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SF PERUSALS

BONAVENTURE

A Play in Three Acts

by

CHARLOTTE HASTINGS

SAMUEL  FRENCH

LONDON

NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY HOLLYWOOD

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ISBN 978-0-573-01046-0

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BONAVENTURE

Produced at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, on December 6th, 1949, with the following cast of characters:

(*in the order of their appearance*)

Nurse Phillips	*Betty England*
Nurse Brent	*Josephine Douglas*
Sister Josephine	*Nell Ballantyne*
Willy Pentridge	*John Crocker*
Sister Mary Bonaventure	*Fay Compton*
Dr Jeffreys	*Ballard Berkeley*
The Mother Superior	*Deirdre Doyle*
Melling	*Colin Douglas*
Sarat Carn	*Mary Kerridge*
Miss Pierce	*Mary Marvin*
Martha Pentridge	*Cicely Walper*

The Play directed by Charles Hickman.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the Convent of Our Lady of Rheims, a French Nursing Order, at Denzil St David, a village some miles from Norwich, England. The time is the beginning of 1947.

ACT I

The Great Hall of the Convent. About 6 p.m.

ACT II

Scene 1.—Sister Mary's room. Two hours later.
Scene 2.—The same. Next evening.

ACT III

Scene 1.—The same. Next afternoon.
Scene 2.—The Great Hall. Three hours later.

(Should it be found too difficult to make the scene change in Act III, it is suggested that Act III, Scene 1, be played as a third scene to Act II).



BONAVENTURE*

ACT I

SCENE.—*The Great Hall of the Convent of Our Lady of Rheims, a French Nursing Order, at Denzil St David, a village some miles from Norwich, England. About 6 p.m. on an evening at the beginning of* 1947.

The Great Hall is a magnificent room ; the walls are built of plain grey stone blocks, the roof is vaulted and supported on three pillars, one each R. *and* L., *and one up* C. *Recessed* R.C. *of the back wall is a great Gothic window, reaching nearly to the ceiling and filled with fine stained glass, depicting the Visitation of the Angel to the Virgin. Under this window is a great oak door which opens inwards. When the door is open a low wall can be seen, with a view behind it of flood waters stretching away into the distance. Back stage,* L. *of the window, an oak staircase mounts to a small gallery from which two more steps lead to a door* L. *At the top of the stairs, facing the audience, is a door that leads to the Hospital. A notice, " To Hospital. Staff only " is neatly painted on a board affixed to the wall* L. *of the door. Down* L. *is a wide stone-hooded fireplace in which a cheerful log fire burns in a metal fire-basket. Above the fireplace is a door that leads to the Mother Superior's room. Down* R. *an arched opening leads to the main part of the Convent. A big carved sideboard with two drawers, stands above the arch down* R. *On it is a brightly polished brass bowl, and a modern internal telephone. Against the wall up* R., *above the pillar, there is a long oak chest. A statue of the Virgin and Child stands on a pedestal lit by a small red lamp. The hearth is furnished with large firedogs and has a rush mat in front of it. An ebony crucifix hangs on the canopy above the fireplace. Coffin-stools stand* R. *and* L. *of the fireplace, and there is another stool down* R. *A carved armchair with a high back is placed* R. *of the fireplace, in such a position that anyone sitting in it is not visible from the stairs.* R.C. *at a slight angle is a long refectory table, with plain rush-seated chairs above it, and at each end of it. A low bench stands below it. The hall is lit by wall electric candle brackets, one* C. *of the wall* R. *and the other below the fireplace. There are also two electric lights in iron lantern fittings, one over the staircase and the other in the arch down* R. *The light switches are above the fireplace.*

(*See the Ground Plan and Photograph of the Scene.*)

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*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

For a few moments before the CURTAIN *rises, the Convent bell is heard.*

When the CURTAIN *rises, the bell fades out. It is about six o'clock in the evening, and in the dim light the great room has a calm and sombre beauty. The electric lights have not been switched on, and the last of the fading daylight shines through the stained-glass window. The rain and wind are beating and howling outside. The table is set for two, one place above it, and one at the* R. *end.* NURSE PHILLIPS, *a grave-looking girl, is seated in the chair above the table. She wears a trim mauve and white striped uniform, white apron and a small white cap set well back on her head. She has finished her meal and is reading a newspaper. She glances up at the windows as the rain increases, then returns to her paper. As she does so,* NURSE BRENT *enters excitedly by the Hospital door and clatters down the stairs to* L. *of the table. She is younger than* NURSE PHILLIPS. *She wears a similar uniform, but her flowing cap is pinned insecurely over untidy curls. She has a dark damp shoulder cape on over her uniform.*

BRENT (*as she enters*). Flippers, Flippers— (*she pulls off her cape*) they're getting out boats and sandbags in the village. They say the Great Dyke may come down.

PHILLIPS (*without looking up*). No doubt your hair is down in sympathy already. And *stop* calling me Flippers.

BRENT (*turning and moving to the fireplace*). Oh, don't be so superior. (*She spreads her damp cape over the stool below the fireplace, then stands with her back to the fire, warming her hands behind her and talking without a pause*). Just hark at that wind. They say the waters haven't been so high for a hundred years.

PHILLIPS. And who precisely are *they ?*

BRENT. I wish you wouldn't talk in capital letters. People in the village, of course. And Sister Josephine and Sister Agnes— and Willy.

PHILLIPS (*contemptuously*). Willy !

BRENT. He knows more about the weather, and cattle and trees— and things—than most normal people. (*She moves eagerly to the chair* L. *of the table and kneels on it.*) I wonder what Josie's making for supper—I'm starving. What did you have ?

(PHILLIPS *impatiently puts down the paper and looks at the small fob watch that is pinned to her uniform.*)

PHILLIPS. Brent, for heaven's sake stop talking. You're on duty in—nineteen and three-quarter minutes precisely. And *do* something about your hair. If Sister Mary sees you . . .

BRENT. She won't be stuffy. She's got a sense of humour. (*She picks up a book from the table and turns the pages, still babbling cheerfully.*) Until I came here I thought all nuns were very calm and detached. I didn't expect them to laugh and be approachable

like other people. I suppose it's because this is a nursing Order. They're not out of touch with the world.

PHILLIPS. There's not sufficient *discipline* here. Sometimes I'm really surprised at Sister Mary's attitude to the patients. A qualified woman with her authority—after all, she *is* Matron.

BRENT. You know what she says. "Don't nag them. They'll get well quicker if they're happy." (*She replaces the book on the table, rises, takes several peanuts from her pocket, cracks them and eats them.*

PHILLIPS. A hospital can't be run entirely on kindness. Now when I was at the Memorial Hospital in . . .

