Bradshaw, or Bradfield, or whatever his name is.

(MISS GOSSAGE takes the boots and puts them on the floor at the downstage end of the fender. As she does so, she sees the boxing-gloves on the easy chair by the fireplace)

GOSSAGE (*staring at the gloves in amazement; in a puzzled tone*) Miss Whitchurch— (*She picks up the gloves and holds them out for Miss Whitchurch to see*)

WHITCHURCH (*moving to Miss Gossage and taking the gloves gingerly; stunned*) Pugilism!

GOSSAGE. You don't suppose they teach it here?

WHITCHURCH (*moving below the table c*) Well, I don't suppose they wear them for walks. Of course, self-defence is invaluable to any girl—but of a lady-like kind— (*She drops the left-hand boxing-glove on the table c and puts the other on her own right hand*)

GOSSAGE (*nodding*) After all, my ju-jitsu classes are equal to anything.

WHITCHURCH. Well, that explains the cricket, anyway. After a pummelling with these (*she hits her ungloved hand with the other*), I doubt if the girls have any figures left worth bothering about.

(RAINBOW, *carrying a parcel of books, enters up R and closes the L door. He is surprised at seeing the ladies and moves down R of Miss Whitchurch*)

(*Coldly*) Good afternoon.

RAINBOW. Good afternoon, madam.

WHITCHURCH. You are the school porter, I take it?

RAINBOW. Porter and groundsman.

WHITCHURCH. Name?

RAINBOW (*taken aback*) I beg your pardon?

WHITCHURCH. Your name? We might as well know it now as later.

RAINBOW (*looking at her curiously*) The name is Rainbow, madam.

WHITCHURCH (*after a moment*) Well, you can't help that. (*She gestures unthinkingly with the boxing-glove*)

(RAINBOW *ducks*)

I hope in future (*she removes the glove and puts it on the table c*) you will answer the door more promptly.

RAINBOW (*defensively*) I was out the front, madam, getting . . .

WHITCHURCH. That will do. *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.*

RAINBOW. I beg your pardon?

WHITCHURCH. Granted—on this occasion. I want to see the Principal immediately.

RAINBOW. The Head, you mean?

WHITCHURCH. The Principal of Hilary Hall. As soon as possible.

RAINBOW (*crossing below Miss Whitchurch to the door down L*) The Head's busy just at the moment—with Matron. If you wouldn't mind waiting, madam—

WHITCHURCH. Just one moment.

(RAINBOW *pauses and turns*)

Before seeing the Principal, there is one thing I should like to know——

RAINBOW. Yes, madam?

WHITCHURCH. How many mistresses have you?

RAINBOW (*outraged*) I am a bachelor, madam, in every sense of the word.

(RAINBOW *exits down L., closing the door behind him. MISS WHITCHURCH and MISS GOSSAGE look after him curiously*)

GOSSAGE (*moving above the L end of the table c*) What a rum sort of porter.

WHITCHURCH. Glandular trouble. (*She crosses to R of the table c*) The man is obviously at the awkward age.

GOSSAGE. Seems a funny sort of school altogether. I wonder what the Principal's like?

WHITCHURCH (*picking up her umbrella*) I don't look forward at all to finding out. Anyone who could employ a man like that—— However, what can't be cured must be endured. I shall keep as aloof as possible. You, Miss Harper, and the girls will do the same.

GOSSAGE. Yes, Miss Whitchurch.

(RAINBOW *enters down L and crosses above the ladies to the doors up R. As he passes MISS WHITCHURCH she shudders. As RAINBOW goes into the hall, he looks back at them, eyeing them curiously. MISS WHITCHURCH catches his eye and looks away hurriedly.*)

RAINBOW *exits down the passage R, leaving the R door open*)

WHITCHURCH. And I think the girls had better have an extra hour each week for ju-jitsu.

GOSSAGE. Yes, Miss Whitchurch.

WHITCHURCH (*impatiently*) Well, I don't know how much longer this woman's going to be.

(MISS GOSSAGE *moves outside the french windows and looks around*)

Perhaps we'd better reconnoitre on our own and take stock of the accommodation.

GOSSAGE (*re-entering and moving above the table c*) It doesn't look a very large building for two schools.

WHITCHURCH. No. (*She moves to R of Miss Gossage*) We shall need quite three-quarters of it. I intend to let them know exactly how much we want—cut and dried, and no nonsense. One must be firm at the start, or . . .

(*She breaks off as RAINBOW, carrying a second parcel of books, enters up R. He crosses to the door down L almost pushing between Miss Gossage and Miss Whitchurch*)

(*She protests*) Oh!

