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GOOD NIGHT MRS PUFFIN

A Play in Three Acts

by

ARTHUR LOVEGROVE

SAMUEL  FRENCH

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GOOD NIGHT MRS PUFFIN

Produced by James P. Sherwood at the Strand Theatre, London, on the 18th July, 1961, and subsequently at the Duchess Theatre, London, with the following cast of characters —

(*in the order of their appearance*)

ETHEL FORDYCE	*Cicely Hullett*
JACQUELINE FORDYCE	*Margo Mayne*
PAMELA FORDYCE	*Jill Hyem*
NICHOLAS FORDYCE	*Rodney Diak*
ANNIE	*Barbara Whatley*
AMELIA PUFFIN	*Irene Handl*
HENRY FORDYCE	*Jack Allen*
STEPHEN PARKER	*Keneth Thornett*
VICTOR PARKER	*Brian Parker*
ROGER VINCENT	*Murray Kash*

Directed by ALEXANDER DORE

Decor by JOHN PIPER

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the drawing-room of the Fordyce family at their house in Hampstead

ACT I

A week before Christmas. About 4 p.m.

ACT II

Later that evening

ACT III

Three days later. Evening.

During Act III the lights are lowered for a few moments to denote the passage of one hour

Time—the present



GOOD NIGHT MRS PUFFIN

ACT I

SCENE—*The drawing-room of the Fordyce family at their house in Hampstead. A week before Christmas. About 4 p.m.*

It is a nicely furnished room that has the air of being lived-in. Double doors C *of the back wall, approached by two steps, lead to the hall and other parts of the house off* L. *A door down* R *leads to the study. A bay window* R *overlooks the garden, with the bare branches of the trees and houses in the distance. The fireplace is* L. *There are built-in shelves filling the back wall,* R *and* L *of the double doors. A long table stands in the window bay, with a Christmas tree and Christmas cards on it. A smaller table, on which there is a large table-lamp and a telephone, stands in the corner up* R. *A small console for drinks is under the shelves up* L. *Above the fireplace there is a television set on which stands a table-lamp. A large sofa is* RC *with easy chairs to match up* LC *and down* L. *A low coffee-table is in front of the sofa. The shelves up* R *carry books, ornaments and Christmas cards. The shelves up* L *have ornaments, Christmas cards and various bottles of drinks on the bottom shelf. There are more Christmas cards on the mantelpiece along with an ornate gilt clock. A good picture, in a heavy frame, hangs over the fireplace. There are electric wall-brackets over the fireplace, with the switches* R *of the doors up* C. *A small occasional table stands down* L *of the easy chair* LC. *Against the back wall of the hall is a console table with a bowl of flowers, and above it, an electric wall-bracket. The window has heavy curtains and pelmet.*

When the CURTAIN *rises, it is about 4 p.m. The light is beginning to fade and the room is brightened by the glow from the fire.* ETHEL FORDYCE *is seated on the sofa, opening letters from a pile on the coffee-table in front of her. She is aged about fifty, plump and rather fussy. She opens a letter and reads it aloud.*

ETHEL (*reading*) "Mr and Mrs Hicks thank Mr and Mrs Fordyce for their kind invitation to the wedding of their daughter Jacqueline on December the twenty-sixth, which they have much pleasure in accepting". They would! (*She picks up another, opens it and reads*) "Sir William and Lady Francis . . ." (*She mumbles away to herself and finishes triumphantly*) ". . . and have much pleasure in accepting". Oh, I am glad! (*And very obviously she is*)

(JACQUELINE *and* PAMELA FORDYCE *enter up* C. JACKY *is aged about twenty-three and is very attractive.* PAMELA *is aged about twenty and is pleasant rather than pretty. They wear outdoor clothes and are both loaded with parcels*)

PAMELA
JACKY } (*as they enter*; *together*) Hallo, Mummy darling!

ETHEL. Hallo, darlings, you're back.

(JACKY *kisses Ethel, drops her parcels on the floor down* LC, *kneels and sorts them*)

JACKY. Tea ready, yet? I'm absolutely dying for a cup.

(PAMELA *moves to the fireplace, drops her parcels on the hearth-rug, kneels and sorts them*)

PAMELA. So am I. Isn't Christmas shopping sheer hell!

ETHEL. You will have to wait. Annie's busy and so am I.

PAMELA (*rising and running to Ethel*) Oh, Mummy, more acceptances and regrets? (*She sits* L *of Ethel on the sofa*)

ETHEL. The usual acceptances from those we don't want and regrets from those we do. (*She reads another letter*) "Mr and Mrs Higglethorpe . . ." Higglethorpe—who on earth are they? We don't know anyone of that name.

JACKY. Higglethorpe? Oh, they're cousins of Victor, once or twice removed.

PAMELA. I bet they are coming.

ETHEL. Oh, they are. And we've had an acceptance from Sir William and Lady Francis. Isn't that nice?

