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In By The Half

a play

Jimmie Chinn

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CHARACTERS

Madam, an elderly actress
Doris, her housekeeper, slightly younger than Madam
Doctor, male or female, any age
Sylvia, young
Ursula, early forties

The action takes place in the sitting room of Madam's small, neat, terraced cottage in Hammersmith, West London

Time — the present

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(See also page ii)

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IN BY THE HALF

First performed by Teddington Theatre Club Audio with the following cast:

Madam	Jennifer Laney
Doris	Doris Winsborrow
Doctor*	Jack Smerdon
Sylvia	Catherine Early
Ursula	Merlyn Lowther

Directed by Ken Mason
Incidental Music by Ken Mason, sung by Wendy Bedford

* Please note that, though the Doctor was originally played by a male actor and is male in the text, it is possible, and perfectly acceptable, for this character to be played by a woman.

For Rachel Kempson

IN BY THE HALF

The sitting room of Madam's small, neat terraced cottage in Hammersmith, West London

An archway L. *leads out to a small hall, the stairs and the front door (which are unseen). A door* R *leads to a small kitchen. Through a window a small untidy garden can be seen and there is a fireplace in the 'fourth wall'*

The living-room furniture and furnishings are old-fashioned but well-kept and suggest a more elegant time and place. There are two armchairs, a chaise-longue and a small polished dining table

The CURTAIN *rises on darkness. Music plays. The Lights slowly come up to reveal the table laid for breakfast, including a plate of scrambled eggs. The door to the kitchen is open. Madam is seated at the table, wearing her dressing-gown and glasses and reading a copy of* The Times. *Although she is very elderly, she still has the look and authority of a once quite distinguished actress*

The music fades; as it does so, we hear a grandfather clock (unseen) begin to strike the half hour

Doris enters from the kitchen. Younger than her employer she was once Madam's dresser and is now her housekeeper and

companion. She wears a wrap-around overall and is carrying a tray, a Hoover and four letters. She starts to clear the table, working thoughout the following exchange

Madam (*peering at Doris over her glasses*) This is outrageous! It says here that I'm dead!

Doris (*with no interest*) You haven't finished your breakfast.

Madam (*reading*) 'Quietly, at her home in Sussex. She was eighty-four.' (*To Doris*) Absolute rubbish!

Doris Honestly, I go to the trouble of making scrambled eggs and what happens? You've hardly touched it.

Madam Well, I'm not taking this lying down. I shall write a stiff letter. This afternoon, after lunch. How can they think I'm dead?

Doris Good money down the drain, is this. You'll get no egg at all tomorrow and see how you like that. More tea?

Madam They're obviously mixing me up with Dorothy Bickerstaff. Now she *did* live in Sussex.

Doris (*picking up the teapot*) More tea or not? This is the last call.

Madam I shall ring the editor. I know him. His mother was Lady Flockley Harriet Skinner before she married. The worst Juliet I've ever had the misfortune to sit through. I shan't have any more tea; it was far too weak.

Doris (*putting more things on the tray*) Too weak, too strong, too hot, too cold; I get giddy with it all.

Madam We don't live in Sussex, do we?

Doris I wish you'd pull yourself together. We live in Hammersmith.

Madam Is that in Sussex?

Doris I shall be doing your bedroom this morning so I hope you haven't left it in a tip.

Madam I shall require writing paper and envelopes. The white, I think. I save the blue for letters of a more intimate nature.

Doris The doctor's due at ten, don't forget, so you'll need clean knicks and things.

Madam Doris, I do wish you wouldn't constantly refer to my undergarments: it's sordid. Have you read this obituary?

Doris I read the *Daily Mirror* you know that. You don't get obituaries in there. (*She plugs in the Hoover*)

Madam I suppose no-one ever dies in the *Daily Mirror*

Doris switches the Hoover on and moves quickly round the room with it

(*Raising her voice*) Must you do that now?

Doris And remember I have to go out this morning, so I'll leave your lunch cold between two plates in the fridge, and I don't want you touching it before one o'clock, right?

Madam Out? You're always out. Where to?

Doris Now don't start. You know perfectly well 'where to'· I always visit my sister Dolly on Saturdays. There's another beside you who calls for my attention.

Madam How on earth am I expected to remember what my maid does on a Saturday?

Doris Oh, I see. 'Maid' today, is it? What's happened to 'housekeeper' all of a sudden?

