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The Old Ladies

A Play in Three Acts

by Rodney Ackland

Adapted from the novel by Hugh Walpole

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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THE OLD LADIES

Produced at the New Theatre, London, on April 3rd, 1935,
with the following cast of characters:

MAY BERINGER

Jean Cadell

LUCY AMOREST

Mary Jerrold

AGATHA PAYNE

Edith Evans

The Play Produced by JOHN GIELGUD

The action throughout takes place in an old house in Pontippy
Square, Polchester.

THE OLD LADIES

ACT I

SCENE.—*An old house in Pontippy Square, Polchester.*

Down stage the hall, R. to C., and a bed-sitting-room, C. to L., are seen. The latter is occupied by LUCY AMOREST. At R., the front door. Above it a staircase leading up stage. A small window, R., above the foot of the stairs.

Up stage of these rooms the interiors of two other rooms are visible. One, R. to R.C., is a bed-sitting-room rented by MAY BERINGER. The other, at C., is the sitting-room occupied by AGATHA PAYNE.

(See the Ground Plan, Furniture and Property Plots at the end of the Play.)

When the CURTAIN rises MAY BERINGER, a thin, peaked, old maiden lady, in long old-fashioned clothes, is seen descending the stairs. Reaching the hall she crosses to LUCY'S room and knocks nervously at the door. There is no reply.

She knocks again. At that moment the front door opens to admit LUCY AMOREST, neat, tidy, white-haired and happy, a cold wind blowing behind her. She shuts the front door quickly to keep out the wind, and crosses towards her room. MAY has turned, and stands facing her, making nervous noises.

LUCY (*checking at c.*). Miss Beringer, isn't it?

MAY. Yes. Oh yes. I had to come and thank you for being so kind. I was just knocking . . . and to wish you the compliments of the season, of course. (*She gives a nervous titter.*)

LUCY. I'm so pleased. I hoped we'd meet before Christmas Day. (*She goes to the door of her room and opens it.*) Do come in for a moment. (*Turning, at the door.*) I was just going to make a cup of tea. (*Entering her room.*) I do like a cup of tea between breakfast and lunch.

MAY (*following her in*). Thank you so much. I couldn't wait to thank you for being so generous as I'm sure, indeed, you have been, to a perfect stranger, and someone whom you've never seen in your life before, and you've no reason at all to be kind to.

LUCY (*who has been taking off her outdoor things and hanging them up*). Well, after all, I thought to myself when you arrived yesterday, we're going to be such very near neighbours, we must get to know one another a little. You *will* sit down, won't you?

MAY (*breathlessly*). I'm sure that's very kind of you. (*She sits R. of the table.*)

LUCY. I'll make some tea, then. (*She comes to the L. of the table.*)

MAY. It's so silly. I *know* I sound as though I'd been running up a whole flight of stairs, but it's only my nervousness. I'm always shy of meeting anyone for the first time.

LUCY. Oh, but you mustn't be like that with me. I'm a very unalarming person.

MAY. I've always been so, ever since I was a child. As quite a little girl I was as shy as anything. (*She gives her habitual nervous deprecating laugh.*)

(*A pause.*)

LUCY. Have you met your other neighbour—Mrs Payne yet?

MAY. Mrs Payne? Oh no. She's the lady in the room next to mine, isn't she? The agent, Mr Richards, told me. Oh, yes. Oh, I'm sure I shall be most comfortable here.

LUCY. The house is very rickety, of course, and when the old gentleman who had your room previously, left, I did feel quite queer sometimes, alone in the house with Mrs Payne, but I'm sure we'll all be very happy now. Three just makes the difference, doesn't it? (*She fetches the kettle from the fireplace.*)

MAY. Quite, oh yes. I think it does.

LUCY (*returning to the table*). And, after all, one makes one's own room one's little domain. It's quite possible to be very cosy and at home with one's things, in spite of the draughty hall and so on. (*A pause.*) I'll see to the kettle. (*She proceeds to fill it from the water jug on her washstand.*)

MAY (*as LUCY goes up with the kettle*). I really could have wept when the charlady came in with such a lovely surprise this morning. It was such a nice thought. I really could. And it must be months since I had a fried sausage for breakfast! You left enough for yourself, I hope?

LUCY (*moving down with the kettle, now filled*). Dear me, yes. More than I could manage, and I thought you might like one, and then it would be a good way of introducing myself. (*She puts the kettle on the fire and then says, as she sits opposite MAY.*) Did you have to come far yesterday?

MAY. Not so very far, no. St. Lennans. The three-forty-five it was . . . I think . . . or was it the three-forty?

LUCY. I've never *been* there, but I hear it's very bracing.

MAY. Yes, very. The air's wonderful. It agreed with me splendidly. Splendidly.

LUCY. Were you there long?

MAY. Oh yes, several years, but it had too many associations for me after my last little dog died, and then my friend Jane, who married and went to India, she'd lived there, too. . . . It's too sad, don't you think, living with associations of things that are past?

LUCY. Yes . . . in some ways.

MAY. That's why I decided to live in Polchester, but I'm sure I shall like it here. The Christmas shops and everything were so gaily decorated I noticed as I came along, it quite reminded me of Exeter.

LUCY. Do you know Exeter well?

MAY. Dear me, yes. My home was there. I'm very fond of it—Exeter. Even when I was by myself I still lived there for quite a long time. Oh yes, nice, very nice. I was just saying—the shops at Christmas time—the butcher, you know, used to have quite a little tableau in the window. Quite a little tableau. Very bright lights, and there were six little pigs with hats on, all sitting round to Christmas dinner. It was quite beautiful.