JACKY. Why? We don't know them.

ETHEL. No, but we will.

PAMELA (*rising*) Of course. (*She removes her coat and throws it over the back of the easy chair* LC) People can hardly come to the wedding without meeting the bride's mother. (*She collects her parcels, crosses and puts them on the table* R)

ETHEL. Well, it's very nice to meet people. (*She opens another letter*)

PAMELA. Oh, Mummy. (*She crosses and kneels on the hearth-rug*)

ETHEL (*reading the letter*) Oh, your Aunt Alice is coming. (*She is not too happy about this*)

JACKY. Not with our ghastly cousin Hector?

ETHEL. That's no way to speak of your cousin. I cannot imagine why you didn't have him as a page boy. I always think a page in white satin gives tone.

(JACKY *rises, collects her parcels and puts them on the table* R)

JACKY. You could dress Hector in royal purple and he'd still look ghastly.

ETHEL (*opening another letter*) That's most unkind. (*She reads the letter*) There, I knew it! Aunt Vera has accepted and wants to know why the wedding is so rushed. Reading between the lines . . .

JACKY (*leaning over the back of the sofa,* L *of Ethel*) Aunt Vera has a dirty mind.

ETHEL. Darling, I wouldn't say that, but I do hope you don't have a baby too soon. People talk so. Look at poor Cynthia. She got married all of a sudden and had a baby in eight months.

PAMELA. Very suspicious.

ETHEL. But it was premature, and every time Cynthia said so, everybody said "Yes".

PAMELA. Quite right, too.

ETHEL. But it was the way they said it.

JACKY (*crossing to the easy chair* LC) Don't worry, darling—(*she removes her coat*) I shan't have a baby for at least two years —for Aunt Vera's benefit. (*She puts her coat over the back of the easy chair* LC) But we've got to get married quickly as Victor and I go to Paris in the New Year. (*She sits in the easy chair* LC) We can't help it if his father suddenly wants to open a branch there.

ETHEL. Of course you can't, darling, and it's such a good match.

PAMELA. So beneficial to the Fordyce family.

ETHEL. That's no way to speak of it. It's the uniting of two—er—families in—er—closer bonds.

PAMELA. You mean the uniting of two firms in closer bonds.

ETHEL. Pam, darling! Jacky's in *love* with Victor—aren't you, darling?

JACKY. Of course I am.

ETHEL. Of course she is.

(NICHOLAS FORDYCE *enters up* C. *He is aged about nineteen and is pleasant and amusing*)

NICHOLAS. Good afternoon, all. (*He goes to Ethel and kisses her*) Wait until you see me in my morning coat. They'll think I'm the bridegroom.

ETHEL. Have you been measured, dear?

NICHOLAS. Ran the tape over me and said I had the perfect figure. I like those chaps, so good for one's ego.

ETHEL. What a blessing one can hire those things.

NICHOLAS. Three cheers for Moss Bros! (*He moves to the table* R *and looks at the parcels*) What are these—presents?

JACKY. Yes, and it was hell getting them.

NICHOLAS (*picking up a parcel*) Any for me?

PAMELA (*rising and running to Nicholas*) Hey, not to be opened until Christmas.

(NICHOLAS *side-steps to* C. PAMELA *passes to* R *of him.*

ANNIE, *the maid, enters up* C *with a tray of tea-things. She passes between Nicholas and Pamela and bends over as she puts the tray on the coffee-table.* NICHOLAS *tosses the parcel to* PAMELA *and moves behind Annie*)

ETHEL. Thank you, Annie.

(ANNIE *straightens quickly with a yelp*)

Nick!

(NICHOLAS *shrugs and looks innocent.* ANNIE *manoeuvres herself to* L *of him and collects the coats from the easy chair* LC. PAMELA *puts the parcel on the table* R *and moves down* R)

I always say tea is such a blessing. (*She pours the tea*)

(ANNIE *exits up* C)

NICHOLAS. Yes, dear, every tea time, the same as father sniffs the coffee every morning and says "Ah! Coffee!" (*He moves to the table* R) Which of these is mine?

PAMELA. Never you mind.

NICHOLAS. I hope it's what I want.

PAMELA. It ought to be. You've dropped enough hints.

NICHOLAS. Think what a help that is. You don't have to spend weeks beforchand wondering what to buy me.

PAMELA. We never have to do that with you. You always tell us by the end of August.

(*The front door bell is heard*)

ETHEL. I wonder who that can be.

NICHOLAS. More presents. You know, Jacky, you lose on this Christmas wedding business.

PAMELS. Why?

NICHOLAS. People combine Christmas and wedding presents. I have.

PAMELA. You would.

(ANNIE *enters up* C, *leaving the door open*)

ANNIE. Excuse me, madam.

ETHEL. Yes, Annie, what is it?

