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At the Sign of "The Crippled Harlequin"

A thriller

Norman Robbins

Samuel French — London
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CHARACTERS

Marjory Pike, seventies
Sally Lockwood, thirties
Pamela Seton, forties
Bryan Lockwood, thirties
Joan Reece, thirties
Derek Tyndale, early forties
Lionel Reece, fifties
Isobel Clarke, late twenties

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in the lounge of "Peak Lodge", a small guest-house in Derbyshire's Peak District

ACT I
SCENE 1 A late afternoon in December. A few days before Christmas
SCENE 2 An hour later

ACT II
SCENE 1 Three hours later
SCENE 2 Two hours later

Time — the present

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(See also page ii)

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Pull the Other One
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Rumpelstiltzkin
Sing a Song of Sixpence
Slaughterhouse
Sleeping Beauty
Snow White
Tiptoe Through the Tombstones
Tom, the Piper's Son
A Tomb with a View
Wedding of the Year
The White Cat
The Wonderful Story of Mother Goose

For Jean and Dennis Canning
who love the theatre

ACT I

SCENE 1

The lounge of "Peak Lodge", a small guest-house near Edale in the Peak District. A few days before Christmas

The only entrance to the lounge is UR *and boasts a rarely-closed glazed door which opens on to the rear wall of the room. A glimpse of the main entrance hall may be afforded through the opening, but this is by no means essential.* DS *of the door is a small bookcase containing a selection of paperback novels and magazines. On top of this is a ceramic bowl filled with decorated pine-cones topped with a sprig of red-berried holly. To each side of the bowl, Christmas greetings cards stand.* DS *of this, the original fireplace has been removed and a boxed-in radiator occupies the space. Various small ornaments cover its surface. Above this a heavy-framed eighteenth-century oil painting or print of the original building, blackened with age, is fixed to the wall and, above this, a lighting fitment to illuminate it. In a recess* DS *of the chimney breast is a television set, angled* US *so that the screen cannot be seen by the audience, with, beside it, a magazine rack containing various magazines.*

In the rear wall, deeply recessed, are two tall and wide windows separated by a long coffee table, topped with an impressive artificial Christmas tree, heavily laden with lights, globes, tinsel, etc. Gaily-wrapped boxes and packages are beneath it. Both windows have wide ledges on which ceramic bowls of hyacinths are flanked by ornamental globes left over from the tree. Fake snow has been applied to the panes of glass within each recess, but glimpses of the spectacular countryside can still be seen. A comfortable window seat is below each window and is framed by thick, swagged drapes and matching pelmets. In the wall L, *and opposite the radiator, is a very large window with drapes and pelmet to match the others. This too is decorated with fake snow. A tall vase of holly sprigs and mistletoe occupies the centre of the ledge, and is flanked by copper or brass bowls filled with Christmas globes and tinsel*

US *of the window is an oblong oak table, angled towards the radiator. Three upright chairs are arranged at this, one with its back to the corner of the room and the other two on the short side,* L *and* R. DS *of the window is a small writing desk topped by a small table lamp and various Christmas cards. Above the desk there is a framed theatrical poster, circa 1895. A fourth upright chair is at the desk. Its back to the bookcase, angled* C, *is a comfortable-looking*

armchair. A matching settee is just off C *of the room, a copy of the "TVTimes" on the* US *arm, and* DL *is another armchair. All have bright cushions for extra comfort and appeal. Behind the settee is a drop-wing table and on top of this, a tray holding a small teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl, spoon and a used cup and saucer. The room is thickly carpeted and the walls are dotted with assorted prints and paintings, each decorated with sprigs of holly or mistletoe. The rest of the room is brightly trimmed with Christmas decorations*

When the CURTAIN *rises, it is a dull afternoon. The overhead lights are dim so, apart from the twinkling lights on the tree, the room looks cheerless*

Marjory Pike, a frail-looking but elegant woman in her seventies, is sitting in the armchair L, *writing postcards*

After a moment, Sally Lockwood, a pleasant and comfortably-dressed woman in her early thirties, enters and crosses to the table behind the settee to collect the tray. She sees Marjory with surprise

Sally Mrs Pike. I thought you were out.