LUCY. Good gracious! (*She cannot help laughing.*)

(*A pause.*)

MAY. There's a very fine view of the cathedral from your window, I notice. Is it far away?

LUCY. Oh, no. Quite a short walk. I always go to the services there.

MAY. Do you? . . . I . . . er . . . I was thinking, I'd very much like to go tomorrow to attend a service . . . I wonder . . . of course, I don't *know* that I shall be able to find the way, but . . . I'm so silly at asking . . . and . . .

LUCY. Why don't you come with me?

MAY (*suddenly, pathetically excited*). Oh, may I really? I would like to so much! It's so very nice of you! I don't know why you should bother, I'm sure! It's really something to look forward to.

LUCY (*warmly*). I'm so glad, Miss Beringer. It is for me, too. Of course, I know we're all alone here, you and I and Mrs Payne, but there's no reason why we shouldn't have quite a happy little Christmas.

MAY. None at all.

LUCY. To tell you the truth, I'd been wondering whether I might have a tiny party this evening. Needless to say, there would only be ourselves.

MAY. *A party!* Oh dear.

LUCY. Well, it wouldn't be a real party. Just tea and cakes, but—I've got a little surprise. It suddenly came upon me to buy it on my way home this morning. I thought how jolly it would be to have a Christmas Eve celebration for once, and perhaps actually stay up till twelve o'clock. What do you think?

MAY. Oh, I think it sounds wonderful. And we could lie late tomorrow morning. Oh dear, yes. The other lady will be here, of course?

LUCY. Mrs Payne, oh yes, though I haven't asked her yet.

(*A slight pause.*)

MAY. Does . . . er . . . Mrs Payne attend at the cathedral, also?

LUCY. No, oh no, she doesn't go about much. She's getting a little past it, I think.

MAY (*nodding her head*). Quite. Quite.

LUCY. And I have rather an idea that she's a Roman Catholic.

MAY. You *don't* say so! Tch! Tch! Tch! Oh, dear! So, of course, she *wouldn't* go to the cathedral. Quite. I've always had a feeling, you know, that there's something rather frightening about Roman Catholicism. I remember my father was even diffident about attending Roman Catholic patients. But, luckily, there weren't a great many where he practised—in Exeter, of course.

LUCY. But I don't think our Lord really minds what form the expression of our love for Him takes. (*Almost with a laugh.*) He knows how different we all are.

MAY. Quite. Quite.

LUCY. What is happening to the kettle? Perhaps the fire's not hot enough just there. (*She rises and moves the kettle to a better spot.*)

MAY. Do you manage to get about much?

LUCY. Well, I do my shopping, and I go to visit my cousin sometimes, which is rather a tiring walk, but—oh, I don't do so badly. (*She returns to her chair.*)

MAY. I've had a strange pain in my knee today. I think it must be the frost. As a rule there's nothing the matter with me at all.

LUCY. I've always found that rubbing in a little Ellimans' last thing at night is quite wonderful.

MAY. Yes. Ellimans'. I must remember that. Ellimans'.

LUCY. It's quite easy to remember.

MAY. Yes. Ellimans'. (*A pause.*) Did you go far in your walk this morning?

LUCY. Well, right over the bridge past Seatown. And I must admit that by the time I arrived at my cousin's I did feel rather tired. But then it may have been through carrying the picture, because otherwise I've been very sprightly lately.

MAY. Oh, a picture?

LUCY. Well, I couldn't make up my mind what to give him. It's so difficult to know what to give a man, isn't it? Oh, there, the kettle's beginning to boil, and I've nothing ready. (*She rises and, going to the sideboard, produces a crocheted table-cloth and tea-things, which she lays on the table.*) Yes, it's so difficult to know what to give for Christmas to a man like my poor cousin Francis, who's confined to his bed all day and hasn't very long to live. So, in the end, I thought a picture would be nice.

MAY. Yes, a picture's always nice, isn't it? Yes.

LUCY (*with a glance at her*). Well, perhaps not *always*. They have some very funny pictures nowadays.

MAY. Yes. Oh dear, yes. I saw some extremely odd ones in a shop at St Lennans once. I don't know *what* they could have been.

LUCY (*moving up to the sideboard*). Would you like a biscuit with your tea, Miss Beringer?

MAY. Oh no, really. I couldn't manage a biscuit, not after the sausage.

LUCY. Are you sure? I . . . believe . . . (*she is peering in the sideboard*) there are some here. They're not too crisp, I'm sorry to say. Still, they might as well be put out.

MAY. Not for me, really. Please, don't. Oh, well, perhaps—are you going to have one?

LUCY. Yes, I think I will.

MAY. Will you, really?

LUCY. I think so.

MAY. Then perhaps I will, then.

LUCY. Do.

MAY (*finally*). Well, then, I will.

(LUCY *brings the biscuits to the table with the crockery. Then she goes, teapot and caddy in hand, to the kettle and makes the tea.*)

LUCY (*as she crosses*). Will two be enough? Or do you prefer it stronger?

MAY. No, no, thank you. Not for me. That will do beautifully. Oh dear, we are cosy in here.

LUCY. I'd better let it stand for a moment. (*she places the pot on the table.*)

MAY (*rising*). May I look round your room? You've got such lovely things, if you don't mind my saying so. Oh dear, yes. (*She moves about the room.*)

LUCY. Yes, do, please. (*She sits L. of the table.*)

MAY (*going to the bookshelf*). What a nice lot of books you have. I do like reading, don't you?