Madam (*as if suddenly deaf*) I'm sorry ... ?

Doris If I recall, all those years ago I was employed as your dresser-companion. 'No household duties' the advert said. I never flaming well stop!

Madam Well, it's most inconvenient. When will you be back?

Doris (*switching off the Hoover and winding up the flex*) Before curtain-up, so keep your hair on.

Madam I must be ready by the half so that I can have my lie down.

Doris You'll be the death of me, you will.

Madam What did you say?

Doris (*handing Madam the four letters*) Here's your post. Two bills, one circular and one from your Ursula.

Madam (*putting the letters on the table and ignoring them*) How do you know that? You've been steaming open my letters again.

Doris I don't need to steam open anything. I know the handwriting. She'll be after money again, mark my words.

Madam It's none of your business.

Doris It soon will be. When you've no money left to pay my wages and I have to leave you high and dry. I don't work for nothing, you know. I'm not a sodding charity!

Madam I can't hear a word you say. You must learn to enunciate properly. Project. All these years in the theatre and you've learned nothing.

Doris (*projecting her voice and enunciating clearly*) I said I am not a sodding charity!

Madam You see. What a glorious line. You must use it. Take a deep breath, fill the diaphragm and 'Speak the speech as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.' Now try again: 'I am not a sodding charity!'

Doris I should save all that for Sylvia; she'll be here at twelve.

Madam Sylvia. Who is Sylvia?

Doris You know perfectly well who Sylvia is so stop being grand. She's your pupil — Saturday mornings, twelve till one.

Madam She's useless. Couldn't act her way out of a paper bag.

Doris Yes, well, don't tell her that. You need the money. *We* need the money.

Madam Where's my tea? You've cleared away my tea, woman.

Doris And please don't call me 'woman' — you know it gets my back up.

Madam I suppose it was you who told this wretched newspaper I was dead. For spite.

Doris Now, come along. Bathroom please. A nice bath and change into those lovely clean undies in case the doctor wants to look at you.

Madam I refuse to be 'looked at.'

Doris You're an actress. You should be used to being looked at.

Madam Not in my underclothes.

Doris I don't see why not. They all strip off these days. You see it all the time on the telly. (*She relishes the next line, aware of the feelings it will produce*) Even your daughter.

Madam (*reacting to this sore point*) Please don't mention that to me. I was disgusted. Ashamed. 'A very important part', she said. And what did it turn out to be? A corpse stark naked on a bed!

Doris Well, it was important the whole play was about her, wasn't it and no lines to learn. I thought she was ever so good.

Madam Of course she wasn't good. Ursula, sadly, has never been good in anything.

Doris You wait; next time I see her I shall tell her what you said.

Madam She knows what I think. When it came to handing out talent, Dame Fortune passed my daughter by Have I had my breakfast? I'm peckish.

Doris (*folding the tablecloth*) Too late. No more food till lunchtime.

Madam I shall tell the doctor you starve me. Deprive me of food. Hide away my sweeties. You'll be reported to the authorities.

Doris (*collecting the tray*) Yes, yes, we've heard it all before.

Doris exits to the kitchen with the tray

Madam (*calling to Doris*) What am I playing tonight?

Doris (*off*) Mother Courage — on ice!

Madam I hate it. Dragging that great cart around the stage exhausts me. I must ask the stage manager to oil the wheels.

The front doorbell rings

Who's that at this time? I'm not even dressed.

Doris enters from the kitchen wiping her hands on a tea towel

Doris Keep your hair on. They've probably sent round a straitjacket for you.

Doris exits into the hall

Madam (*calling out again*) I'm signing no autographs. Tell them I'm resting. Tell them that, according to this, I'm dead!

Doris (*off*) Oh, Doctor, you're early; come in.

Doctor (*off*) I do hope it's convenient, Doris. I'd forgotten it's my day at the hospital.

Madam (*calling again*) If it's Sir Godfrey I'll see him. I want a word about his performance the other night. He's got to find more pace.

The Doctor enters carrying a doctor's bag

Madam Oh, it's you!

Doctor Good-morning, Eleanor; hope I haven't caught you on the hop.

Madam I don't want you. I'm not ill. I'm an actress; actresses of my calibre are never ill.

Doctor I must say you're looking terribly well, dear. (*He winks at Doris*) Doris looking after you, is she? (*He opens the bag and brings out a stethoscope, pad and pen*)

Madam If it was left to her I'd have been dead years ago. I refuse to be injected.