BRENT (*moving to the fireplace*). I know—you've told us. Everyone went around in iron corsets, and when the house surgeon appeared no-one was allowed to breathe until he was out of sight. (*She cracks another nut.*) Catch me holding my breath for Dr Jeffreys, I must say.

PHILLIPS. Don't be disrespectful to the medical staff. And *stop* chewing those disgusting nuts.

BRENT. All right—all right. (*She throws the nut-shells into the fire.*) Bless us, at this rate you'll be mummified before you're thirty.

PHILLIPS. The prospect need not affect you. I'm leaving at the end of this month.

BRENT (*moving to* L. *of the table*). But how silly—this is a grand place to train. Mary's a wonderful teacher—and the food's superb.

PHILLIPS. I don't like the lax atmosphere. And I object to that horrible Willy prowling about. (*She picks up the newspaper and starts to read.*)

BRENT. Willy's all right if you don't show your aversion. The poor thing couldn't help being born. D'you know your real trouble —you've no patience.

(SISTER JOSEPHINE *enters briskly down* R. *She is a short buxom Scotswoman, rosy and wrinkled, with bright twinkling eyes and a deep rich voice. She wears the habit of the French religieuse, a fitted tunic and full-gathered skirt of rich blue, a black apron, square white starched collar, and a wide white cornette—the mediaeval winged head-dress—and a leather girdle with a trailing wooden rosary attached to it. She carries a tray with* BRENT'S *supper on it.*)

JOSEPHINE (*as she enters*). And you, young lady, have no hairpins. (*She moves up* R. *of the table.*) Which particular film-star are you copying this week ?

BRENT (*crossing between* PHILLIPS *and* JOSEPHINE *to* R. *of the table*). I've been to look at the water. Sister, what will happen if the Great Dyke doesn't hold ? (*She sits in the chair,* R. *of the table.*)

JOSEPHINE (*placing a covered plate on the table, in front of* BRENT). All the villagers will be homeless and crowding up here on the high ground. (*She puts a jug of coffee on the table.*) And where we

shall put them and how we shall feed them, goodness only knows. (*She puts the tray on the sideboard.*)

BRENT (*opening her table napkin*). Food's no problem to you. You're a genius. Sister Agnes says you could make creamed chicken stew out of a diabetic hippopotamus.

JOSEPHINE. Sister Agnes and Nurse Brent have one thing in common—they talk too much. Eat your supper before you're late on duty. Good evening, Nurse Phillips. I hope you enjoyed your meal.

PHILLIPS (*looking up*). I found it completely adequate, thank you, Sister. (*She returns to her paper.*)

JOSEPHINE. Oh, you did? Well, I suppose that's something to be thankful for. (*She lifts the dish-cover and puts it on the sideboard.*)

BRENT. Sister Josephine! Mushroom omelette and that heavenly savoury sauce. (*She sniffs at the jug.*) And coffee. (*She eagerly picks up the knife and fork.*) Honestly, if I stay here long, I shall get *fat* . . .

JOSEPHINE (L. *of* BRENT). Ah, now—wait a moment.

(BRENT *pauses and looks up at* JOSEPHINE.)

Well? (*Gently.*) No blessing, child?

BRENT (*putting down her knife and fork*). Oh, I'm so sorry. (*She folds her hands.*) Dear Lord, thank you for my most excellent supper and for making Sister Josephine such a divine cook.

JOSEPHINE (*with a twinkling smile*). Now, now—let us have a little reverence. (*She prompts quietly.*) *Benedictus* . . .

BRENT. *Benedictus, Benedicat, per Jesum Christum dominum Nostrum,* Amen. (*She picks up her knife and fork and starts to eat hungrily.*)

JOSEPHINE (*crossing herself*). Amen. (*Briskly.*) Now savour every mouthful in the good Lord's name. My word—this wind and rain. I pity the poor souls on the road tonight. (*She crosses to the switches above the fireplace and switches on the wall brackets and the lantern lights.*)

(*The hall is flooded with soft light.*)

(*She crosses to the sideboard.*) I think we should keep the place extra warm just in case. (*She lifts the telephone receiver.*)

BRENT (*speaking with her mouth full*). I believe you *are* expecting trouble.

JOSEPHINE (*dialling*). You concentrate on your supper. Masticate it now, masticate it. Good food well cooked should be approached in a spirit of humility and understanding. (*Into the telephone.*) Sister Agnes, is Willy around? . . . Would you please ask him to bring some logs into the hall. I'm going to keep a good fire in . . . Yes, as well be prepared. (*She replaces the receiver.*)

(PHILLIPS *pushes back her chair, rises, crumples the newspaper and drops it on the* L. *end of the table.*)

(*She gives almost a little shriek.*) Nurse Phillips ! (*She moves above* PHILLIPS *to* L. *of the table.*)

PHILLIPS. Sister—what *is* it ?

JOSEPHINE (*carefully smoothing out the newspaper and folding it flat*). Haven't I begged you girls to keep all the old newspapers and not to crumple them like that ?

PHILLIPS (*rolling up her table napkin*). You must have thousands stored.

(BRENT *pours herself a cup of coffee.*)

JOSEPHINE. Yes, and a thousand and one uses for them. Never discard a newspaper and never throw away a piece of string. (*She puts the folded newspaper carefully on the* L. *end of the table, moves to the armchair* L.C., *sits and takes some knitting from her pocket.*)

(PHILLIPS *resumes her seat above the table, opens the book and starts to read.*)

History might have been altered many times if a piece of string or an old newspaper had been lying handy.

BRENT. Sister Josephine is actually sitting down. Was it an accident, Sister, or did you just forget ?

JOSEPHINE (*with her twinkling smile*). No impertinence from you, miss. I'm only waiting on your dishes. (*She knits rapidly.*) I want to finish this for Mrs Thomas. Poor dear—her leg gets so cold now it isn't there any more.

BRENT. Sister Mary sat up with her for nearly forty-eight hours. She ought to have died.

JOSEPHINE. My good girl, if Sister Mary says people are not to die, then they don't die, and that's that.

PHILLIPS (*looking up*). From a medical and surgical point of view, Mrs Thomas *should* have died.

BRENT. You sound quite disappointed. (*She drinks her coffee.*)

PHILLIPS. Not at all. But I do like things to be *logical.* (*She resumes reading.*)

JOSEPHINE. And so you've no room for miracles. Well, well, we're all as the good God made us—only He must get a mite puzzled sometimes.

(WILLY PENTRIDGE *enters down* R. *He is a tall, big, loosely-built youth of uncertain age. He walks with a very slight stoop and the awkward gait often found in mentally deficient people. His face is not so much vacant as unresponsive, until he becomes interested, when it changes to an expression of strained and searching eagerness. He wears blue overalls, a green baize apron and his shirt sleeves are rolled to the elbows. When he speaks, it is in the wide tones of the Fen country. He carries a basket of logs.*)

Ah, good boy, Willy. Will you mend the fire, please ? We're rather shivery.