LUCY. Well, Mrs Henry Wood, of course—she writes *good* stories, I think—and Sir Walter Scott. My husband used to say that Sir Walter Scott had the true romantic spirit. Although a little old-fashioned. But then my husband was more modern than I was. Yes, my husband was a writer. He wrote plays and poetry, and was very well known in his time. Very well known, indeed! You'll see one of his books there.

MAY. Really? How very interesting. That *is* interesting.

LUCY. Two plays in one volume. *Tintagel* and *The Slandered Queen*, by Ambrose Amorest. Can you see it?

MAY. Oh, yes. (*She takes the volume out.*) I should love to read them. I really should. Do you think I might?

LUCY. Why certainly, Miss Beringer.

MAY. Thank you so much. Yes, I really must read them! (*But she puts the volumes back and passes on to the mantelpiece, where she examines a photograph.*) This is your husband, I suppose?

LUCY. Yes. That is my husband.

MAY. What a fine face. A fine face. A fine man he must have

been. And how well the cloak becomes him. (*She turns to the other photograph.*) And is this your little boy?

LUCY (*speaking with a pride which she is unable to conceal*). Yes, that's Brand.

MAY. He is a nice little boy. Is he . . . I . . . er . . .

LUCY. He's a grown man now, of course. He lives abroad. I write to him every week.

MAY. Every week? Yes? And which part is he?

LUCY. I . . . I'm not quite sure. He was . . . in America when I heard last. (*A tiny pause.*) Milk and sugar?

MAY. Oh, if you don't mind. Two. (*She goes back to her seat.*)

LUCY. Yes, he's a sturdy little chap in the photograph, isn't he?

MAY. Yes, very. Very. (*She takes the proffered cup.*) Oh, thank you. That's beautiful, thanks.

LUCY. He was just off to football.

(*Her eyes wander away into the past. She is thinking of BRAND. MAY drinks her tea. She speaks after putting her cup down.*)

MAY. That's very odd now, but I have a brother who went abroad when he was young, and lost touch with the family. He may be alive somewhere, one never knows.

LUCY (*meaninglessly*). Yes.

(*A pause.*)

MAY. One gets great companionship from dogs, don't you think? This is the first time I've been without one. Ever since my friend Jane went to India, I've never been without a dog. Never.

(*Lucy, who has not heard a word, brings herself back to earth.*)

LUCY. What a neglectful hostess I am. Do have another biscuit, will you?

MAY. I don't *really* think I could manage one.

LUCY. Oh, but they're nothing.

MAY. Well—perhaps. Are you really going to have one?

LUCY. Yes, I think I will.

MAY. Then perhaps I *really* will, then.

LUCY. Do.

MAY. Thank you. I shouldn't, of course. I'm nothing but a glutton. (*She takes one and eats it. They are very small, thin biscuits.*)

LUCY. Mrs Payne's the one for sweet biscuits.

MAY. She's fond of them, is she?

LUCY. She has quite a passion for sweet things.

MAY. Really? Chocolates?

LUCY. No. Nougat she likes—and sticky things. Queer, isn't it? . . . And raspberry jam.

MAY. Oh, dear.

(*They both laugh a little.*)

I was very fond of sweet things myself as a child—we were all children together in Exeter, you know. And the times we had, and the things we got up to—when we were all children together in Exeter, you know. There was a little rhyme we used to say—I'm afraid you'll think it awfully silly of me remembering it—oh dear, yes, you *will* think I'm silly, (*she is giggling nervously through her words*) . . . but it was this:

“Okey pokey, penny a lump,
The more you eat, the more you jump.”

Oh dear, now, I don't know what it could have meant!

(*They both laugh, but a sudden thud on the ceiling causes them to start and look upwards. There is silence for a moment. In the room up c., a bulky sleeping figure, vaguely discernible until now in a rocking-chair, has heaved itself up and, in doing so, knocked over a small table. Now it shuffles to the door, and goes out.*)

MAY. What was that?

LUCY. Oh, nothing. Mrs Payne, I expect.

MAY. Oh.

(*A pause.*)

LUCY. She must have knocked something over.

MAY. It gave me quite a start.

(*AGATHA PAYNE appears on the stairs, which she commences to descend. Large, stout and shapeless, her soiled red wrapper clutched about her, a jewelled comb in her black tumbled hair, she is like an old gipsy woman, or at least one of gipsy blood. MAY and LUCY go on talking.*)

LUCY. Mrs Payne often startles one like that. She sleeps a lot, you know, and then she probably wakes up suddenly and moves about without being properly awake.

MAY. I hate anything giving me a start. There's really nothing I hate more. My heart's not at all good. The slightest shock and it jumps up and down in such a wild manner. I can feel it now. And what is worse, it will miss a beat. Most alarming!

LUCY. I don't think that's anything to worry about, Miss Beringer.

MAY. Oh, but it is. You've no idea how alarmed I get. I don't know what I should have done sometimes without Pip—I don't really.

LUCY. Was that your last little dog?

MAY. Yes. Pip. A little fox-terrier he was.

LUCY. Did you have him long?

MAY. Oh yes. He was quite old when he passed away. And just like a human being. Jane—my friend Jane—gave him to me as a gift. Pip first, she gave me, and then the amber.

LUCY. The amber?

MAY. Yes. My most treasured possession—a most beautiful piece of amber. I must certainly show it to you.

LUCY. Do, please, I'd love to see it.

MAY. I do think there's nothing like a gift, is there? Well, I've often thought since—when Pip died it was doubly sad—doubly sad, yes—not only losing him, but something from my best friend as well.

LUCY. But at least you've got this amber; you'll always have that, won't you?