Doctor No injections today. Just my little stethoscope. How's your chest?

Madam My chest is none of your business.

Doctor (*moving a chair to Madam's side and sitting*) No problem. There we are — nice deep breath.

Doris Oh, by the way, Doctor, she's in the obituaries again this morning. It's getting beyond a joke.

Doctor (*turning his head away from the patient and lowering his voice*) I shouldn't let it worry you, Doris. She's not half as silly as she makes out.

Doris exits to the kitchen. We hear the sounds of washing up during the following

Madam Why are you two whispering? Is it a cancer?

Doctor Afraid not, dear a bit of congestion, that's all. Another deep breath.

Madam breathes deeply

(*Making small talk*) Terrible notice in *The Times* for the new *Merchant* at Stratford. He slaughters poor Shylock.

Madam Good. Who's playing it?

Doctor Some new chap, apparently. A performance you could put between two slices of bread by all accounts. One more deep one, dear.

Madam Off the television, I expect. No training no experience no talent! (*She breathes in deeply once more*)

Doctor Splendid. There really is a great improvement. How are the tablets?

Madam As usual. No good whatsoever. (*She lowers her voice*) Doris has got to go, Doctor. She's getting past it. My meals are late, undercooked — and she's so forgetful. Last night she was even late with my costume change in Act Three.

Doctor (*re-packing his bag*) Oh, dear ...

Madam I know what it is — she wanted to ruin my performance. She knew the critics were in.

Doctor (*not taking any of this seriously*) You could always sack her I suppose.

Madam But where would she go? You know she's been with me for years. How could I be so heartless?

Doctor Yes, well, that is how it might appear, Eleanor.

Madam Of course, she is far too old; that's the top and bottom of it.

Doctor (*trying not to sound sarcastic*) Ten years younger than you if I'm not mistaken.

Madam She's got her bus pass, I know that for a fact. She goes all the way to see her sister Dolly for nothing. And the cinema half price for the matinee. And, I hate to mention it, but she's developed a sordid fixation about my underclothes.

Doctor I shouldn't let it worry you, dear. The moment she starts trying to climb into bed with you we'll have a little word with her. Heard from Ursula?

Madam When, I ask you, do I ever hear from her?

Doctor Saw her on television the other night. Jolly good, I thought. A bit too thin, perhaps.

Madam How she can bear the family name and appear in rubbish like that is beyond me. We've always stuck to the classics.

Doctor It may be all she's offered, Eleanor.

Madam Are you surprised? I have never appeared on television—and I never shall.

Doris enters with clean bed linen

Doris Can I get you anything, Doctor?

Madam Tea and biscuits, please at once!

Doris Not for you. I was asking the doctor.

Doctor No, thank you, Doris. Must dash.

Madam I've been telling the doctor how incompetent you're becoming.

Doris Oh, yes.

Madam We both agree you're past it. You should be put out to graze, thrown on the scrap heap. Isn't that what you said, Doctor?

Doctor (*writing on her pad*) I'm writing a prescription for more tablets, Doris. She must be running short.

Doris Thanks. I'll get them on my way to Dolly's.

Madam I never see any tablets. She hoards them. Waiting till she has hundreds then she can poison me with them.

Doris Time for your bath, otherwise you'll have Sylvia here — and she won't want to see your sagging bosoms.

Madam (*rising from the table*) See what I mean, Doctor? This isn't a normal person speaking.

Doctor I'll pop in next week, Eleanor. Don't overdo things. And *no* sweeties *or* chocolate!

Madam Don't do this, don't do that — my life is a misery. I shall go over my lines for tonight and leave you to talk about me. I know what goes on behind my back. (*She heads towards the hall door quoting loudly as she goes*)

'O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers.

Doctor (*laughing*) You're a saint, Doris. I've no idea how you stick it.

Doris She don't get any better an' that's a fact. But she's harmless enough. I just hope to Gawd I don't end up like that. Who'd look after me?

Doctor You've always got your sister I suppose.

Doris You must be mad! Dolly's nearly as bad as her. Is Madam really better?

Doctor Strong as a horse, dear. It's all play-acting. It's how she passes her time.

Doris Every night, about seven o'clock, she still thinks she's about to go on stage, you know. I have to get her ready, call the 'half' then 'beginners, please' Sad, really.

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