Marjory (*looking up*) Oh, yes. I was. But didn't get far, I'm afraid. Only down to the stepping stones. (*Giving a little laugh*) Mr Tyndale was right. They're almost covered. Much too dangerous to risk a crossing.

Sally (*grimacing*) Last night's rain, I expect. Didn't ease off till after three. But you could have followed the path and crossed lower down. There *is* a footbridge. I told Bryan to mention it.

Marjory (*quickly*) Oh, he did, Mrs Lockwood. He was *most* helpful. But to tell you the truth I didn't like the look of the sky, and the wind was much sharper than I expected. I really needed a warmer coat. "Marjory," I thought, "there's no point in being silly. You'll be far better off in the comfort of *Peak Lodge* writing your cards." So before I could change my mind, I turned round and made my way back again. (*Anxiously*) It is all right? You don't mind my being here?

Sally Of course not. But you shouldn't be straining your eyes in *this* light. (*She moves back to the door and flicks up an unseen switch in the hall*)

The overhead lights come up to full. From this point on, the exterior lights fade as night falls

That's better. You can see what you're doing now. (*She returns to the tray and picks it up*) Is there anything I can get for you? A cup of tea? Glass of sherry?

Marjory (*gratefully*) I wouldn't say no to the tea. (*Hastily*) But not if it's any trouble.

Sally (*shaking her head with a smile*) We usually have one ourselves about this time, so Bryan'll have the kettle on. (*After a hesitation*) Now you're sure you're warm enough? I *can* turn the heating up.

Marjory (*quickly*) Oh, no. I'm fine, thank you. Warm as toast. (*After a hesitation*) Well ... perhaps *a teensy* bit warmer would be nice.

Sally (*smiling*) I thought so. (*She puts the tray down again and moves to the boxed-in radiator*) It's often quite chilly by mid-afternoon at this time of year, but if no-one's about, we turn it down to keep the bills more manageable. (*She adjusts the knob*)

Marjory (*guiltily*) Oh, I didn't mean ...

Sally No, no. Don't worry. I should think they'll *all* be making their way back by this time, and we don't want them freezing to death before dinner. (*She goes back to collect the tray*) It'd be a waste of good food.

Marjory (*shyly*) I must say I'm looking forward to it. Lunch was delicious.

Sally (*lifting the tray*) One of Bryan's recipes. (*Confidentially*) Top secret and coveted by cooks the world over. (*Drily*) So he *tells* me. Been in his family for *centuries*. Well — maybe the nineteen-forties. (*She laughs*)

Marjory (*smiling*) And what's on the menu tonight? Or mayn't I ask?

Sally (*lowering the tray again*) Soup *Lorraine*, that's chicken and almonds with a blend of spices. Rack of lamb, or baked salmon. The usual selection of veg, and Grandma Lockwood's apple tansy or clementine and chocolate pudding to follow. Plus the cheese board, of course.

Marjory (*raising an eyebrow*) No Bakewell tart?

Sally (*in mock shock*) Mrs *Pike*. Bakewell *pudding*, if you *don't* mind. The locals would hang you for calling it a tart. (*Amused*) It's the first thing I learned when we moved here. (*In snooty tones*) "We don't have tarts in Bakewell, Mrs Lockwood. The correct term is *puddings*." (*She laughs*) I can arrange one for tomorrow, if you'd like? It's sometimes on the menu in tourist season, but not as often in winter.

Marjory (*smiling*) There's no need. Really, there isn't. I only mentioned it because we're so close to Bakewell and thought there'd be some connection.

Sally (*nodding*) Invented by a cook at the *Rutland Arms*. Some time in the eighteen-hundreds. A pure accident, according to local legend, but the famous Jane Austen raved about it, so everyone jumped on the bandwagon. You'll have to try one before you go home. The ones you buy in supermarkets aren't a patch on the genuine article. (*She picks up the tray*) I'll get you that tea.

Sally exits

(*Off*) Cup of tea, Pammy? You look as though you could use one.

Marjory goes back to her postcard writing

Pamela (*off*) Tell me about it. It's colder than a witch's *you-know-what*. Just give me a chance to shed this and I'll be right with you.
Sally (*off*)Two minutes. In the lounge.