MAY. Yes. I'll always have that.

(AGATHA PAYNE has now reached the door of LUCY'S room. She knocks.

MAY draws in her breath and puts her hand to her heart, but LUCY whispers.)

LUCY. It's only Mrs Payne. (She calls brightly and hospitably.) Come in!

(AGATHA pushes the door slowly open, and enters. MAY rises to her feet and stands, trembling. She had not expected AGATHA to be quite like this.)

We were just having a cup of tea. Miss Beringer, this is Mrs Payne, who shares the house with us here.

(AGATHA comes forward. MAY giggles nervously.)

AGATHA (in her deep, thick voice). I'm glad to meet you.

LUCY. You will have some tea? I'll get another cup. It won't be very fresh, I'm afraid. (She moves to the sideboard.)

(AGATHA sinks into the vacant chair, after peering at an open letter on the mantelpiece. MAY sits, also.)

AGATHA. Not for me, Lucy.

LUCY. Are you sure?

AGATHA. You know I don't like tea. There's no richness to it. A nice cup of cocoa with plenty of sugar, that's a different matter.

LUCY. But I'm afraid I haven't any cocoa.

AGATHA. That's all right, I've had three cups this morning. But tea—I like it about as much as the Devil likes dill-water.

MAY (in a voice which is trembling with nerves and with a face which is meant to have an appearance of brightness). But do you find cocoa as stimulating as tea when you're tired, Mrs Payne?

AGATHA (ignoring this). Have you been out this morning, Lucy?

LUCY. Yes. I met Miss Beringer just as I came. And we've got to know each other in no time. (She sits in the wing-chair.)

AGATHA. I heard you laughing. It woke me up. What were you laughing about?

MAY. I can't remember now. Can you, Mrs Amorest? What was it?

AGATHA (*to LUCY*). And where'd you been?

LUCY. I went and paid a visit to my cousin, just to take a little present.

AGATHA. A present! I wouldn't give him a present. Rich as he is, and does nothing for you. I'm sorry for you, Lucy, with no relations but an old skinflint like him, unless you count your boy. But he might as well be dead for all you see of him.

LUCY. Oh, no, Agatha.

AGATHA. He's been gone for years now. No one knows where. If he is alive he doesn't care about you. I'm glad my child died. She'd only have been a grief to me.

LUCY. He'll come back—Brand, I mean. I feel tonight as though everything's going to turn out well. Don't you feel that sometimes? I'm sure *you* do, Miss Beringer.

MAY. Oh yes, I do, indeed. Often. Don't you, Mrs Payne?

AGATHA. Brand. So that's your boy's name. Queer name.

LUCY. It was my husband who wished it. I think it's a nice name.

MAY. Oh, very nice. Very.

AGATHA. Well, I don't think much of your Brand. Why doesn't he write and tell you what he's doing? Perhaps he *is* dead.

LUCY. I know he's not dead. Brand wasn't the kind of boy who would ever own that he was beaten. It was always the same, in cricket and football. He'll tell me where he is when he's made his fortune. I'm expecting to hear any day now.

AGATHA. You've been expecting to hear any day since I've known you. You're a patient woman.

(*A long pause.*)

MAY. One would never think it was Christmas Eve, would one?

LUCY. Oh, Agatha, I felt I simply had to do something this Christmas. We've just done nothing these last two Christmases, and it did seem too bad. I bought a little surprise for us all, on my way back. I simply couldn't resist it. You will come down tonight, won't you, and I'll have cakes and tea—no, cocoa, I'll remember to get cocoa for you—and we can have quite a little party. But the surprise is the thing. I'm sure you'll like it, dear.

AGATHA. How can you afford a party, Lucy?

LUCY. Well, if one always stopped to think what one could afford one would never do anything.

MAY. No, one wouldn't do anything at all.

(*A pause.*)

AGATHA. What's the matter with you? You've had some good news. The cards last night said there was good news on the way.

LUCY. Well, in a sense I have. And yet it's not news exactly. My cousin spoke to me in a very kindly manner this afternoon.

AGATHA. Did he say he'd leave you something in his will?

LUCY. He did say something. Of course, he may have meant nothing by it. I certainly mustn't rely on it.

AGATHA. Nonsense. (*She leans forward.*) What did he say he'd leave you?

LUCY. Well . . . (*She turns to MAY before she answers AGATHA.*) Do forgive us, Miss Beringer, but after all, as we're going to be such very close neighbours, there's no harm in knowing about each other's affairs.

MAY. Quite. Not at all. I don't mind a bit.

LUCY. Well, he said a thousand pounds a year!

AGATHA (*sitting back*). A thousand pounds! A thousand pounds a year! Why, Lucy, that's a fortune.

(*A pause.*)

MAY. Yes, it is. Quite a fortune, isn't it? Oh, dear, you must be feeling happy, Mrs Amorest.

LUCY. You're quite right, Miss Beringer, I am. But, after all, it's foolish of me. I shouldn't rely on it. I've only what he *said* to go on.

AGATHA. Was there anyone else there when he said it?

LUCY. No, there wasn't. We were quite alone, and he was very kind, indeed. I've never known him so nice.

AGATHA (*slowly staring at her*). So *you're* going to get a thousand pounds.

LUCY. It's only what he *said*.

MAY. You never can be sure of anything, can you?

AGATHA. What could *you* do with a thousand pounds?

LUCY. Well, Agatha, I could find my boy and we'd live together again.

AGATHA. Is that all you'd do?

LUCY. That's all I'd want.