ANNIE. Well, there is a woman outside who wants to see the family.

NICHOLAS. Jolly nice of her. Shoot her in.

ETHEL. What's her name?

ANNIE. A Mrs Amelia Puffin.

ETHEL. Mrs Puffin? I've never heard of her. Has anybody?

(*The others shake their heads*)

NICHOLAS. No, but let's have her in. I'd like to meet a Puffin.

ETHEL. Did she say what she wanted, Annie?

ANNIE. No, madam, just to see the family.

NICHOLAS. A very laudable wish.

PAMELA. Perhaps she is from the dressmaker's.

JACKY (*rising and moving to the fireplace*) Then she would have asked for me.

ETHEL. A friend of Victor's family, perhaps?

NICHOLAS. Meanwhile, Mrs Puffin waits without. Anxious to meet us, puffin' to meet us. Show her in, Annie.

ETHEL. Yes, show her in, Annie.

(MRS AMELIA PUFFIN *sidles in unannounced up* C. *She is a poor, but neatly dressed woman aged about forty-five, carrying a small shopping bag. She looks slightly mournful, but is not overawed by the assembled family. She speaks with a strong Cockney accent*)

ANNIE. Yes, madam. (*She turns to go and almost bumps into Mrs Puffin*)

MRS PUFFIN (*glancing around*) Good afternoon. 'Ow are yer?

(ANNIE *moves up* LC *and stares at Mrs Puffin*)

ETHEL (*taken aback*) Oh—er—how do you do? I'm Mrs Fordyce.

MRS PUFFIN. Yes, I know. (*She points to the others in turn*) And that's Mr Nicholas, that's Miss Pamela and that's Miss Jacqueline.

NICHOLAS. Blimey!

JACKY. Won't you sit down?

MRS PUFFIN. Thank you very much. (*She crosses to the easy chair* LC, *sits and puts her bag on the floor* R *of the chair*)

ETHEL. Annie, fetch another cup and saucer.

(ANNIE *exits up* C)

MRS PUFFIN. Ta ever so. I wouldn't say no to a cuppa tea. Though I didn't call 'ere for that. I couldn't get 'ere before, and as it was, I very near didn't come. Alf told me not to. He said . . .

PAMELA. Who did?

MRS PUFFIN. My old man. "Mark my words", 'e said, "no good will come of it, 'Melia", but I said I must go, so I did, and 'ere I am.

ETHEL (*faintly*) Yes.

(ANNIE *enters with a cup, saucer and spoon and puts them on the tray*)

Oh—er—thank you, Annie.

(ANNIE *exits up* C)

NICHOLAS (*moving to* R *of Mrs Puffin*) But how do you know us?

PAMELA (*moving down* R *of Nicholas*) I don't think we know you.

ETHEL (*pouring a cup of tea for Mrs Puffin*) Really, Mrs—er . . .

MRS PUFFIN. Puffin. Silly name, isn't it? Still, I took 'im and 'is name. Now there's seven little Puffins.

(ETHEL *holds out the cup of tea to* PAMELA, *who takes it, picks up the sugar basin and crosses to Mrs Puffin*)

NICHOLAS. All puffing merrily along, we hope.

MRS PUFFIN. Oh, yes. (*She takes the tea from Pamela*) Ta. Two knobs, please.

(PAMELA *puts two lumps of sugar in the cup, returns the basin to the tray and stands down* R *of Nicholas*)

(*She stirs her tea and holds the cup with her little finger delicately poised*)

Now, I bet you're all wonderin' why I'm 'ere.

NICHOLAS. Well, a bit.

ETHEL. I do think some explanation is necessary.

MRS PUFFIN (*handsomely*) And you shall 'ave it, only, first, is the wedding on?

ETHEL. Oh, of course it's on. I mean, of course it's going to take place. Really, Mrs Puffin . . .

MRS PUFFIN. Ah, but who to? Don't tell me, 'cos I might be too late—then again I might be too early. If I'm too early—all right. If I'm too late—all right.

NICHOLAS. In fact, it doesn't matter a damn either way.

MRS PUFFIN. Oh, but it does, dear. Oh, yes. Now, is the bridegroom . . .? Now, don't tell me—I've got to think. (*She thinks deeply, nodding her head*) Ah! I know—it's Victor Parker.

ETHEL. Yes, it is, but I . . .

MRS PUFFIN. Then I'm early.

NICHOLAS. Hooray!

ETHEL (*rising and moving down* R) Really, Mrs Puffin, I fail to see what business this is of yours. You force your way into this house, and . . .

MRS PUFFIN (*rising; indignantly*) Ooh, I never. (*She picks up her bag, puts her cup on the tray and moves to* L *of the sofa*) I got asked in and given a cup of tea.

ETHEL. Whether you were or not . . .

JACKY. Please, Mother. Mrs Puffin, you must have some very good reason for coming here. Won't you tell us why?