Pamela Seton enters the lounge unfastening her bulky jacket. She is forty or so, with a positive, almost masculine attitude, wearing a woollen cap, jeans, thick sweater, stout walking shoes and a bright red knitted scarf. She moves to the radiator, glancing at Marjory as she does so

Pamela (*brightly*) You've more sense than I have. (*She presses her hands to the radiator*)
Marjory (*looking up*) I'm sorry?
Pamela It's freezing out there. There'll be six foot of snow by tomorrow.
Marjory (*glancing at the window in dismay*) Oh, dear.
Pamela (*hastily*) Only joking. But if you do see three brass monkeys hanging around, you'll know what they're looking for. (*She laughs*) I'm Pam, by the way. Pam Seton. Though mostly I answer to Pammy.
Marjory (*introducing herself*) Marjory Pike.
Pamela (*slipping her jacket off*) Arrived last night, did you?
Marjory (*apologetically*) Well after nine, I'm afraid.
Pamela Late start? Or just a long journey? (*She drapes her jacket on the back of the armchair and adds her scarf to it*)
Marjory All the way from London.
Pamela (*moving to the settee and removing her cap*) Sheffield's *my* base. I'm English and Drama at North Lane Community. (*She sits and tosses the cap on to the armchair*) Godawful place, but the head's decent enough and the kids seem to like me, so I shouldn't complain. (*Loosening her boot laces*) Been here before, have you?
Marjory To the lodge or Derbyshire?
Pamela (*still occupied*) Oh. Lodge.
Marjory (*shaking her head*) First visit. But I did visit Buxton once. Just after the war. (*Smiling*) We had an aunt who ran a tea-room there.
Pamela (*leaning back*) Umpteenth time for me. Four times a year, at least, for the past five. (*She grins*) As you'll have noticed, I like my walking and Derbyshire's walkers' heaven. The minute breakfast's out of the way, I'm into the wilds with a pack of sandwiches and a large flask of coffee. Forget civilization. Give me the peace and quiet of countryside any time. How'd you get to hear of it?
Marjory Through a friend. "Marjory," she said, "You'll love it. Pack a suitcase and book yourself in for a month. You'll never regret it."
Pamela (*enviously*) So you're here till the end of January?
Marjory (*amused*) Oh, no. No. Just over Christmas. I have to be back in London for New Year. But I'm sending her a postcard to let her know I've

arrived safely. (*She shows Pamela the card*) It's no use trying to telephone. She's been totally deaf for the past few years.

Pamela So what do you think of it? (*She indicates the room*) *Peak Lodge*?

Marjory (*smiling*) It's early days yet, but at the moment I'm enjoying it immensely.

Pamela Well, don't forget to put your name down for the panto party.

Marjory looks blank

(*Explaining*) At Buxton Opera House. Bryan and Sally arrange a trip every Boxing Day. (*Explaining*) Because of the *connection*.

Marjory continues to look puzzled

Jemmy *Junkins*.

The postcard slips from Marjory's hand

(*Realizing*) Sorry. Probably means nothing to *you*, but he's been one of *my* pet hobby-horses for years. (*Explaining*) He was one of the last *Harlequins* in the Drury Lane pantomimes and died in 1908. Worked with Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd, et cetera and did a Royal Command at Windsor Castle in 1895.

Marjory (*realizing the card is missing*) A little before my time, I'm afraid. (*She smiles and picks up the card again*)

Pamela (*laughing*) Mine too. But he popped up in one of the A level texts a few years ago and curiosity brought me down here. It's where he lived, you see? After his accident. He was doing his thing in *Red Riding Hood* at the Opera House in 1903 and broke his back falling through an open trapdoor.

Marjory (*wincing*) How *awful*.

Pamela (*nodding*) Only twenty-eight, and never walked again. No insurance, of course. Didn't have it in those days. But the management held a benefit night for him and raised enough cash to cover medical treatment and transport him here when he left the infirmary.

Marjory (*glancing around*) So this is where he lived?