WILLY (*crossing below the table and the armchair to the fireplace*). Ah, sure-ley. Floods be out. Tes always coold when floods be out.

BRENT. Definitely? Are they out?

WILLY (*turning*). Not yet. But yee'll be hearing later right enough. (*He puts the basket down, kneels and carefully builds up the fire.*)

BRENT. I told you he'd know. What's happening, Willy? What are the people doing?

WILLY. Bobbin' about wi' lanterns, they are. Like as many ants. And the botes—they're going tew. Some they're makin' for Norwich. But they woon't get there, they woon't. Waters be turrible strong once they're out. (*He rises suddenly and turns.*) Smash a liddle bote in a minute, they will. Smash her into nuthin'. (*With an unexpected movement he claps his big hands together.*)

(PHILLIPS *starts.*)

JOSEPHINE (*placidly*). Now, Willy.

WILLY (*to* JOSEPHINE; *smiling*). Have yee seen Sister Mary, please? She promised I some sweeties, she did. Out of the big brass box in her room. I bin polishing it. (*He stoops and takes a log from the basket.*) Shines like the liddle old moon, she does—all ready to have top taken off. (*He puts the log on the fire.*)

PHILLIPS (*looking at* WILLY). Are you sure you haven't taken a few sweets already?

WILLY (*straightening up*). Why would I do that?

PHILLIPS. Why not?

WILLY. Because it's in the wise book that Sister reads. (*He raises his hands and looks at them.*) "Keep they hands from pickin' and stealin." (*His face begins to work. He holds his hands out to* JOSEPHINE.) Have my hands been pickin' and stealin', Sister?

JOSEPHINE. I'm quite certain they haven't.

WILLY (*crossing to* PHILLIPS). But Nurse here—she says they been pickin' and stealin'.

PHILLIPS. Oh, be *quiet*. And keep them away from my apron. They're filthy.

WILLY. They may be filthy, but they've got no sin on un. (*He looks at his hands, puzzled.*) Least, I can't see none. (*He turns to* JOSEPHINE.) Can you see sin on my hands, Sister? (*He holds out his hands to her.*) Tell her you can't see no . . .

PHILLIPS (*putting down her book and rising*). Oh, for mercy's sake.

JOSEPHINE (*rising*). Willy, listen to me. (*She puts her knitting in her pocket.*)

WILLY (*suddenly angry*). She's down on me, she is. Why?

PHILLIPS. Nothing of the kind.

WILLY. I never hurt her. I never hurt the littlest crawling thing. (*He suddenly siezes another log.*)

(*He turns and moves above the* L. *end of the table.*) If I saw anyone hurting anything— (*he towers over* PHILLIPS) I'd crush them—so I would.

(PHILLIPS *cowers away from* WILLY. BRENT *sits staring, her cup half-way to her mouth.* SISTER MARY BONAVENTURE *enters by the Hospital door. She is between thirty-five and forty, tall and beautifully made. Even her plain blue habit is worn with grace. The white-winged cornette sets off the fine clear pink and white of her skin, the lovely breadth of the intelligent forehead, and the gentle but penetrating blue eyes. Her voice is cultured, full and beautiful. She carries a large piece of old faded tapestry over one arm, and has several neatly folded newspapers tucked under her elbow.*)

(*Without taking his eyes off* PHILLIPS *he shouts.*) Crush them like that ! (*He crashes the log down on to the table in front of* PHILLIPS.)

(PHILLIPS *recoils.* BRENT *squeals.* JOSEPHINE *takes a step towards* WILLY.)

MARY (*calling from the gallery*). Willy !

(*They all stop dead. There is a pause and silence.* WILLY *is bent over the table, his hand hard down on the log.*)

(*Quietly.*) Did you forget the words again, Willy ?

WILLY (*without moving*). I—lost 'em, Sister.

MARY. They're in your head. Think now, think carefully. (*She pauses, then prompts gently.*) To everything . . .

WILLY. To everything— (*he lifts his head a little and the light comes slowly back into his face*) there is—to everything there is a—season—season——

MARY. And a time . . .

WILLY (*painfully remembering*) —and a time to every purpose——

MARY. Under . . .

WILLY. —under the heavens. A time to plant—a time to . . . (*He suddenly becomes tense.*) I lost it, Sister—I lost it.

MARY. What comes after planting ?

WILLY. A time to—yes—a time to pluck up that which is to be planted.

MARY (*moving down two steps*). Bravo. That was the hard part. You know the rest.

WILLY (*lifting his head*). A time to kill and a time to heal——

MARY. Yes, Willy—go on.

WILLY. —a time to—break down— (*his head droops again*) and a time to build up. (*With a half sob.*) I'm sorry, Sister.

MARY. Good boy, Willy.

WILLY. Build up. (*He looks at the log.*) Will I build up the fire, Sister ?

MARY. Yes, please.

(WILLY *slowly picks up the log, crosses to the fireplace and busies himself at it.* PHILLIPS *breaks up* R. MARY *comes quickly and lightly down the stairs, moves to the table and runs her hand across the surface.*)

(*To* WILLY.) Poor Sister Josephine's polished table. We'll ask her to give you some oil and a soft rag and then you can put it in order again.

WILLY (*turning*). And then may I have the sweeties—from the big brass box wi' the eagle on the top ?

MARY. Get them now. You know where they are. You can fix the table after supper.

WILLY. Yes, Sister. (*He moves quietly to the stairs, starts up them, then stops, turns, and holds out his hands to* MARY.) Sister, are my hands clean of sin ? There's fire dirt here—and that, that's metal polish. I mean—are they . . . ?

MARY (*in the wide Fen tones*). Yes, Willy. Praper clean.

WILLY (*beaming*). Praper clean.

(*With a triumphant look at* PHILLIPS, *he goes up the stairs and exits up* L.)

MARY (*with a change of voice*). I have asked you all to use gentleness and tact with that poor mind.

JOSEPHINE. I'm afraid tact is not Nurse Phillips' speciality.

PHILLIPS (*moving above the table*). I told him his hands were filthy. Which, of course, they were.

MARY. And then, Nurse ?

BRENT (*rising*). I don't think she's entirely to . . .

MARY. I'm asking Nurse Phillips.

(*The rebuke is quiet and entirely without harshness, but* BRENT *flushes and looks down.*)

BRENT. Yes, Sister.

MARY. I see you've finished your supper. Will you go on duty now, please ? Read the notes I've left about Mrs Thomas. Read them carefully. We shall need your help.

BRENT (*gratified*). Yes, Sister. (*She crosses below the table to the fireplace, collects her cape, and hurries to the stairs.*)

(PHILLIPS *picks up her book and puts it on the sideboard.* JOSEPHINE *moves the log basket below the stool down* L.)