PAMELA (*crossing to* R *of the easy chair* LC) Yes, please.

ETHEL. Children, I fail to see . . .

NICHOLAS. Quiet, Mother! Mrs Puffin, the floor is yours.

(NICHOLAS *helps* MRS PUFFIN *to sit on the sofa, at the left end of it*)

MRS PUFFIN (*to Nicholas; chuckling*) You're a one, you are. (*She puts her bag on the floor* L *of the sofa*) Well, it's about this wedding. I don't know 'ow to say this—I'm sorry . . .

ETHEL (*bristling*) Why?

MRS PUFFIN. It won't 'appen.

(*There is a stupefield silence in the midst of which* MRS PUFFIN *picks up her cup and calmy drinks her tea*)

NICHOLAS (*sighing*) Bang goes my morning coat. Ah, well!

ETHEL (*indignantly*) Mrs—Mrs—whoever you are, how dare you come here and—and . . . Will you please leave at once.

MRS PUFFIN. Well, I like that! 'Ere I am, come all the way from Clapham . . .

NICHOLAS. Junction or Common?

MRS PUFFIN. Junction. Of course, if you don't want me to stay, I'll go, but I must say . . . (*She puts down her cup*)

ETHEL (*crossing to the door up* C) There is no need to say anything. You have said far too much already. This is no business of yours. Good-bye, Mrs Puffin.

JACKY (*with a step towards Ethel*) Please, Mother!

(PAMELA *moves to* L *of Ethel*)

Mrs Puffin must have some good reason for coming here.

NICHOLAS. Of course she has. The wedding is off.

(NICHOLAS *moves to* ETHEL, *leads her to the easy chair* LC, *sits her in it and stands* R *of her*)

ETHEL. It's not off. Don't be so ridiculous.

PAMELA. Oh, be quiet, Nick! Mrs Puffin, what does this mean?

MRS PUFFIN (*rising and moving* C) Why are you all getting so excited? There's no need.

NICHOLAS. No need at all. Let's all keep calm and collected.

ETHEL (*outraged*) Calm and collected!

MRS PUFFIN. Calm and collected. I remember them very words. There's no need to get excited, you know. It's all 'appened before. Word for word.

JACKY. What has?

NICHOLAS. I know! "I have been here before". Good old Priestley.

MRS PUFFIN. Who's 'e, when 'e's at 'ome with 'is boots off? There's no Priestley. You're not all 'ere, yet, but 'e doesn't come into this.

ETHEL (*with rising voice*) Mrs Puffin, will you please . . .

NICHOLAS. Explain something soon, otherwise my mother will have a fit.

PAMELA. So will I.

JACKY. Please, Mrs Puffin. And be quiet, all of you. After all, this does concern me.

NICHOLAS (*crossing to the fireplace*) I'm the best man, Pam's the chief bridesmaid, mother will be well to the fore, and Victor's the bridegroom . . .

MRS PUFFIN. 'E ain't.

NICHOLAS. Oh, yes, I was forgetting—'e ain't. (*He sits in the easy chair down* L)

MRS PUFFIN. No, 'e ain't. I can't for the life of me remember at the moment who is. That's a bit vague, but it'll come. It's coming clearer now. (*She sits on the sofa*)

ETHEL. Will you please tell me why you are here?

MRS PUFFIN (*settling herself comfortably*) Well, it's like this.

(PAMELA *kneels* L *of Mrs Puffin*)

I felt it my duty to come. Alf argued and said "No". I said, "Yes, Alf, it's the 'and of Fate. Mrs. Fordyce is a mother and so am I".

NICHOLAS. Seven times.

MRS PUFFIN. "You won't get thanked, 'Melia", 'e says, "like as not they'll show you the door".

ETHEL. Highly probable.

MRS PUFFIN. "Well", I said, "that's a bridge we'll cross when we come to it", as the Vicar said when 'e mislaid 'is upper set. (*She enjoys her joke enormously*) "Look at it this way", I said, "If it was Elsie instead of Miss Jacqueline, I'd be grateful".

PAMELA. Who is Elsie?

MRS PUFFIN. My eldest. Going to get spliced in the summer to George Wilkins, as nice a lad as . . .

ETHEL. Mrs Puffin, will you please come to the point?

MRS PUFFIN. Well, I am. This 'ere wedding will 'ave to be cancelled, 'cos it ain't going to take place.

(*This announcement causes* JACKY *to wander thoughtfully up* C *and then behind the sofa*)

So I came to warn you, to save you all that expense. I bet you've invited near a hundred people. You got the Church, the organ, the flowers, the cake, and a bit of a do afterwards—and all for what? Nothing!

JACKY (*moving and sitting* R *of Mrs Puffin on the sofa*) But, Mrs Puffin, you haven't told me why, yet.

MRS PUFFIN. You poor lamb, I 'aven't, 'ave I? (*Impressively*) Well, a couple of nights ago I 'ad a dream.