Pamela Only for the *last* part of his life. He was a London boy, was Jemmy. And it wasn't a house *then*. It was an old coaching inn. *The Flying Horse*. (*She indicates the print on the wall*) That's a print of the original building. You can just make out the sign if you examine it under a glass. His younger brother, *Victor*, was the one who owned it — and wasn't exactly happy to be lumbered with a bedridden sibling. If it hadn't been for Jemmy's friends and the odd cheque or two, he'd have packed him off to the workhouse. As

it was, he had the name changed to *The Crippled Harlequin* so no-one could forget *he* was his brother's main supporter, and Jemmy spent his last few years upstairs relying on "the kindness of strangers" as Tennessee Williams once put it. He was thirty-three when he died and hadn't a penny to his name.

Marjory (*shaking her head sadly*) Poor man.

Pamela There was almost a riot when people heard he'd been buried in a pauper's grave. Marie Lloyd sent money for a headstone, but it never materialized. Little brother cried abject poverty and claimed he'd used it to pay off part of Jemmy's debts, so the only marker ever set up was a wooden cross donated by a local carpenter. (*Disgustedly*) Even that's gone now, so it's pure guesswork where the grave actually is.

Marjory How very sad.

Pamela It'd be nice to think the old miser finally got what he deserved. But no. He lived here till 1949 and died worth *thousands*. Though *how* he did it, they hadn't a clue. It certainly wasn't from "passing trade" and most of the locals wouldn't give him the time of day. Not after Jemmy died. (*Thoughtfully*) Black marketing's *my* opinion. Some of them made a fortune from it during the war — but *you'll* probably know more about that than I do.

Marjory looks startled

(*Realizing*) I mean — I was only a twinkle in Daddy's eye at the time. But they never pinned anything on Victor, so if he *was* up to something nefarious, he managed to get away with it. Anyway — he'd no family and hadn't made a will, so His Majesty's Government copped the lot. After that, it was one owner after another. None of them stayed long, and most of 'em were gone inside a year. They kept the name though. It was still *The Crippled Harlequin* up to fifteen years ago — then a Manchester couple turned it into a guest house and christened it with the inspiring appellation of *Mon Repose*. (*She rolls her eyes*)

Marjory (*frowning*) I'm surprised they got permission.

Pamela (*shrugging*) It wasn't a listed building — though it should have been in *my* opinion — so legally there was nothing to stop them. Everything of historical or architectural interest went into the skip and the great god "contemporary" moved in.

Marjory (*puzzled*) But surely the landing window's original?

Pamela The stained-glass one, you mean? (*She shakes her head*) Looks authentic, I know, but it's only a repro. After the Manchester lot gave up and moved on, a local businessman had a go at restoring the place and that's one of his efforts. Spent a fortune, from all accounts, but it didn't improve trade. He sold to a Scottish couple — the Gregorys — the following year

and they changed the name again and had "For Sale" notices up before the paint had time to dry. It had four more owners before the Lockwoods bought it in 2001.

Marjory So the Gregorys named it Peak Lodge?

Pamela (*shaking her head*) It was *Cairngorms* in their day. This one's down to the Lockwoods. They wanted to re-name it when they took over and Bryan found the old inn-sign in what was left of the stables. Would you believe some idiot had used it to board up a broken window? Anyway — after hearing about the place's history, they thought *The Crippled Harlequin Guest House* would appeal more to punters than *Cairngorms* ever did. But what they hadn't counted on was our old friend political correctness. When they tried to register the new name, the board turned it down on the grounds that some people might find it offensive and suggested *Peak Lodge* was a far more appropriate title. (*Grimacing*) So that's what it became. *Peak Lodge*.

Marjory (*interested*) Do they still have the sign?

Pamela Oh, yes. They've had it restored. It's up in their own room. If you'd like to see it, have a word with Sal. She'd be only too pleased.

Bryan Lockwood enters. He is a cheery thirty-something man in slacks, shirt, and thick sweater with pushed-up sleeves. He carries a tray holding a small china tea-pot, milk jug, sugar bowl, two cups and saucers, and two teaspoons

Bryan Here we are, ladies. Tea up. (*He deposits the tray on the table behind the settee*) Sorry it's taken so long. Sal got called to the phone. (*To Pamela*) Good walk today, Pammy? (*He picks up the "TVTimes" and moves down to the magazine rack*)

Pamela (*lightly*) Aren't they always? I was just telling Mrs Pike about the panto trip.

Bryan Oh, yes. (*He replaces the magazine and turns to Marjory*) You *will* be joining us, won't you? It's Boxing Day night and just a bit of fun.