AGATHA. You'd have plenty over, wouldn't you? What would you do with that? Wouldn't you buy anything? Wouldn't you buy any jewels or trinkets? Any coloured things? Silks and jewels? No—nothing like that you wouldn't buy, would you?

LUCY (*half laughing*). No, I can't say I would, Agatha.

AGATHA (*slowly looking at her with a concentrated stare*). No.

(*There is a little pause. Then AGATHA sits back once more.*)

MAY. Well, I'm afraid there isn't anybody who's likely to leave me a thousand pounds. (*She giggles.*) I wish there were. (*She giggles again.*)

LUCY. Anyway, he probably won't leave it to me at all. Do let's talk of something else. It doesn't seem right to be talking of money like this when it comes through someone's death. Shall I take your cup, Miss Beringer?

MAY. Oh, yes. Thank you. Lovely cup of tea it was. I much prefer Indian to China. Except sometimes one doesn't feel like

Indian, and then one prefers China. Which do you prefer, Mrs Amorest?

LUCY. Oh, Indian.

MAY. Yes, Indian.

AGATHA. I'll be going, Lucy. And you're quite right. Don't count on the money. You come to me and we'll talk it over. There's nothing like a little plan. Nothing. (*She commences to heave herself up.*)

LUCY (*politely*). Oh, don't go yet.

(AGATHA *does not reply, but, having got to her feet, moves slowly to the door, where she turns.*)

AGATHA. Would you lend me some of the money?

LUCY. Lend you some? Why, of course.

AGATHA. You're a good creature, Lucy. I'd do the same for you. And, after all, you must be pretty sure of it. You wouldn't go spending money on parties and surprises else. You've only got ten pound four in the bank and nothing coming in.

LUCY (*springing to her feet in shame and agitation*). Whatever gave you such an idea? You're quite wrong, Agatha—you are, really! What *could* have put such an idea into your head?

AGATHA. I saw the letter from the bank. 'Twas on the mantelpiece. I didn't really mean to read it.

LUCY. Oh, but you shouldn't have. What were you thinking of? I assure you it's a mistake! The letter was a mistake. You shouldn't have said such a thing. . . .

(*There is a loud knock at the front door. LUCY pauses. They all look questioningly at each other. She contrives to recover her composure.*)

It's for me, I think, I'll go. I won't be a moment. Only stay in here, will you both? You mustn't see before tonight or everything will be spoiled. I won't be a minute.

She hurries into the hall, shutting the door of her room. AGATHA, on the other side, stands against it, listening. MAY remains seated; she, too, listens. LUCY holds her skirts down as she pulls the front door open and the wind tears round the hall. On the threshold is a Christmas tree. A sudden peal of bells rings out from the cathedral. It seems to fill the whole house as—

the CURTAIN falls.

The CURTAIN remains down for two or three minutes, during which the chimes continue, and rises again to the sound of children's voices singing:

"No-el, No-el,

No-el, No-el,

Born is the Ki-ing of I-is-ra-el."

The old ladies are each in their rooms. MAY and AGATHA are putting the finishing touches to their party best. LUCY, already attired for the party, is putting finishing touches to the tree. It stands enshrined in an

aureole of golden splendour at the c. of the room. Father Christmas triumphs at the peak. Chains of frosted silver, balls of fire, emerald and ruby, amethyst and crystal are shining and flashing from its boughs. On either side of the tree are two small tables, with white cloths. On one are some parcels, tied with coloured ribbon, on the other cakes and sweets, tea in a pot, cocoa in a jug, cups and saucers. LUCY sits down and surveys her work. A smile plays on her lips. Upstairs, AGATHA, in her dark purple old-fashioned dress, her black hair brushed and her red slippers on her feet, picks up from where it sits on her work basket a large doll in a green frock. She looks at it with affection, pulls the dress straight, and places the doll in a more elegant position. After this, she gathers up some playing cards from the table, collects them into a pack, turns down the lamp, and goes out. A second later, MAY, in an orange silk dress, does the same. AGATHA has reappeared and descended half-way down the stairs before MAY appears behind her. AGATHA does not even turn round, but continues her descent. MAY, suddenly alarmed at seeing her, retreats, to reappear a second or two later, catching her up just as she reaches LUCY's door.

MAY (*very breathless*). Oh . . . er . . . good evening, Mrs Payne.

(AGATHA turns and surveys her.)

AGATHA. And how are you tonight?

MAY. I'm so excited. I don't know when I've felt so excited.

(*She giggles.*)

LUCY (*calling out*). Come in.

(AGATHA opens the door. The carol finishes. LUCY has risen to her feet. The two ladies stand amazed, gazing at the tree. They can hardly believe their eyes.)

MAY (*at last*). Oh dear! Dear me! Dear me!

(*A pause. AGATHA says nothing, she just stares.*)

LUCY. Was it very silly of me? I hope you won't think so. But I simply had to do it. I do hope you don't mind.

MAY. Mind? Why, Mrs Amorest, it's lovely. It's the *loveliest* thing. Why, I can't speak. . . . I can't, indeed. Words won't come. I can't say anything at all.

(*A pause.*)

LUCY. Well, sit down, both of you. And, dear me, there's quite a draught. I'll shut the door.

(MAY goes to a chair and sits. AGATHA, without taking her eyes off the tree, moves as though in a trance to another chair. She sinks into it and goes on staring as though hypnotized. Her lips move. LUCY turns from the door and stands there. The silence remains unbroken. She waits for them to speak, in vain.)

(*After a minute, with a tiny note of alarm in her voice.*) Oh, do say something, Agatha. I shall begin to feel you don't like the tree.