ETHEL. A dream? This is too much. I will not listen to such rubbish.

MRS PUFFIN. 'Alf a mo'. You ain't 'eard nothing yet. You ain't 'alf got a shock coming to you, you 'ave. Three nights ago I 'ad this dream. I saw this 'ouse, this room, the family, everyone, and what 'appened in my dream is 'appening now, word for word. You see, in my dream I was kind of two people. Me, myself, if you know what I mean, and what was 'appening, if you can understand me.

ETHEL. No.

MRS PUFFIN. You know, you're making it very difficult. I saw this 'ouse, twenty-three Henley Road, as clear as anything. So I said to Alf the next day, "I must go and see 'em and tell 'em about it". He said, "Don't do that, they won't like". So I said, "I'll go and look as the 'ouse. If the 'ouse is there that'll prove it". So up I comes and there's the 'ouse. Then while I'm outside —(*to Nicholas*) out you popped.

NICHOLAS. Did I?

MRS PUFFIN. I said at once "Mr Nicholas".

NICHOLAS. And what did I say?

MRS PUFFIN. Nothing. You didn't see me. I thought, "Ere's a funny 'ow do you do". So I waited. And what d'you think 'appened?

NICHOLAS. Someone else popped out.

MRS PUFFIN. You're right. Miss Pamela popped out and went down the road. I knew 'er at once. "Funnier and funnier", I said to myself. Just then a maid, or such like, came out from next door.

NICHOLAS. One bustling hive of activity.

MRS PUFFIN. So I said to 'er, "Excuse me, that's the Fordyce 'ouse, ain't it?" She said "Yes". So I said, "Excuse me, is Miss Jacqueline getting married soon?" And she said, "Yes, on Boxing Day". You could 'ave knocked me down with a coal 'ammer. So I went back to Alf and said, "Blimey, it's true! What'll I do now?" An' 'e said—well you know what men are —"Forget it".

ETHEL. It's a pity you didn't follow his advice. I have never heard such nonsense. You said yourself you came up here yesterday and made enquiries, consequently you knew the wedding was taking place. Really, Mrs Puffin . . .

MRS PUFFIN. 'Ow was it I knew who you all was the minute I came into the room?

ETHEL. From your enquiries. Really, Jacky, this is too much.

JACKY. Mrs. Puffin, you must admit that so far you haven't proved anything.

MRS PUFFIN. No, but, Miss Jacqueline, a lot of this dream is very 'azy. It was as clear as daylight when I dreamt it, but it's coming back clearer every minute. F'rinstance—I know what 'appens now. I remember. A telegraph boy comes with a telegram, your maid brings it in, and it's for—(*she nods to Nicholas*) 'im.

NICHOLAS. Who is it from?

MRS PUFFIN. Blimey, you don't 'alf want your money's worth. (*She thinks deeply*) I remember. It's from Stan, 'e can't come tonight. There.

(NICHOLAS *rises*)

PAMELA. That's ridiculous!

NICHOLAS. It isn't. I'm meeting Stanley Cooper tonight. He's coming up from Essex.

ETHEL. I don't believe it.

NICHOLAS. But it's true.

ETHEL. I don't mean you. I mean her.

(*The front door bell rings*)

JACKY (*rising and moving down* R) If this should be true . . .

PAMELA (*rising and moving up* R) It can't be.

MRS PUFFIN. It is, you know.

ETHEL. How could this woman possibly know that you were meeting a friend named Stanley Cooper tonight?

(ANNIE *enters up* C *with a telegram on a salver. She pauses for a*

moment at the top of the steps as the others turn and look at her, then she crosses to Nicholas)

ANNIE. For you, sir.

NICHOLAS (*taking the telegram*) Thank you, Annie. (*He stands holding the telegram*)

(*There is a silence.*
ANNIE *exits up* C)

Y'know, it's not much use opening this; Stan can't come, that's all.

ETHEL. I don't believe it. Open it.

JACKY. Please, Nick. This is important.

NICHOLAS. Very well. (*He tears open the envelope, takes out the telegram and reads it*) "Regret cannot come tonight. Will telephone tomorrow. Stanley". Strewth!

MRS PUFFIN. There you are.

ETHEL. This woman is in league with the G.P.O.

JACKY. What else do you know, Mrs Puffin?

MRS PUFFIN. I know you won't marry this bloke—Victor Parker.

ETHEL (*rising*) You can't come here and disrupt this household. My daughter knows who she is in love with and who she'll marry.

MRS PUFFIN. Does she?

ETHEL. Of course.

MRS PUFFIN (*to Jacky*) Do you, dear?

JACKY. If I don't marry, Victor, who do I marry? There's nothing to stop the wedding.

ETHEL. And nothing will.

JACKY. I wonder.

PAMELA. Jacky, what do you mean?