Marjory (*protesting faintly*) I don't think …

Bryan (*quickly*) It's our treat. No charge. It's a kind of Christmas present to the guests for supporting us. (*Grinning*) Gives *us* a night out, too.

Marjory (*surprised*) That's very generous.

Bryan We get tickets as soon as booking starts. Can't have old Jemmy thinking we've forgotten him. He might start haunting again and frighten off the customers. (*He laughs and moves back* US)

Pamela He's welcome to haunt my room. I'd swap my ex for him any day.

Marjory (*amused*) I didn't know the lodge was haunted, Mr Lockwood.

Bryan (*smiling*) It's not. (*In a Scottish accent*) Nary a ghostly wail's disturbed us since the day we moved in.

Marjory But you said "again". He might start haunting again.
Bryan (*amused*) Just an old wives' tale. Who believes in ghosts these days? (*He picks up the teapot*) Shall I pour, or will you do it yourselves?
Marjory (*indicating for him to do it*) Please.
Pamela But it's why it changed hands so often, isn't it? After Victor died.
Bryan (*pouring tea*) According to the locals. But it was more likely bad management and gossip. (*Scornfully*) Clanking pipes, creaking floorboards and suddenly the place is knee deep in spooky visitors. Wooooooo. (*He laughs*) You don't have to worry, Mrs Pike. I promise we're a ghost-free establishment.
Marjory (*with mock regret*) Oh, dear — you've really spoilt my Christmas now. They're never the same without a ghost.
Bryan (*lightly*) The only one you'll see round here's the one in the pantomime. (*He moves down to Marjory carrying a cup and saucer, a spoon and the sugar bowl*) Unless, of course, you *really* feel deprived and in that case, for a small extra charge, I'll moan and groan outside your bedroom, Christmas Eve, rattling snow-chains till you beg for mercy.
Marjory (*taking the cup and saucer; amused*) That's *very* kind of you, Mr Lockwood, but I wouldn't want to put you out. (*She adds a spoonful of sugar to her tea*)
Bryan (*smiling*) It's no trouble. All part of the *Peak Lodge* service. (*He moves back to the tea-tray*) And it's Bryan.
Pamela But it was why the last owners sold, wasn't it? Because of Jemmy? They even called in an exorcist.
Bryan (*handing a cup to Pamela from the back of the settee; amused*) Where did you get *that* from?
Pamela (*surprised*) You told me. The first year you were here.
Bryan (*lightly*) I must have been pulling your leg.
Pamela (*protesting*) No, you weren't. You were tickled pink because it hadn't worked and they'd dropped the asking price by ten thousand pounds to get the place off their hands, I remember it, clear as day. (*She sips at her tea*)
Bryan (*laughing*) You've a better memory than I have. If I owned a so-called haunted house and wanted to get rid of it, I wouldn't drop the price. I'd double it and advertise to every crack-pot in the country. It'd be gone inside a week.

Sally enters

Sally That was the Tysons. They've had to cancel.
Bryan (*dismayed*) Not *again*.
Sally He's back in hospital. (*Wincing*) It doesn't sound good.
Bryan You're right. It leaves us with an empty room for Christmas.

Sally Well I'm sure he's not done it on purpose.

Bryan I know that. But we've been turning people away for weeks.

Sally (*soothingly*) There's always the chance of a last-minute booking. I'll give the information bureau a ring.

Bryan (*shaking his head*) It's all right. I'll call in tomorrow when I pick up the order from Millsons. (*He remembers something*) Which reminds me. I need to check that last invoice of theirs. I'm sure they've undercharged for the sirloin. It's not been that price since the nineteen-nineties. Better do it now before I forget again. (*He gives the others a quick smile*) 'Scuse me, ladies. Duty calls.

Bryan exits

Sally (*to the others*) Sorry about that. We don't usually discuss problems in public.

Pamela (*sympathetically*) Must be annoying, though. Being let down *this* close to Christmas. It's not the Nottingham couple, is it? Something to do with the BBC?