MARY (*to* BRENT). Oh, Nurse.

(BRENT *stops and turns.*)

Your hair is very soft and pretty. But while you are on duty, I think I should roll it back more neatly.

BRENT. Yes, Sister. Thank you, Sister.

(*She goes up the stairs and exits by the Hospital door.* MARY *turns to* PHILLIPS.)

MARY. Nurse, I want you to remember you can always calm Willy with words—any words with colour in them. Or even a verse.

PHILLIPS. If you'll forgive my speaking bluntly, Sister, I don't think he should be allowed so much freedom. He's so quickly roused, and with that mentality and his muscular strength, he could quite easily be *very* dangerous.

MARY. That's for us to judge. He's probably better employed up here than at liberty in the village.

PHILLIPS. But it's a question of . . .

MARY. In this case, of tolerance.

PHILLIPS. Tolerance undermines discipline.

MARY. If you'll forgive my speaking bluntly in turn, Nurse, I don't think you appreciate the borderline between discipline and severity.

PHILLIPS. I . . . (*She stands rigidly on her dignity.*)

MARY. I'm sorry you're leaving us. You're an excellent nurse, and I'm sure you'll make your way in the profession. (*She looks at* PHILLIPS.) Only—if you could just realize humanity isn't ruled in straight lines—I think perhaps you would be happier.

PHILLIPS (*stiffly*). Thank you, Sister.

MARY (*ruefully*). I don't mean to preach, you know.

(BRENT *enters by the Hospital door.*)

BRENT (*calling from the gallery ; breathlessly*). Excuse me, Sister —Nurse Phillips, you're wanted on the phone.

PHILLIPS. *Which* phone ?

(BRENT *looks at* PHILLIPS *pityingly and speaks to her as to a backward child.*)

BRENT. The *telephone.*

(*She exits by the Hospital door.* PHILLIPS *gives an impatient gesture.* JOSEPHINE *hides a smile.*)

PHILLIPS. If you'll excuse me, Sister.

MARY. Of course.

(PHILLIPS *moves hurriedly to the stairs, goes up them and exits by the Hospital door.* MARY *looks after her a moment, then turns to* JOSEPHINE.)

There goes the potential matron of a State Institution. (*She pauses. With a sigh.*) She'll run it most efficiently.

JOSEPHINE. With discipline. *Discipline.* A pity she's not staying. You wear them all down in time.

MARY. Not at all. They merely come round to our way of thinking. (*She laughs.*) We *have* had some tough ones, haven't

we? Do you remember the Manchester staff nurse with a passion for diet and an obsession about counting calories?

JOSEPHINE. She actually invaded my kitchen. (*Grimly.*) I caloried her. How's Mrs Thomas?

MARY. Bonny. She's sent you down two immaculate copies of *The Times*. (*She hands the newspapers to* JOSEPHINE.) I'm to tell you they haven't even been opened.

JOSEPHINE (*crossing to* L. *of the table*). Bless her heart. I *do* like *The Times*. (*She puts the newspapers neatly with the one already on the table.*) The pages have such a nice even grey effect on my shelves —none of those big untidy headings like the *Daily Express*.

MARY (*hanging the tapestry over the back of the armchair* L.C.). When you die, Sister Josephine, you'll have newspaper wings. Look, I brought down that tapestry we found in the old cupboard.

(JOSEPHINE *moves to the sideboard, picks up the tray and dish-cover and puts them on the table.*)

Such a pity—I'm afraid it's past repairing. (*She pauses, then reels a little, puts one hand to her head and grips the back of the armchair for support.*)

JOSEPHINE (*about to stack the plates*). Sister Agnes will tackle it. (*She sees* MARY, *and crosses quickly to her.*) Here—you'd better sit down. (*She helps* MARY *to sit in the armchair* L.C.) Steady now—let me . . .

MARY. Thank you—just giddiness—it's passing.

JOSEPHINE. You've had no sleep for nearly two nights.

MARY. But people are already trickling up from the village, and there's so much to be done.

JOSEPHINE (*moving to the table*). Then someone else will have to do it for once. (*She stacks the dirty plates, cups and cutlery on the tray.*) Even you can't go on for ever. You promise me to sit here by the fire for a quarter of an hour, and then I'll take a bowl of hot onion soup to your room. That'll put heart into you.

MARY. Your onion soup would put heart into a graven image.

JOSEPHINE (*picking up the loaded tray*). Don't waste it, even in jest. (*She moves below the table.*) Why, dear goodness knows it takes enough time and material . . .

(DR JEFFREYS *enters down* R. *He is a handsome man of thirty-five, normally with great poise and charm. At the moment he is wet and bedraggled. He wears a black oilskin and wellington boots. He carries a sou'wester and a small case.*)

JEFFREYS (*laughing*). Good evening, Sister Josephine. Campaigning as usual?

JOSEPHINE. Good evening, Doctor. Tell me—as a medical man, would you consider half an hour's rest a mortal sin?

JEFFREYS. I certainly should not.

JOSEPHINE. Then try convincing Sister Bonaventure. (*She rustles below him to the arch down* R.) That'll keep you busy.

(*She exits down* R. JEFFREYS *moves* L. *of the table and places his sou'-wester and case on it.*)

JEFFREYS. That means you haven't been to bed since I left.

MARY. I've had all the rest I need.

JEFFREYS. You've such a spartan idea of your own needs. You can't go on giving yourself like this. I insist you rest.

MARY. But, Doctor . . .

JEFFREYS. No. That's an order—Matron. (*He takes off his oilskins.*)

MARY (*smiling*). Yes—Doctor. Thank you. (*Quietly.*) But aren't *you* making rather a late visit ?

JEFFREYS. I'm staying here ready. That dyke can't possibly hold.

MARY. Apparently we coped with the same thing sixty years ago. We can do it again now.

JEFFREYS. What you mean, Sister, is that you'll cope—and we shall follow.

(*He drapes his oilskins over his arm, picks up his sou'wester and case from the table, goes up the stairs and exits by the Hospital door.* MARY *relaxes in the armchair and slips her rosary through her fingers. The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *enters* L. *She is an older woman than* MARY, *with an air of great authority. The only difference between her habit and that of the others is the large cross on a chain around her neck. She moves quietly to* C., *pauses as she sees* MARY, *then turns to go out again.* MARY *sits up.*)

MARY. I beg your pardon, Reverend Mother. (*She half rises.*)

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*moving* R. *of* MARY). No—don't get up, Sister. I know you're off duty. I just wanted to check with you that we're ready for all emergencies.

MARY. Yes. We've managed to clear those two large wards. We can put the men in one and the women and children in the other when they arrive.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Good.