JACKY. Well, all this is rather strange.

NICHOLAS. Very odd.

ETHEL. Yes, but what does Victor do that Jacky won't—I mean—that you say she won't marry him? Victor is a nice, steady, reliable young man.

MRS PUFFIN. Oh, I remember 'im. Nice young chap, but 'e ain't the romantical type.

NICHOLAS. Was your Alf?

MRS PUFFIN (*chuckling*) 'E 'ad 'is moments.

NICHOLAS. Yes, seven of them.

ETHEL. Victor is a worthy young man, and my daughter will be very happy with him, and I'll thank you, Mrs Puffin, to mind your own business and go. The idea! (*She moves up* C)

JACKY (*to Mrs Puffin*) If the wedding doesn't take place . . .

ETHEL (*stopping abruptly and turning*) Jacky!

JACKY. I said "if"—why doesn't it?

MRS PUFFIN. You're swep' off your feet.

JACKY. Swept off my feet? Who by?

MRS PUFFIN. The other bloke what's coming.

ETHEL. What bloke? I mean—who?

MRS PUFFIN. I can't remember.

ETHEL. There! What did I say?

NICHOLAS. What did you say?

ETHEL. What? What I've been saying all along. This is ridiculous.

NICHOLAS (*waving the telegram*) Is this?

MRS PUFFIN. Yes, is that? I remembered that, and give me time and I'll remember the other bloke. 'Ere, and I'll tell you something else. I came straight in 'ere, didn't I? I never been 'ere before except in my dream. Well, later on I get shoved in there—(*she points to the study door down* R) and in there there's a ruddy awful clock what don't go, and it's stopped at ten to four. There!

ETHEL. That's no way to speak of my father's presentation clock.

MRS PUFFIN. No-one ain't got the right to present a clock like that to anyone.

NICHOLAS. Mrs Puffin, my heart warms to you.

ETHEL. You looked through the windows before you came to the front door. That's how you know about the clock.

MRS PUFFIN. Ho, did I? Well, your father's name was Wentworth. That's on the clock.

NICHOLAS. You know, Mother, she couldn't have read that through the window.

MRS PUFFIN. And I'll tell you something else. (*She points to Ethel*) In a minute or two your 'usband's coming in, rubbing 'is 'ands and saying, "Well, well, well! Seasonable weather we're having. Who's this?" And 'e'll mean me. And Gordon Bennett! Are we going to have trouble with 'im.

NICHOLAS (*turning to the fire*) I bet we are.

ETHEL. We are not. There will be nothing to have trouble about. You are going. (*She moves to the doors up* C) Good-bye, Mrs Puffin, thank you for calling.

(*The front door is heard to slam*)

NICHOLAS. Too late.

ETHEL (*moving and sitting in the easy chair* LC) Not a word of this to your father.

NICHOLAS (*moving* LC) Well, who is she? He does ask; she said so.

ETHEL. She's—she's—oh, who is she? Can't anyone think?

(HENRY FORDYCE *enters up* C. *He is a typical business man, very "hail fellow well met" and a back slapper*)

HENRY (*rubbing his hands vigorously*) Well, well, well! Seasonable weather we're having. (*He moves* C) Who is this?

(*There is a silence.* MRS PUFFIN *rises*)

(*To Mrs Puffin*) I'm so sorry, I don't think I know you.

MRS PUFFIN. Not yet, but you will.

HENRY (*heartily*) I'm sure I will. (*To Ethel*) Who is this lady?

ETHEL. Oh—er—yes. Henry dear, this is—er—Mrs—er . . .

MRS PUFFIN. Puffin.

HENRY (*shaking hands with Mrs Puffin*) How do you do?

ETHEL. Mrs Puffin was just going.

HENRY. Oh, good-bye. (*He shakes hands again and crosses down* R *to Jacky*) Well, how's the bride-to-be? Still busy? (*To Mrs Puffin*) You know Jacky is soon to be married?

MRS PUFFIN. Well, that's why I came to . . .

ETHEL (*hastily*) To offer her congratulations, Henry. Now, we must not keep her, she has a long way to go. Camden Town.

MRS PUFFIN. Clapham Junction.

ETHEL. Oh, yes, Clapham Junction. Such a nice place. (*She rises*) Good-bye, Mrs Puffin—so good of you to call.

MRS PUFFIN. Yes, wasn't it? All right, I'll go. But you mark my words. I'm right.

HENRY (*moving behind the sofa*) Right about what?

ETHEL. Well, Henry—Mrs Puffin—er—meant . . .

JACKY. That the wedding wouldn't take place.

ETHEL. Jacky!

HENRY. Won't take place? (*He laughs heartily, crosses to the easy chair* LC *and sits*) Of course it will. Everything is arranged, and there have been some arrangements, haven't there, Ethel darling? But everything is going smoothly.

NICHOLAS. Then here is the spanner in the works.