Sally (*remembering*) The Dysons, you mean? No, no. We've not seen them in months. They're visiting friends in New Zealand. (*Glancing round*) There's a card here, somewhere. (*Giving up*) No. These are the *Tysons*. Nice couple. Americans. About your age. They were here in May and booked again for October, but the husband was rushed into hospital the night before they were due to fly and had to cancel.

Marjory Oh, dear.

Sally It was touch and go for a few weeks, but the minute he came out, they gave us a call and re-booked for Christmas. And now it's happened again.

Pamela (*curiously*) So what's wrong with him?

Sally Something to do with his liver. Recurrent tumours, I think. She was pretty upset about it. (*Grimacing*) Some people have awful luck.

Marjory (*kindly*) He'll be in the best hands. The doctors there are very good.

Sally (*sighing*) I suppose so. But it's not surprising he had depression. It'd depress *me* being in and out of hospital every few months.

Pamela (*frowning*) Hm?

Sally (*shrugging*) He was taking pills for it. Narfil or Nardil. Something of the kind. Nothing I'd ever heard of. But it's on the bottle. He left them behind when they went and didn't realize till they'd reached the airport. I offered to post them, but he said if we'd keep them safe, he'd pick them up on their next visit. Which, of course, never happened.

Pamela So what are you going to do with them?

Sally (*helplessly*) Haven't a clue. They could have gone off, for all I know. I presume there's a sell-by date?

Marjory They do say unwanted medicines should be taken to the local chemist's.

Sally (*frowning*) I should have asked when I spoke to her, but never gave it a thought. Do you think I should call her back?

Pamela Well it's not as if he'll need them, is it? I mean — he's obviously not been without for the past few months. He could even have forgotten you've got them. I shouldn't worry about it. Drop 'em in at Boots.

Sally She might call when Christmas is over. She did say she'd let us know. (*Resolving the problem*) Oh, they can stay where they are. It's not as though we're tripping over them, is it? And they're safe enough in the first aid box. Are you all right for tea?

Marjory and Pamela smile and nod

Well, give me a call if you need anything.

Sally exits

Pamela (*finishing her tea and rising*) And I'll be off, as well. (*She moves behind the settee and puts her cup and saucer on the tray*) A long hot soak before dinner, then a few chapters of Katherine Hardy and an early night. (*She gathers up her belongings*) I'll see you in the dining room.

Lionel (*angry; off*) Well don't blame me. I didn't choose the bloody things.

Joan (*angry; off*) No. And you didn't tell me we'd be stuck in the middle of nowhere for Christmas, did you?

Pamela (*to Marjory; warningly*) The Reeces.

Lionel (*off*) And where do you think you find country guest-houses? The middle of flaming Rochdale?

Joan (*off*) When I said a country guest-house, I meant one with a road leading to it. Not half-way up a dirt track. Look at these shoes.

Lionel (*off*) The last thing that interests me now is your bloody shoes. If you bought ones the right size occasionally, you'd be a damned sight better off.

Joan (*off*) Oh, yes? You're an expert on women's shoes, as well, are you? Well for your information, Lionel Reece ... (*Sharply*) Where are you going?

Lionel (*off*) Upstairs.

Joan (*off*) And how do *I* get up there with my foot like this. What am *I* supposed to do?

Lionel (*off*) Limp.

Joan (*off*) Well, thank you very much. I'll remember that the next time you break a leg. (*Yelling*) And it can't be too damn soon.

Joan Reece limps into the room, face flushed with anger. She is a sullen and over-painted woman of thirty or so, wearing a full-length fur coat over expensive-looking clothes with matching accessories — including a handbag — and lots of flashy jewellery

Pamela (*with malicious sweetness*) Nice trip out, Mrs Reece?
Joan (*tartly*) If you call being frog-marched round godforsaken towns without a decent shop to their names "nice", it's been great. I've had more fun in a graveyard. (*She limps past Pamela to the* R *of the settee*)
Pamela (*smiling*) Yes. We have heard the rumours.

Joan glares at Pamela

Marjory (*sympathetically*) Not a country girl, I take it?
Joan (*balefully*) As far as I'm concerned, they can stick the countryside where the monkey sticks its nuts. (*She sits on the settee arm and massages her ankle*)
Pamela (*drily*) Such wonderful phraseology. You'd have turned him green with envy.
Joan (*frowning*) Who?
Pamela William Shakespeare.