MARY. They'll have to camp out for a little, until we get properly organized and they can keep control themselves.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Sister Agnes is ready at the switchboard for messages. By the way, Willy's mother has come up—their cottage has already gone, I'm afraid. She'll be very helpful. I expect you can find beds for them both.

MARY. Yes, of course.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. And Sister Josephine tells me she has made arrangements for plenty of hot soup.

MARY (*involuntarily*). Onion soup.

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*drily*). Precisely. Onion soup.

(*They look at each other and laugh.*)

(*She moves to the chair above the table and sits.*) How very happy she will be officiating. (*She leans forward, folding her hands on the table in front of her. Gravely.*) Life must be quite simple and uncomplicated for the Josephines of this world.

MARY (*quietly*). Yes.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. You look tired—very tired. I've been watching you for some weeks. When this weather clears, would you care to go into retreat for a little ?

(MARY'S *hands close hard over the carved arms of the chair. She rises.*)

MARY (*turning to the fireplace ; abruptly*). No—I would not. (*She turns.*) I'm sorry. If you wish to send me away . . .

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*gently*). How long have you been here ? Six years ?

MARY. Nearly seven.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. We've never had our hospital run so efficiently. No, I don't want to lose you. I only wonder if we haven't lost you already. Spiritually.

MARY (*moving restlessly up* L.C.). I don't—know.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. I'm not trying to force your confidence. But if I can help you . . . (*Quietly.*) What is it, Sister ?

MARY (*turning*). Just that . . . (*She breaks off, pauses, and moves down* C.)

MOTHER SUPERIOR. For you, matters are neither simple nor uncomplicated.

MARY. And why not ? It's merely mental adjustment. If I were studying for an examination, I should will my brain to concentrate. Other things would be excluded—completely.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. And these—other things—are not ?

MARY. No. (*She moves to the fireplace and turns.*) This restlessness—the uncertainty. If one could be sure one had done the right thing.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. We all go through this conflict, you know. Even the Josephines.

MARY. Perhaps they have more balance.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Or the finer vessel needs longer in the kiln.

MARY. We're put into the world, as the world is, and as we are. Is it wise to leave it—to narrow ourselves into a little space ?

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Do we ? We're a serving Order, not a closed House.

MARY (*turning and gazing into the fire*). I feel if it were *right*, there should be no question in the mind. Can we ever be sure ? (*She turns.*) Are you sure ?

MOTHER SUPERIOR. At my age, yes. At yours—I can't think I was so certain. Our normal emotions—and desires—aren't sublimated without a struggle. We know that when we take our vows.

MARY. That's the easy part. (*She turns and looks up at the crucifix over the fireplace.*) I remember the exaltation—an ecstasy almost physical. (*Slowly.*) Afterwards—when it became a question of work and routine . . .

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*nodding*). And loneliness.

MARY (*turning*). Yes. The mental loneliness. And yet, that's something all the saints must have had to bear.

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*rising and moving to* MARY). My child, saints and martyrs have had their day. In our time we need practical Christianity. You'll do more good sitting up with Mrs Thomas than going to the stake in a blaze of righteousness.

(*The doorbell clangs shrilly off* R.)

Believe me, I do understand. For a woman of your character and knowledge, service—and above all, humility—are not easy. You're tired and for the moment the world seems stronger than the spirit. It will pass. I am sure it will pass.

MARY. Thank you, Reverend Mother.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. If you want to rest later, it can be arranged. If you are happier working—as I think you are—the work is certainly to hand.

(JOSEPHINE *enters down* R.)

(*She turns.*) Yes, Sister Josephine?

JOSEPHINE (*moving* C.). Reverend Mother, there's a man wanting to speak to you. They're travelling from London by car—he and two women and a driver. They're cut off by the floodwater.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Will you bring them in, Sister? (*To* MARY.) This is probably the first of the rush.

(JOSEPHINE *turns and moves to the arch down* R.)

(*She turns and calls.*) Sister Josephine.

(JOSEPHINE *stops and turns.*)

(*With a smile.*) Be ready with your loaves and fishes.

JOSEPHINE (*beaming*). Yes, Reverend Mother.

(*She exits down* R.)

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*turning to* MARY). You see? No need to look for our work. Would you be so good as to give Sister Josephine a little assistance?

MARY. Yes, Reverend Mother. (*She crosses to the arch down* R.)

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Sister——

(MARY *stops and turns.*)

—I'm sure it will be all right. We need you too badly.

MARY (*smiling*). Don't be too kind to me. I find few things harder to fight than vanity.

(*She exits down* R. *The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *moves to the fireplace and stirs the logs with the poker.* JOSEPHINE *enters down* R.)

JOSEPHINE (*as she enters*). Would ye be pleased to come this way ? (*She stands aside, above the arch.*)

(MELLING *enters down* R. *He is a prison warder, but for the moment, his uniform is concealed under the blue raincoat and white scarf that he wears. He has no hat. He is a spruce, upright man, about forty. His shoes and trouser legs are black with wet.* JOSEPHINE *exits down* R.)

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Good evening—come in. You must be nearly drowned.

MELLING (*moving above the table to* C.). I'm sorry to arrive like this, madam, but we're travelling from London, and I'm afraid the car is waterlogged.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. We shall have many people coming here to the high ground tonight. Come to the fire. (*She pauses.*) But I thought you had others with you ?

MELLING. Yes. (*He pauses, then turns towards the arch down* R. *and calls.*) Come in.

(SARAT CARN *enters down* R., *followed by* MISS PIERCE. SARAT *is tall. Her eyes are magnificent and even at this unfavourable moment there is a kind of fierce magnetism about her. She wears a long travelling dress of dull crimson cloth and a caped coat of the same material is flung across her shoulders, cloak fashion. She has no handbag. She walks with a long sweeping stride. She pauses a moment in the arch, then moves* C. MISS PIERCE *stands* R. *below the arch. She is a prison wardress and wears an inconspicuous navy blue uniform tunic and skirt, a shirt-blouse and tie, brown leather gloves and a navy blue woollen scarf around her throat and across one shoulder. She has no hat. She is an upright, pleasant-looking woman about thirty-two or three and might be taken for a governess or a good-class lady's maid. The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *hurries forward and meets* SARAT *at* C.)

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Come in—why, you look positively exhausted. Are you ill ? (*She puts out a hand.*)

SARAT (*drawing herself up ; abruptly*). No.

(*The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *draws back, puzzled.*)

No—I'm not ill, thank you. (*She crosses below the* MOTHER SUPERIOR *to* L., *walking steadily, her coat held tightly round her.*) If I might sit by your fire.

MOTHER SUPERIOR. But certainly. (*She moves to* SARAT *to take the wet coat from her shoulders.*) They haven't taken your wet coat.