HENRY. Who? What?

NICHOLAS. Mrs Puffin.

ETHEL. Really, this is ridiculous. Mrs Puffin had her little joke—and . . .

NICHOLAS. We all had a jolly good laugh.

JACKY. And now we have stopped laughing. . . .

HENRY. Why?

JACKY. Because you came in.

PAMELA. Because a telegram arrived.

JACKY. And because of grandfather's presentation clock in the study which has stopped at ten to four.

PAMELA. And because Jacky is going to be swept off her feet by another man.

HENRY. Good God, who?

PAMELA. She can't remember.

JACKY. Mrs Puffin, I think you had better come and sit down again.

(MRS PUFFIN *sits on the sofa, at the left end of it*)

HENRY. You can't be swept off your feet by someone or other a week before you marry Victor. It isn't possible.

ETHEL. That's exactly what I said, dear. Now, don't let's worry over it any more. Good-bye, Mrs Puffin.

HENRY. Who is she? A fortune teller? I thought she was a friend of yours.

ETHEL. I've never seen her before.

NICHOLAS. Mrs Puffin had a dream.

HENRY. Mrs Puffin had a what?

NICHOLAS. A dream, and a jolly good one, too.

ETHEL. It was not a good one.

JACKY (*crossing to* L *of the sofa*) It was a very vivid dream, and as I am the bride, I want to hear more about it from Mrs Puffin.

NICHOLAS. If I know Mrs Puffin, we will. A lot more.

ETHEL. And if I know father, we won't.

HENRY. If it means cancelling the wedding, you're quite right, Ethel, my dear. Give me a cup of tea, please.

(ETHEL *crosses and sits* R *of Mrs Puffin on the sofa*)

ETHEL (*lifting the teapot*) There. I knew you would be sensible about it, my dear.

MRS PUFFIN. Excuse me, but is that the best tea service, or one you only use on weekdays?

ETHEL. This is our best. (*She pours a cup of tea for Henry and hands it to Jacky*)

(JACKY *passes the cup to Henry*)

MRS PUFFIN. You want to watch out then. He's going to drop that in a minute.

NICHOLAS (*trying to take the cup from Henry*) For heaven's sake, put it down and don't have any more tea, Father.

HENRY. Why on earth not?

NICHOLAS. Because you don't know Mrs Puffin.

HENRY (*incensed*) I don't want to know Mrs Puffin. I come home after a hard day in the office, slaving in the City to help this family, and I'm entitled to my cup of tea. What's come over everyone?

JACKY (*moving to* R *of Henry*) Listen, darling, it's all very simple. Mrs Puffin has come a long way to tell me I'm not going to marry Victor.

HENRY (*putting his cup on the small table* L *of his chair*) But what has she got to do with it?

JACKY. Nothing. But she had a dream.

PAMELA (*moving between Jacky and Henry*) She dreamt about this house and us, and she knew us as soon as she came in.

JACKY. It was a very vivid dream. She knew Nicky was going to receive a telegram.

NICHOLAS (*waving the telegram*) Exhibit one, in the case of the Fordyce family versus Mrs Puffin.

PAMELA. She knew about the clock in the study.

NICHOLAS. Exhibit two, which I won't produce, as we all hate the sight of it.

JACKY. She knew you were coming in rubbing your hands and saying, "Well, well, well! Seasonable weather we're having. Who is this?"

NICHOLAS (*bowing gracefully to Henry*) Exhibit three.

HENRY. Good God! I've never heard such rubbish. (*He crosses his right leg over his left and knocks his cup off the table. It falls to the floor and smashes*)

(ETHEL *rises*)

NICHOLAS. Exhibit four. Now, talk yourself out of that.

MRS PUFFIN. I knew it was going to 'appen. I saw that real vivid. Oh, spoilt the set, ain't it?

(PAMELA *crosses, kneels and picks up the broken pieces.* NICHOLAS *assists her.* JACKY *crosses to* R *of Pamela*)

ETHEL (*wailing*) Henry, how could you!

HENRY (*wrathfully*) I did not do it on purpose.

ETHEL. You could have put it on the tray.

HENRY. How the devil can I drink a cup of tea sitting here if the tray is over there?

ETHEL (*to Mrs Puffin; nearly hysterically*) Will you please go before anything else is broken?

MRS PUFFIN (*indignantly*) I didn't do nothing. 'E broke it. I've been sittin' 'ere as quiet as anything. Not that I couldn't see that coming.

ETHEL. You don't by any chance see your departure?

MRS PUFFIN. Oh no, dear, not yet; a lot's got to 'appen yet. We ain't 'eard the last of that tea set yet.

ETHEL. No!

MRS PUFFIN. I can't remember who drops it, but there ain't 'arf one 'ell of a crash.

HENRY (*rising*) Pamela, for heaven's sake, ring for Annie to come and take it away.