Pamela exits

Joan looks baffled

Marjory (*brightly*) I'm rather fond of the country, myself, but my late sister would certainly have taken your side. Even as children we ——
Joan (*suddenly focusing on her*) Do I know you?
Marjory (*confused*) I'm sorry?
Joan (*impatiently*) Haven't we met before? You look familiar.
Marjory I don't think so. I only arrived last night. (*Quickly*) Marjory Pike.
Joan (*after a moment*) Joan Reece ... (*Darkly*) For the time being. (*She slips her shoe off with a theatrical gasp of relief*)
Marjory (*sympathetically*) New shoes?
Joan They were. (*Bitterly*) First time I get a chance to wear them and it has to be a bloody route march. (*She fingers her heel*) Sod it. Now I've got a blister.
Marjory (*smiling*) They've no idea, have they? Men.
Joan (*balefully*) That one certainly hasn't. I could wear clogs for all he'd care. Ninety-six pounds I paid for these and now look at 'em. (*She glares at her shoe*)
Marjory (*soothingly*) I'm sure they'll clean up.
Joan Not unless they do it themselves. I wear nothing unless it's immaculate. There's no make-do-and-mend about me. If you've got the brass, you let 'em know you have and spend it accordingly. I learned that in me teens. Nob'dy looks down their nose at Joanie Claythorpe. (*Suspiciously*) Are you sure we've not met?
Marjory Not to my knowledge.

Joan (*frowning*) I've always been good with faces. Not often I make a mistake. (*Proudly*) Should have been in the p'lice, according to my first husband. (*She slips her shoe back on*) So what brings you here? One of their "regulars", are you? Or just bad luck?

Marjory (*slightly taken aback*) I'd hardly call it bad luck, Mrs Reece. The owners are nice, the food is good, rooms clean and comfortable. And even you must agree the surroundings are impressive.

Joan (*scowling*) I'd take Barbados, any day. Or Venice. (*Bitterly*) I'd even settle for Leeds, Birmingham or Blackpool. Anywhere but this place. It's so flamin' dead, we might as well be on the moon.

Marjory (*mildly*) There's a lot to be said for peace and quiet in this day and age.

Joan Only by them who've never been young. I had all that crap from my first husband and I'll not make the same mistake twice. This time round it's bright lights and high livin'. Not Poverty Row.

Marjory (*gently*) Then why choose a country guest-house for Christmas? (*Apologetically*) I couldn't help overhearing.

Joan (*embarrassed*) Seemed a good idea at the time. I'd seen that film on telly. You know? *Gosford Park*. Load of posh buggers trying to out-do each other with their airs and graces. Quite fancied myself mingling with gentry like that lot. I could have put them straight on a thing or two, I can tell you. (*Seething*) But no. We had to come here. Stuck up the backside of England and not able to get a decent night's sleep for all the screeching and bloody moaning. First night we stayed here, I thought the place was haunted. (*Tartly*) Didn't bother him, of course. If I hadn't stuck my elbow in his ribs, he'd have slept right through it.

Marjory (*curiously*) And what was it? The thing that disturbed you?

Joan Flaming fox, according to the Lockwoods. But it sounded like someb'dy in agony, to me. And as for that bloody owl, if it starts hooting again tonight, I'm out of here first thing tomorrow.

Derek Tyndale appears in the doorway. He is a slender man in his early forties with an apologetic manner, wearing a padded car coat over a tweed suit with matching waistcoat, and clutching hat and gloves. He pauses to unzip the car coat

Derek (*shyly*) Afternoon, ladies. I *thought* I heard voices. (*To Marjory*) Did you find your way all right?

Marjory To the village, you mean? (*She shakes her head*) I thought discretion was the better part of valour. It's nothing urgent and I've all week to get myself organized.

Derek (*helpfully*) If you'd like a lift, you've only to say the word. It's no trouble. I pass through it every morning and there's a nice little tea-room on the High Street if you find yourself feeling peckish.