AGATHA. Don't like it? I can't tell you what I feel about it, Lucy; you wouldn't understand.

LUCY. I think I would.

AGATHA. No. You don't love beauty. Nobody loves beauty like I do. It's beauty and colour—the tree there. That's why I'm the only one that understands it. (*She relapses into her contemplation.*)

MAY (*suddenly bursting out*). Oh, Mrs Amorest, I wish I could tell you what I feel. It makes me think of all the Christmases I've ever spent!

LUCY (*taking the remaining chair*). I'm so glad you like it. It's nice, isn't it, to think of all the other trees there are tonight in everybody's homes, and the children sitting round them, and the presents. . . . (*She breaks off.*)

MAY. Oh, it's wonderful. Simply wonderful.

(*A little nearer now, the children's voices commence another carol; the bells peal softly beyond the window; the fire crackles. In a row sit the three old ladies, gazing at the tree. After a little while LUCY bestirs herself. She rises, and moves to the table.*)

LUCY. Oh, I'm forgetting all about the tea. You will have some, won't you, Miss Beringer, and Agatha will have some cocoa, I know. With lots of sugar in it. I got the cocoa specially for you. (*By this time she is at the table, pouring the beverages out.*)

MAY (*with a sudden rush*). I remember once when I was a little girl—when we were all children at Exeter, you know—we had one Christmas time a really lovely fairy on top of the tree. Oh, it was lovely. I wish you could have seen it, Mrs Amorest. And then, of course, Gertrude—my sister Gertrude—was given it, but she didn't like it somehow, and she gave it to me. I can't think—I can't remember now why she didn't like it. Oh, but *I* did. I really loved that fairy, Mrs Amorest. I wish you could have seen it, you know how silly children can be. Well, anyway, I came into the nursery one day—we had a big fire going, you know—my mother believed in big fires in the nursery, and there was the fairy, Mrs Amorest—I'd put it in front of the fire because I thought it was feeling cold—there was nothing left but the clothes. It was made of wax and had melted right away.

LUCY. Indeed, that was curious. But quite a little tragedy. You do take sugar, don't you?

MAY. Oh yes. Yes, please. And then I remember there was one thing at Christmas that I never could bring myself to like. I don't know what it was, you know, but there was something about the turkey, or it might be the goose, as it lay on the table waiting to be carved, that always seemed slightly . . . er . . . well, *vulgar*. Jane always used to laugh at me about this.

AGATHA (*taking the cup which LUCY is offering to her*). Thank you, Lucy.

LUCY. And you must help yourself to cakes and sweets. Look, I'll put them where you can both reach them.

AGATHA. Thank you, Lucy. That's fine. (*She drinks her cocoa in silence—eyes fixed on the tree. One hand stretches mechanically forth at intervals and, taking a sweet, drops it into her mouth.*)

MAY. Oh, thank you. That's such a good idea, isn't it, and saves running about. Do sit down, Mrs Amorest, and enjoy *yourself* a bit. I'm sure you deserve it, you do, indeed. I've never seen such a beautiful Christmas tree, never.

LUCY (*seating herself and taking a cake*). You're perfectly right, Miss Beringer. I can't help admitting I think it's beautiful myself. All the afternoon I've kept wondering—well, is it silly of me? I don't know, I couldn't make up my mind, but in the end, it looked so lovely that everything seemed to be justified.

MAY. Quite, quite. A thing of beauty is a joy for ever as the poet says.

LUCY. More cocoa, Agatha?

AGATHA (*shaking her head*). No. (*Another sweet is dropped into her mouth.*)

MAY. Oh, and I remember one Christmas party we had at Exeter. Everybody was there, and Gertrude—my sister Gertrude, you know—this was when we were young girls—oh, quite grown up, we were, too—she was lovely looking—oh, she *was* looking lovely, Mrs Amorest, I wish you could have seen her, and mother had lent her her pearl brooch for the evening, in fact they were all looking lovely, even mother herself. And the men were so dashing. They were very dashing in those days—don't you think, Mrs Amorest—much more so than nowadays—oh, we did have a gay time. And witty, the people seemed to be so gay and witty then. Of course, I was never very good at parties—although I enjoyed them. I always *felt*, you know, that I could be quite clever and amusing, if only I could put my ideas in order. Jane—when she and I were in St Lennans, you know—used to tell me that I *could* if I'd only *try*, but somehow, I've never been able to. Something unfortunately always seems to get in the way. And then my brother Rupert, you know, always used to overeat himself at Christmas dinner—oh yes—sick—he often used to be sick afterwards when he was a boy. And then Miss Marchmont, she was our governess. I remember her as if it were yesterday—I wish you could have seen her, Mrs Amorest, she had a very long nose with a flat piece at the end, and we used to call her Miss Rembrandt—I can't remember why, but, of course, people are often called by very odd names. I remember once I was walking along the front at St Lennans with Jane, and a group of young people who were going by looked at me and said, "There goes the Grenadier"—I've often wondered why they called me the

Grenadier, because I'm sure I don't look like a Grenadier—but anyway, what was I telling you, oh yes, about Miss Rembrandt—well, we were having a very gay party once, at Exeter of course, and Miss Rembrandt insisted on reciting, and we all began to laugh and titter, you know how silly young people are—we were properly in disgrace. Hm. (*She clears her throat.*) Oh, dear, I hope I'm not sickening for tonsilitis. My throat's quite sore.

LUCY. Have some more tea, Miss Beringer, then you'll feel all right.