ETHEL. No.

HENRY. Then you take it away, Pamela.

PAMELA (*rising*) Oh, no! Oh, no!

HENRY. Then you take it, Jacky.

JACKY. Oh, no.

HENRY. Nicholas.

NICHOLAS. Not on your life. (*He sits in the easy chair down* L)

MRS PUFFIN. I'll take it.

ETHEL. No! Don't touch it. Leave it alone.

HENRY (*shouting*) But we can't sit staring at the damn thing for ever.

NICHOLAS. I know. It's left here until the evening. Victor comes in, picks it up, drops it, and is kicked out of this house for ever. (*To Mrs Puffin*) How's that?

MRS PUFFIN. No, I don't think it's that, dear.

HENRY. Then who does take the damn thing? If we only knew that we could get somebody else.

MRS PUFFIN (*squirming with embarrassment; shyly*) I can't remember. Y'see, I remember the main part of my dream, that Miss Jacky doesn't marry this Victor; but all these bits keep coming back as we go along—if you see what I mean.

HENRY. I'm damned if I do.

MRS PUFFIN. Yes, I suppose it is a bit 'ard to understand unless you know me. Y'see, you got to know me. My hubby knows me.

HENRY. Then God help him!

MRS PUFFIN. Mind you, this ain't the first dream by a long chalk, oh, dear, no. D'you know, last night I dreamt the winner at the dogs. I saw it as clear as I'm seeing you now. Good-looking bitch, too. Knew the name, too. 'Eard them shouting it in my dream.

NICHOLAS. What happened?

MRS PUFFIN. Forgot it the minute I woke up. Alf wasn't 'arf annoyed. Created something awful. "Alf", I said, "be patient. It'll come". And it did.

HENRY. When?

MRS PUFFIN. The minute I laid eyes on Mrs Fordyce. Dog's name was Ethel, too.

HENRY (*moving up* C) This woman is a menace.

JACKY (*moving to* L *of Henry*) Daddy, do you think it would be all right if . . .

HENRY. If what?

JACKY. If we cancelled the wedding.

HENRY. Cancelled the wedding! Certainly not! What will Victor say? What will his father say? Just because some woman comes here and says she had a dream. We'd be the laughing stock of the neighbourhood.

ETHEL. Of course we would. But what about my tea service?

HENRY (*collecting two cups*) Nothing will happen to your tea service. I'll prove it to you. Now, each take a cup, saucer and plate. I'll take the tray with the teapot on and the rest. We will all take them to the kitchen. Right! (*He puts the cups down with a bang*)

ETHEL. Oh, Henry, please be careful.

HENRY (*shouting*) My dear Ethel, keep calm. Now, come on everyone. Nicholas, Jacky, Pamela.

(MRS PUFFIN *leans forward to pick up a cup*)

Not you, Mrs Puffin, drop it!

ETHEL (*frantically*) No! Don't drop it!

HENRY. Come along, Nicholas, Jacky, Pamela—cup, saucer, plate.

(NICHOLAS *rises. He,* JACKY *and* PAMELA *collect a cup, saucer and plate*)

If the contents of the tray are equally divided, nothing can happen.

(JACKY, NICHOLAS *and* PAMELA *move to the door up* C. HENRY *picks up the tray and follows them.* MRS PUFFIN *watches with interest*)

Right! Are we ready?

NICHOLAS. You know, I bet we look damn fools.

HENRY. Never mind about that, Nicholas. Lead the way, Jacky.

(JACKY, NICHOLAS *and* PAMELA *exit up* C)

(*He goes up the steps, stumbles on the first one, but saves himself*) There you are; all that's needed is a little organization.

(HENRY *exits up* C. MRS PUFFIN *and* ETHEL *listen attentively.*
HENRY, JACKY, PAMELA *and* NICHOLAS *re-enter up* C. HENRY *moves down* C. JACKY *goes down* RC. PAMELA *stands up* R. NICHOLAS *crosses to the fireplace*)

ETHEL. Henry, you're wonderful. I would never have thought of that.

NICHOLAS. But that doesn't explain Exhibits one, two, three and four.

HENRY. Coincidences. (*To Jacky*) There, my dear—Mrs Puffin has been proved wrong over one thing, and she is undoubtedly wrong on another. Now, don't worry your pretty little head any more. You and Victor will be happily married next week.

ETHEL. Well, I'm very glad. Good-bye, Mrs Puffin.

HENRY (*crossing to Mrs Puffin*) Exactly. Go home and dream some more dreams.

ETHEL. But for heaven's sake keep us out of them.

(MRS PUFFIN *picks up her bag and rises*)

NICHOLAS. Cheerio, Mrs Puffin. It's been fun meeting you.

MRS PUFFIN (*moving up* C) Bye, bye, sir.

(ETHEL *sits on the sofa*)

PAMELA. I don't know about fun, but it's been an experience.

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