Joan (*with distaste*) Spare me from getting that desperate.
Derek (*frowning*) It's not bad, actually. Whenever we stayed here, Mother called in to soak up the atmosphere. Said it recharged her batteries.
Marjory (*reassuringly*) I know just what she means, Mr Tyndale. I'm the same with Fortnum and Mason. She's not with you this time?
Derek (*forcing a smile*) Not this time. She died two years ago.
Marjory (*quickly*) Oh, I am sorry.
Derek (*brightly*) But I still come down myself. Every so often. Just for a day or two. It may seem strange, but I feel close to her here. She was very fond of the old *Harlequin*.
Marjory (*interested*) So you knew it in the old days? Before the alterations?
Derek (*moving into the room*) Oh, yes. She even thought of buying it, once. (*Regretfully*) Didn't work out, though. But they're doing a great job. The Lockwoods. Better than I'd have done. (*Smiling*) Well — must pop upstairs and get my notes written up or the publishers'll be breathing down my neck and wanting their advance back. (*He turns to exit*)
Joan (*archly*) I didn't realize you were a writer, Mr Tyndale.
Derek (*awkwardly*) Only a minor one. It's not a family thing. Mum was the lady of letters. She had three books published before I was born.
Marjory (*enthused*) You must give me her name. Perhaps I've read her?
Derek (*slightly embarrassed*) I don't think they'll be your kind of thing, Mrs Pike. They're more of a — specialist nature.
Marjory (*amused*) Don't judge a book by its cover, Mr Tyndale. I like a good bodice ripper. Even at my age.
Derek (*hastily*) Oh, no. They're nothing like that. They're not fiction. They're about her work.
Joan And what was that?

Sally hurries in

Sally Sorry to break in, but there's a call for Mrs Pike. (*To her*) Chantelle Vincent?
Marjory (*frowning*) Who?
Sally It's rather urgent, she said. (*Helpfully*) You can take it at the end of the hall. Next to the first aid box. Bryan's putting it through for you.

Marjory puts down her postcards, still looking puzzled, and rises

Marjory I can't place the name at all. It doesn't ring bells. (*She hesitates*) And how did she know I was here? The only one I told was Aileen. (*Recovering*) Do excuse me.

Marjory exits

Sally (*moving to the rear windows*) Just got back in time, Derek. First flakes are falling. (*She closes the curtains on both the windows*)
Derek (*enthusiastically*) White Christmas coming up, eh?.
Sally (*amused*) So long as it's not *too* white. We were snowed in for days three years ago. (*She moves down to the window* L) And we had a power cut. Almost ended up eating each other. (*She closes the curtains*) But we're ready for it this time. All the old chimneys have been unblocked and there's enough wood out back to last us a month. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll not be cold or hungry. (*She moves back towards the door*) Anyone fancy a drink?
Joan I'll settle for a sherry if there's one on offer.
Derek Oh ... er ... coffee's fine for me.
Sally (*smiling*) One coffee and one sherry. (*To Joan*) Sweet, medium or dry?
Joan Drier the better.
Sally I'll be back in a second.

Sally exits

Derek (*after a slight pause*) Nice coat.
Joan (*glancing at him askance*) Know about furs, do you?
Derek (*embarrassed*) Not really. There was one in Mum's wardrobe when she died. Bit lighter than yours, I think. Hadn't worn it in years. Not since the fuss started, anyway. You know? Animal rights thing. Didn't do to upset the fans.
Joan (*scornfully*) Took notice of them, did she? Well more fool her. I'd like to see anybody tell me what I could or couldn't wear.
Derek (*uncomfortably*) It's always a problem when you're in the public eye. She was very — sensitive.
Joan (*tartly*) Bite before you're bitten's my motto. I may look soft, but I'm not just a pretty face. If folks come looking for trouble in my direction, they'll be in for a big surprise.
Derek (*jokingly*) Like the Teddy Bears' Picnic, eh?

Joan looks at him as though he's gone mad

Sally enters

Sally I'm sorry, Mrs Reece. We're totally out of dry sherry. Will medium be all right? I'll have more in, tomorrow.
Joan (*acidly*) If I'd wanted medium, I'd have said.
Sally (*hopefully*) I can offer a white wine.
Joan (*scowling*) Better than nothing, I suppose. But in my opin ... (*She stops in mid-sentence as the thought strikes her*) *That's* where I know her from. I knew I recognized her. (*Smugly*) The Pike woman. Her name's not Pike at all. She's here under false pretences.

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