(RAINBOW *turns, bumps the door open and exits*)

I suppose one can learn ju-jitsu at any age?

GOSSAGE (*enthusiastically*) Oh yes, rather.

WHITTCURCH (*picking up her suitcase*) I may make it compulsory for the staff as well.

GOSSAGE. Yes, Miss Whitchurch.

WHITTCURCH (*moving to the doors up R*) Come along, Gossage.

(MISS GOSSAGE *picks up her kit-bag*)

Let's investigate this curious establishment. I doubt very much if it's even an approved school.

(MISS WHITTCURCH and MISS GOSSAGE *exit down the passage R leaving both doors open.*)

RAINBOW *enters down L, looks surprised to find the room now empty, shrugs his shoulders and starts to cross to the door up R.*

As he does so, POND comes down the stairs and enters the room. He is carrying a book

POND (*moving below the table c*) Did you bring them in?

RAINBOW (*L of the table c*) No, sir. They come of their own accord.

POND (*severely*) Don't be sarcastic, Rainbow, please. Where are they?

RAINBOW. Gone of their own accord too, it seems. Daft, if you ask me, sir, the pair of them.

POND (*exasperated*) What are you talking about, Rainbow? (*He crosses to the door down L*) Are those books in my study, or are they not?

RAINBOW. The books are. The ladies aren't.

POND (*turning*) What ladies?

RAINBOW. There was two of them, sir, I think they was wanting. And they was wanting you, too, sir.

POND. I'm expecting no-one. (*He turns again to the door down L*)

RAINBOW (*with gloomy satisfaction*) Ah. Then perhaps that's why they've gone.

(POND *nods and exits down L. RAINBOW moves up C.*)

As he does so, BILLINGS and TASSELL enter from the passage up R, still wearing their mortar-boards and gowns. They leave the doors open

BILLINGS (*seeing Rainbow*) So this is where you're skulking. Tuck-boxes. The bus driver refuses to bring them in single-handed. (*He crosses to the pegs L, takes off his mortar-board and gown, and hangs them up*)

RAINBOW (*moving R of the table c; nodding gloomily*) They didn't ought to be allowed. Wicked, them things are. I strained my stomach once with a tuck-box.

TASSELL (*moving R of Rainbow; grinning*) Funny—so did I.

RAINBOW. Bound with iron at the corners.

TASSELL (*rubbing his stomach; ruefully*) That's just what it felt like.

RAINBOW (*moving to the doors up R*) And forty-six of 'em to bring in.

BILLINGS (*moving up L; cheerfully*) Not this afternoon. You'll have the St. Swithins ones, too. (*He notices the writing in the dust on the bookcase ledge, stops, and stares at it*)

RAINBOW. Murder, that's what it is.

(RAINBOW *exits up R, closing both doors behind him*)

TASSELL (*crossing to the pegs L*) Well, the little blighters look as healthy as always. (*He takes off his gown*)

BILLINGS (*staring at the writing in the dust*) What the devil's this?

TASSELL (*easing to the bookcase*) What's that?

BILLINGS. Something written in the dust—G-O-S—Gossage. (*He pronounces it as though it were French*)

TASSELL. What's Gossage?

BILLINGS (*moving to the chair R of the table c*) I don't know.

(TASSELL *moves to the pegs L, takes off his mortar-board and hangs it with his gown on the pegs*)

Must be some new rude word Rainbow picked up in the holidays. (*He sits*)

TASSELL (*moving below the table c*) How did your lot take the news? (*He perches himself on the table c*)

BILLINGS. About St Swithins?

(TASSELL *nods*)

With characteristic British phlegm.

TASSELL. Same here. Except for a certain amount of jubilation that it might mean one bath a week instead of two.

BILLINGS (*calmly*) I expect they'll be at each other's throats in the first five minutes.

TASSELL (*picking up the boxing-gloves with a grin and tying the laces together*) Better pass these on to Hopcroft Mi.—if his brother's left, I suppose they're his property now.

BILLINGS. If Hopcroft Mi. doesn't take to St Swithins, he won't be bothered by any Queensberry rules—something rude, swift, and below the belt is more in his line. That boy needs a firm hand—very firm—and this term he's going to get it.

(*There is a knock at the doors up R*)

Come in.

(HOPCROFT MI. *enters up R, closing the door behind him. He is a boy of about twelve, with a deceptively innocent air. He is dressed in a maroon-coloured blazer with yellow edgings, a grey shirt, Hilary Hall tie, grey shorts and stockings and black shoes*)

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