SARAT (*abruptly*). Leave it, please. (*She sits in the armchair* L.C., *and shivers slightly as she holds her hands to the blaze.*)

PIERCE (*quickly*). We're very grateful to you. (*She crosses to the fireplace.*) I hope we're not disorganizing things. (*She takes off her gloves.*)

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Not at all. One of our Sisters is getting you something hot. (*She glances at* SARAT.) Are you sure your . . .

MELLING. Madam, could I have a word with you in private, if you please ?

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*turning to* MELLING). Do sit down. I assure you we're quite private here.

MELLING (*respectfully*). I think I ought to speak to you quite alone, madam—if you don't mind.

(*The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *looks at* MELLING, *then at* SARAT. *She nods.*)

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*moving to the door* L.). Will you come with me ?

(*She exits* L., *followed by* MELLING. SARAT *leans back wearily in the chair.* PIERCE *sits quietly on the stool down* L., *loosens her scarf, takes off her shoes and stockings, places the stockings in the hearth, then puts her shoes on again.*)

PIERCE. I should take yours off, too. You'll get a chill.

SARAT (*harshly*). That would be very inconvenient, wouldn't it ? Think how the calendar would be thrown out.

PIERCE. Please—it won't help to be . . .

SARAT. In fact, the whole thing is very humorous. A convent of all places. The holy woman is going to get an unpleasant shock in a few minutes.

(PIERCE *rises, puts her gloves on the stool, and moves to* L. *of* SARAT.)

PIERCE. That coat is soaked. (*She lays a hand on* SARAT'S *shoulder.*) Let me . . .

SARAT (*fiercely*). Take your hands off me. I've told you that before.

PIERCE (*quietly*). Don't be difficult.

SARAT. It's my privilege to be what I can while I can. And get away from me. There's plenty of space here. Get away, please—right away.

PIERCE (*shrugging her shoulders*). Very well. (*She moves above the armchair, then up* R.)

(SARAT, *without looking round, snaps her fingers over the side of the chair.*)

SARAT. No, no—don't leave the fire. I didn't mean that. I don't want you to be cold and wretched. If you would just sit—where I can't see you.

(PIERCE *moves quietly to the chair above the table and sits.*)

(*She does not look at* PIERCE.) Are you all right there ?

PIERCE. Yes, thank you.

(*There is a pause.* SARAT *leans back and stares at the ceiling.*)

SARAT. Do you know this place ?

PIERCE. Yes.

SARAT. How far from—Norwich ?

PIERCE. About fifteen miles.

SARAT. Fifteen. (*Abruptly.*) How far are we from Denzil St David ?

PIERCE. Not more than two miles.

SARAT. I thought so when the holy woman mentioned the high ground. The journey has been so confused in the dark and flood-water. So *this* is Our Lady of Rheims ?

PIERCE. Yes.

SARAT. I told you it was funny, didn't I ? (*She laughs almost hysterically.*)

PIERCE (*rising quickly and moving* C. ; *sharply*). Now, please !

(SARAT *abruptly stops laughing.*)

SARAT. All right. I've not been hysterical so far, have I ?

PIERCE. You've behaved very well. Very well indeed.

SARAT. Then you've nothing to worry about. So be quiet and leave me alone.

(MARY *enters down* R. *She carries two bowls of hot soup on a tray.*)

MARY (*moving below the table*). I'm sorry to keep you waiting. You must be very chilled. (*She places the tray on the table.*) I can recommend this very excellent soup. Some of us think our cook has missed her vocation.

PIERCE (*sitting above the table*). It looks and smells wonderful.

MARY (*placing a bowl of soup and a spoon in front of* PIERCE). It tastes better. (*To* SARAT.) Will you come to the table, or would you like it there by the fire ?

(SARAT *does not answer.*)

PIERCE (*rising*). I'll take it to her.

MARY. No, no. Sit down and drink yours while it's nice and hot.

(PIERCE *sits and starts to drink her soup, watching* SARAT *and* MARY *carefully as she does so.*)

(*She picks up a bowl of soup and a spoon and moves to* R. *of* SARAT.) Why—that wet coat—you poor child. (*She turns to the table, puts the soup and spoon down, then moves again to* R. *of* SARAT.)

(SARAT *turns her head and they face each other.* MARY *draws a sudden quick breath. There is a pause, then* SARAT *turns her head away.*)

(*Gently.*) Do let me take that coat. You see—it's spoiling our piece of tapestry.

SARAT. You could take it away, couldn't you ?

MARY. It's convenient there. It stops the draught from the staircase.

(SARAT *looks at* MARY *again. Then very slowly she rises and slips off her coat.* MARY *takes it and spreads it over the stool down* L. *to dry.*)

SARAT. And my wet shoes—are they spoiling your hearthrug ?

MARY. No. But they can't be very comfortable. Won't you take them off ?

(*With a little shrug,* SARAT *sits in the armchair and bends down to her shoes.*)

Let me. (*She kneels in front of* SARAT.)

SARAT (*drawing her feet under her ; fiercely*). No—get up. Get up at once.

MARY. But why . . . ?

SARAT (*urgently*). Get off your knees—in front of me.

(*She rises desperately and turns up* C. PIERCE *rises quickly and intercepts her.*)

PIERCE (*firmly, but not unkindly*). Now steady—take a grip on yourself.

SARAT (*thrusting her off ; desperately, under her breath*). Leave me alone—leave me alone. (*She moves to the pillar up* R. *and stands with one hand against it, her head bent and her back to the audience.*)

(MARY *rises.*)

PIERCE (*moving quickly to* MARY). I beg your pardon, Sister. She's a little upset.

MARY. She must be ill.

PIERCE (*quietly*). She's not ill. Just take no notice.

MARY. Is there nothing . . . ?

PIERCE. Nothing that you or I can do anything about.

MARY. I felt when I spoke to her . . .

PIERCE. I thought perhaps you knew her.

MARY. I've never seen her before. But there must be something terribly wrong. She isn't . . . ?

PIERCE. She is neither ill nor insane. Believe me, Sister, the best way you can help is to be normal.

MARY. If you assure me . . .

PIERCE. It is the only thing. (*She moves to the chair above the table, sits, and gets on with her soup.*)

MARY. Very well. (*She moves to* SARAT.)

(PIERCE *watches warily.*)

(*To* SARAT.) Won't you at least come back to the fire ?

(SARAT *does not answer for a second, then she turns and moves to the fireplace.*)

(*She moves to the table, picks up the bowl of soup and spoon, and takes it to* SARAT.) And have some hot soup to warm you ? (*She holds out the bowl.*)

(SARAT *takes the bowl and spoon, then sits in the armchair* L.C.)

(*She smiles triumphantly at* PIERCE. *To* SARAT.) That's better. Thank you for humouring me. Now I'll see if I can find you both some slippers. (*She moves to the stairs.*)

(SARAT *drinks a spoonful or two of soup.*)

PIERCE. You're very good, Sister, but don't bother. As soon as we can we must be on our way to Norwich.