MAY. Oh, thank you, yes. But not another cup, no. I'll just finish what I've got. (*She does so.*) Yes, that is better. Perhaps it was through talking such a lot. I do hope that I haven't bored you, Mrs Amorest, but you know how one can get carried away thinking of old times.

LUCY. Not at all. Only too well. I've loved hearing you, I really have. But you must eat a piece of plum cake, or I shall be most upset.

MAY. Why, yes, of course—beautiful it looks. (*She takes a piece and bites.*) Delicious, delicious.

LUCY. There's quite a likelihood I should have been talking of old times myself, if I hadn't been too busy eating.

MAY. Oh, dear!

(*They both laugh.*)

LUCY. Are you going on quite well, Agatha? Some more cocoa? (*She takes up the jug.*) Oh, I'm afraid there isn't any more, only a drain.

AGATHA. That's all right, Lucy.

LUCY. Are you quite sure? Well, then, we'll go on to the next part of the programme. (*She crosses to the table on which are the parcels.*) You mustn't laugh at me, please. They're just little tiny things that I got. The chief part of a present, I always think, is that it should be wrapped up in paper—don't you?

(*She hands them the gifts. There is a pause while they open them up. MAY with trembling excited fingers; AGATHA, lethargically. Nevertheless hers is undone first.*)

It's more than silly of me, isn't it? But I was certain you'd like a new dress for that little doll of yours, and I couldn't resist the blotter because I thought you'd like the colour.

AGATHA. Thank you, Lucy, yes, I did want a new dress for Miranda. That makes four she's got now. The green, the purple, the ruby, and now the blue. Yes, the room'll look nice when I put the blue on her. Thank you, Lucy. (*She wraps up the dress with the blotter and sits holding them staring once more at the tree.*)

MAY (*shrilly, having unwrapped hers*). Just what I wanted. Dear me. Dear me!

LUCY. I'm so glad you like them. It was so difficult to know what you'd like.

MAY (*holding up the book*). *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edward Arnold. I've always wanted to read that. Always. And the little scissors in the case are so useful. Oh dear, I shall be able to do lots of sewing now. Lots. Thank you, Mrs Amorest. Well, that *is* a nice surprise.

LUCY (*resuming her seat*). I'm so glad you liked them.

MAY. Oh I do, indeed!

(*A pause. AGATHA is beginning to fall asleep.*)

I don't know when I've felt so happy. I don't think I've felt so happy since Jane gave me the amber.

LUCY. I feel happy, too. If only I thought my boy were coming home I wouldn't mind anything.

MAY. Oh, dear yes. I expect you had lots of fun at Christmas with him. Did he get up to many pranks?

LUCY. Well, I remember one Christmas his father gave him a new kind of top that flew up in the air if it was spun in a certain manner. We were having a dinner-party, and Brand was allowed down to dessert. Well, he spun the top, and if it didn't go right up in the air and come down on Mr Horland's head.

(*MAY clicks her tongue. They both laugh.*)

Mr Horland was the husband of a lady novelist. He was most upset. My husband used to ask quite a lot of those sort of people to stay—but, tell the truth, I always thought the kind of books they wrote were quite horrible.

MAY. Quite. Quite.

LUCY. I wrote to Brand today. But . . . I can't be sure he gets my letters. . . . I write, you see, to the address from which I last heard. Two years ago it was now.

(*She suddenly starts. MAY starts, too. AGATHA is fast asleep. The parcel has fallen from her hand.*)

MAY. Oh! Oh! I wish she wouldn't do that.

LUCY. She's fast asleep.

MAY. Is she? Are you sure?

LUCY. Quite.

(*A pause. Then MAY leans forward.*)

MAY (*hoarsely whispering*). Oh, Mrs Amorest, I don't like her at all. Do you like her? Don't you think there's something queer? There's something very odd about her' indeed.

LUCY. Sh! No, I don't think so. She is a *little* queer perhaps, but she doesn't mean anything—any harm.

MAY. Doesn't she?

LUCY. No. She's old and all by herself. We ought to be kind to her.

MAY. Oh, I don't think I can be kind to her. I don't like her at all—I really don't.

LUCY. But what should you be alarmed about?

MAY. Oh, Mrs Amorest, *you* should understand. Her manner to you earlier today—about your cousin, I mean—was *most* alarming.

LUCY. Well, poor old thing, she's so much alone. Perhaps she doesn't know what she's saying. And tonight—it's so late for her to be up, and she has this passion for colours—the tree fascinated her. I often think that in all probability she comes from gipsy ancestors. And—well, that would make her a little different.

MAY. Very likely. Very likely.

LUCY. But it's no good alarming yourself about her, is it?

MAY. All right, Mrs Amorest. I'll try not to.

LUCY. That's right.

MAY. And I must really buy myself another little dog. Perhaps that's what's the matter with me—being without a dog.

LUCY. I'm sure they must be a great comfort.

MAY. Yes. . . . I've been wondering now. May I ask your advice, Mrs Amorest? I shouldn't think it would be very difficult in Polchester to find some sort of a—*position*. Would you?

LUCY. What kind of position?

MAY. Well, I wondered whether, later perhaps, I couldn't find a position as a—a—companion perhaps—or where I could arrange the flowers.

LUCY. I don't *think* such positions are too easy to come by.

MAY. Oh, but Mrs Amorest—you don't mind my telling you, do you—only I'm sure you'll understand. You see, I must get a position soon, because at the end of six months I won't have any money left.

AGATHA (*in her sleep*). Give that to me. . . . (*She mumbles for a second or two.*) It's mine! I'll kill you if you touch it.

MAY. Oh! Oh!