MARY (*stopping on the stairs and turning*). I'm afraid you won't get to Norwich tonight. It wouldn't be safe to try. The Great Dyke may give way at any time unless the men achieve a miracle of engineering.

(SARAT *turns in her chair.* PIERCE *rises.*)

SARAT (*slowly*). Then—we might be here for some time ?

MARY. Some days, perhaps.

(*She goes up the stairs and exits by the Hospital door.*)

SARAT. Do you hear that, Pierce ?

PIERCE (*resuming her seat ; noncommittally*). Yes. (*She finishes her soup.*)

SARAT. Do you remember what I said about the calendar ?

PIERCE. Try and be sensible. Don't bank on it.

SARAT. Why not ? Isn't there a trite saying about drowning men and straws ? Except that I'm not—drowning.

PIERCE. It looks as if we've only just escaped it.

SARAT. What a pity.

(MARY *enters by the Hospital door and comes down the stairs.*)

MARY (*moving* C.). One of our nurses is getting you some shoes.

PIERCE. Thank you very much.

SARAT. You were right about the soup. My compliments to your cook—for what they're worth. (*She holds out the bowl and spoon to* MARY.)

MARY (*laughing*). She'll be delighted. Nothing pleases her more than to have her work appreciated. (*She takes the bowl and spoon.*) Only—you haven't had very much.

(PIERCE *rises and eases up* R.)

SARAT. All I wanted, thank you.

(MARY *puts the bowl and spoon on the table.*)

(*She rises, goes to her coat, takes a packet of cigarettes from her pocket, is about to take a cigarette, then pauses.*) Oh, I'm sorry. I suppose it isn't permitted to smoke in here.

MARY. Not usually. But in these circumstances . . .

SARAT (*moving* C. ; *abruptly*). What circumstances ?

MARY. But surely . . .

SARAT (*sharply*). I said—what circumstances ?

PIERCE (*warningly*). Careful.

MARY. I meant that—soon this place must be free to all, and we shan't be so strict about regulations. So if you would like to smoke . . . (*She takes a box of matches from the table, lights one and holds it out.*)

(SARAT *looks at* MARY, *then lights her cigarette.*)

SARAT (*crossing below* MARY *to* L. *of* PIERCE). You're a good woman.

(MARY *moves to the fireplace, throws the spent match into the fire, then picks up* SARAT'S *coat and holds it up in the front of the fire to dry.*)

(*To* PIERCE.) Any good offering you one, Pierce ?

PIERCE. No, thank you.

(SARAT *turns away with a slight shrug, sees* MARY *with the coat and moves quickly to her.*)

SARAT (*taking the coat from* MARY). That must be dry now. I'd like to have it. (*She throws it around her shoulders.*)

MARY. Is that wise ?

SARAT. No, but I'd like to have it. (*She huddles it around her and sits in the armchair* L.C.) It's not wet enough to harm your chair. (*She puts the packet of cigarettes in her pocket, leans back and blows out a cloud of smoke.*)

(BRENT *enters by the Hospital door and clatters down the stairs. She carries a newspaper and two pairs of black shoes.*)

BRENT (*moving* C. ; *breathlessly*). Please, Sister—I've brought the shoes.

MARY (*moving to* L. *of* BRENT). Thank you, Nurse.

BRENT. Two pairs—one from me and one from Nurse Daly. And there's a copy of the local paper for Sister Josephine—old Mr Jenkins in the end ward sent it because it's so nice and smooth. (*She gives the shoes to* MARY, *places the newspaper on the table and smiles happily across at* SARAT.)

MARY. Yes, thank you both very much. Get back to the ward or you'll have Nurse Phillips after you. (*She gives one pair of shoes to* SARAT.)

(BRENT *moves to the stairs and clatters noisily up them.*)

(*She turns. With a smile.*) Quietly, Nurse, quietly! How is Mrs Thomas?

(SARAT *changes her shoes.*)

BRENT (*stopping, turning and tiptoeing down the stairs*). In a lovely sleep, Sister. But Nurse Phillips says she doesn't like the look of Mrs Grimes. She thinks the baby may come tonight.

MARY. By the way, have you done any maternity work before?

BRENT. Not practical.

MARY. Then it will be very interesting and good for you.

BRENT (*in a sudden panic*). Oh-h-h!

MARY. No—don't get excited. Just help Nurse Phillips and the doctor.

BRENT (*excitedly*). Yes, Sister. Thank you very much.

(*She turns, rushes up the stairs with a clatter and exits by the Hospital door.*)

MARY (*moving to* PIERCE *and giving her the second pair of shoes*). They're not very elegant, but at least they're dry.

PIERCE (*taking the shoes*). That's the main thing. (*She moves to the chest up* R., *sits and changes her shoes.*)

(MARY *moves to the table. She looks at* SARAT. SARAT *straightens up and meets her glance.* MARY *collects the bowls and spoons and puts them on the tray.* SARAT *looks into the fire.*)

SARAT. Do you arrange everything here?

MARY. I'm in charge of the hospital. We each have our own duties.

SARAT. Life must be very calm and pleasant.

MARY (*quietly*). Yes.

SARAT. Out of the world and away from temptation.

MARY. I believe that is the popular conception.

SARAT. How does it really work?

MARY (*smiling*). In work. (*She picks up the tray.*)

SARAT. No doubt you are filled with a sense of spiritual well-being. But—are you happy?

(MARY *glances over her shoulder at* PIERCE, *then puts the tray on the table and moves to* R. *of* SARAT.)

MARY (*deliberately*). Are you?

SARAT (*flinching back into the chair; quietly*). Oh, God!

MARY (*kneeling beside* SARAT). Oh, my dear, you can trust me. Won't you tell me what is wrong?

SARAT. No—please don't ask—I can't . . .

(*There is a burst of shouting off, a confused noise of raised voices and hurrying feet. The telephone begins to ring.* MARY, PIERCE *and* SARAT *rise.* WILLY *enters suddenly up* L., *and runs down the stairs.*)

WILLY (*as he enters ; shouting at the top of his voice*). Sister—Sister—the Big Dyke's gone—they just sent word—they're leaving the village—I got to ring the great bell—Reverend Mother says to ring the warning bell.

MARY (*intercepting* WILLY *at* C.). Willy—calm yourself.

WILLY (*unheedingly*). I got to ring him loud and clear to warn the people. (*Shouting.*) The floods be out !

(*He dashes to the arch down* R. *and exits.*)

(*He calls wildly. Off.*) The floods be out !

(MARY *crosses to the telephone.*)

PIERCE (*moving above the armchair* L.C.). Can I do anything ?

MARY (*lifting the receiver*). No, we're prepared. (*Into the telephone.*) Yes, Sister Agnes ?... Yes... Ring through to Norwich and let them know . . . What ? . . . Well, we all know what to do . . . Thank you. (*She replaces the receiver.*)

(*The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *and* MELLING *enter* L. *The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *moves above the table to* MARY. MELLING *moves to* L. *of* PIERCE.)

MELLING. Miss Pierce—we can't get away tonight. We shall have to telephone . . .

MARY. There's no outside communication. (*To the* MOTHER SUPERIOR.) Sister Agnes has just told me the wires are down.

(JEFFREYS *enters by the Hospital door and hurries down the stairs. He is coatless, his shirt sleeves are rolled up and his hair is damp about his face.*)

JEFFREYS (*moving* C. ; *urgently*). Sister—Sister Mary—can you come ?—the Dyke's gone—they're bringing in the casualties—why didn't the fools give up the attempt before . . . (*He breaks off, follows* MARY'S *look, turns and sees* SARAT.) Sarat ! Good God—Sarat !

(SARAT *begins to laugh.* MELLING *moves quickly to* SARAT'S *left and* PIERCE *quickly to* SARAT'S *right.* MARY *moves below the table to* C. SARAT *stops laughing abruptly.*)

MELLING. Now, now, Miss Carn !

MARY (*suddenly*). Sarat—Carn !

SARAT (*defiantly*). Yes, that's my name. Does it mean anything to you ? Think, Sister. Sarat Carn.

PIERCE (*taking hold of* SARAT'S *right arm*). Shall we go outside ?

MOTHER SUPERIOR. You'll have to know, Sister. I'm afraid it will distress you.

(SARAT *takes a step or two towards* MARY. PIERCE *and* MELLING *quickly take her arms and hold them firmly.*)

SARAT. If she's to know, I'll tell her myself.

MELLING. Now come with us, there's a good girl.

SARAT. Be quiet. (*To* MARY. *Without emotion.*) My name is Sarat Carn. Three weeks ago I was tried and convicted for the murder of my brother. We have just come back from London from hearing the appeal. It has been dismissed.

MARY *stands looking at* SARAT. *The* MOTHER SUPERIOR *involuntarily crosses herself. The noise outside rises to full pitch. The great bell of the Convent booms out overhead as—*

the CURTAIN *falls quickly.*

ACT II

SCENE 1

Scene.—SISTER MARY'S *room. Two hours later.*

The room is in the Hospital section of the Convent. It is a small apartment, the walls built of plain stone as in the Great Hall. Down R., *there is a large window in a pointed arch recess, overlooking an expanse of cold blue-grey sky and a vista of flooded countryside.*

The window is fitted with a cushioned window seat. An iron slow-combustion stove stands in a low curved arch recess R.C. *of the back wall. There is a large arched recess in the wall* L. *of the fireplace with a door leading out of the back of it into a small cell-like bedroom. A heavy door down* L. *leads to the main corridor. Above the window* R. *there is a well-filled bookcase with cupboards under it. A big knee-hole desk stands at an angle* R.C. *The desk is very neat and workmanlike, with inkstand, letter tray, blotter, files, etc. A telephone stands at the* R. *end of it, and there is a waste-paper basket underneath it. Two stools stand, one down* R. *and one* L. *of the door up* L.C. *There is an upright chair behind the desk. A bright rush mat lies below the stove. An ebony crucifix hangs over the stove recess. The room is lit by two wall electric candle brackets, one below the door* L. *and the other over the bookcase.*

(*See the Ground Plan*)

When the CURTAIN *rises, the lights are lit and a bright fire burns in the stove.* JOSEPHINE *is standing* R. *arranging some daffodils in a vase on the desk. The piece of tapestry is on the stool up* L., *and* MELLING'S *uniform jacket lies on top of it. After a moment,* WILLY *enters* L. *He is still in overalls and carries a large roll of bedding and pillows.*

WILLY. Where do yee want this, Sister ?

(MARTHA PENTRIDGE *enters* L. *She is a gaunt elderly woman. She wears a flowered print overall over a grey dress, with a high collar pinned by a cameo brooch. Her grey hair is drawn back into an uncompromising bun. She carries a white counterpane over her arm.*)

MARTHA (*as she enters ; to* WILLY). In the bedroom, of course, you gurt goop. Where else ?

WILLY. There's beds all over everywhere at the moment—even in the Chapel—and I were talking to Sister Josephine, I were—so there.

(*He exits defiantly with his burden up* L.C.)

MARTHA (*calling after* WILLY). I'll come about and box yere ears in tew minutes if you're not careful, so I will.

WILLY (*off; calling*). And what I would be doin' to let yee, I'd like to know.

(MARTHA *moves to the door up* L.C.)

JOSEPHINE. Not now, Martha. You really haven't time.

MARTHA (*moving to* L. *of the desk*). That boy's got above himself since he came to work here. I still think it's a pity they wouldn't take him in the army. (*She nods towards the flowers.*) Those look nice, I must say. Poor Miss Carn. Praper struck I was when I knew she were 'ere.

JOSEPHINE. I suppose it's all over the Convent by now.

MARTHA. Wi' best part of three villages up 'ere together, I don't see 'ow you can stop gossip. Not that I don't know 'ow to guard my own tongue, but seeing I was 'er 'ousekeeper *and* a chief witness, I reckon at least I'm *qualified* to speak.

JOSEPHINE. I know that, Martha. (*She puts the flowers on the bookcase.*) We merely want you to be discreet.

MARTHA (*sniffing*). Which I must say I know 'ow.

(WILLY *enters up* L.C.)

WILLY. I put them two liddle beds up, but these old sheets they got themselves tied round the legs somehow.

(*He exits up* L.C.)

MARTHA (*exasperatedly*). Mercy on us, boy, don't you go trying to make beds. (*She moves to the door up* L.C.) You'll end up wi' yourself tucked in.

(*She exits up* L.C. MARY *enters* L. *at the same time. She carries four small black notebooks.*)

MARY (*moving above the desk*). Thank you, Sister Josephine. (*She looks at the flowers.*) They do look nice.

JOSEPHINE (*crossing to the door up* L.C.). They're bonny, aren't they?

(MELLING *enters* L. *He is very spick-and-span. He is without his jacket and has his white shirt sleeves neatly rolled. He carries a wicker armchair. He is followed on by the* MOTHER SUPERIOR.)

MOTHER SUPERIOR. Over by the stove, I think, Officer, please.

MELLING (*briskly*). Over by the stove it is. (*To* JOSEPHINE.) Mind your back there, ma'am, thank you.

(JOSEPHINE *moves up* L.C. MELLING *places the chair* R. *of the stove.* JOSEPHINE *exits* L. MARY *places her books on the desk.*)

MOTHER SUPERIOR (*easing* L.C.; *to* MELLING). Willy has put another bed in there for Miss Pierce. Can you manage with the

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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