LUCY. She's having a nightmare. Here, Agatha. (*She gives AGATHA a little push.*) Agatha, wake up! You're dreaming!

AGATHA. What? What's that? (*She wakes up.*) Dreaming? That's right, Lucy. I was dreaming about that husband of mine. I dreamed I tried to kill him. Well, he's dead now and can't do me any harm. No more than I can do him any. But I could have killed him once. I could have killed him all right when he threw my hat on the fire. A fine hat it was—but too gay for him. Can you believe that, Lucy? I was a young girl then, and prettier than most of them—"My Gipsy Queen" he'd call me when we were courting. "My Gipsy Queen." But after that—when he'd got me—no life, no gaiety then—not even a gay hat. No. So into the fire he threw it. Well, I got my own back. Yes. I can't tell you *how*,

because you and Miss Bering—what's her name—Miss Beringer here are too lady-like. Yes. And he didn't know *how*, to his dying day. I used to lie awake after he threw my hat in the fire, thinking what I could do to him. And I read a book about China once—just certain parts of it, you know—I could never read a book right through. But it told you how they'd tie up prisoners with wire, and then they'd get a rat. . . .

MAY (*springing to her feet*). Oh, please! Please don't! I can't bear it! I really can't! I shall have to go.

LUCY. Miss Beringer, you mustn't get in such a state. Agatha, don't go on. Let's talk about something nice.

AGATHA. I was only telling you what I read in the book.

LUCY (*to MAY*). Please sit down again. It would be such a pity to end the Christmas party like this. And I believe it's nearly twelve o'clock, too. Christmas Day.

MAY. I can't help it. My heart's bad, and my nerves are quite on edge. But I will try. I'd do anything for you, Mrs Amorest. I'd hate to spoil the party. I . . . (*She sits down.*)

LUCY. That's right. Now . . . er . . . Oh, Agatha, why don't you put the new little dress on the doll? I'm quite longing to see what she looks like in it.

AGATHA. I'm too tired, Lucy. If I go upstairs again to get Miranda, I shall stay there and go to bed.

LUCY. It is late, of course, but . . .

MAY. Let *me* get it for you. Oh, *do* let me, please. I won't take a minute to run upstairs. May I?

AGATHA. Please yourself, I don't mind.

LUCY. I shouldn't trouble, Miss Beringer.

MAY (*moving to the door*). But I'd love to. I . . . I so want to see Mrs Payne's doll. I . . . Where will I find it, Mrs Payne?

AGATHA. You can't miss her. She's a big doll. You'll see her all right.

MAY. Thank you, I . . . I'll get her, then. Oh, this is fun. And . . . and, Mrs Amorest . . . ?

LUCY. Yes?

MAY. Would . . . would you like to see my piece of amber that Jane gave me?

LUCY. Yes. Very much.

MAY. I'll bring that down, too, then, shall I?

LUCY. Yes, indeed.

MAY. All right. Bye-bye, then. Bye-bye for the present.

(She goes into the hall, and immediately on shutting the door, drops her false brightness and leans for a few seconds against it, her face in her hands. Then, pulling herself together, she goes up the stairs to AGATHA'S room, looks round it fearfully, takes Miranda and, going to her own room, lifts reverently from its place of honour on the mantelpiece a lovely piece of carved amber. She then returns to the stairs.)

During the above the following piece of dialogue has taken place between the two old ladies in the room below.)

AGATHA (*mimicking MAY's last words*). Bye-bye! Bye-bye! Idiot!

LUCY. Why don't you like her? Poor old thing.

AGATHA. I don't mind her. She irritates me, that's all. What's she so frightened of everything for?

LUCY. You must admit, Agatha, you are a little alarming sometimes.

AGATHA. Me, alarming? Nonsense! Bye-bye! I like people to have *gumption*. Wants to see the doll, does she? Wants any excuse to get away from *me* for a moment, because I frighten her. Bye-bye!

LUCY. I think you're very unkind, Agatha.

AGATHA. Nonsense. She's frightened of everything. You can see that. You and I, Lucy, *we're* not frightened. I like you for that, Lucy. I respect you. You've got independence. But her! Look at her! She's not worth talking about. You're quite right. Poor old thing. She's never known what it is to live. Brrrr. (*She shivers.*) It's cold, the fire's going out, and I'm going to bed. (*She commences to heave herself out of the chair.*) Help me up, Lucy.

LUCY (*doing so*). Must you go now?

AGATHA. Yes, I must. Bed's all I want. And you'll have to help me up the stairs. My legs are funny tonight.

LUCY. Wait a moment. I'll turn the lamp down. It might catch the tree or something terrible.

(One arm round AGATHA, she turns the lamp down with her free hand. The fire has nearly died down now. In the dim lamplight, the tree, too, looks dead. Glamour has flown.)

AGATHA. And thanks for the party, Lucy. I enjoyed the tree. Thanks.

(LUCY smiles at her, and they go into the hall. By this time MAY has nearly reached the foot of the stairs. On seeing them, she stops.)

MAY. Oh dear, are you going to bed now? Look, Mrs Amorest, I've brought the amber. It's pretty with the light shining through. Look.

(The street lamp shines brightly through the window behind her. She suddenly holds the amber up, and the light shines through it. Shaped square, like a block of wood, and this block surmounted by a carved red amber dragon—the little ornament glows with the light.)

LUCY. Oh, what a lovely thing! It's like a piece of fire. And all the colours in it.

(AGATHA removes her arm from about her, and walks with slow, steady steps to the bottom of the stairs. The amber seems to have hypnotized her

as, a little while ago, she was hypnotized by the tree. MAY regards her approach with nervous eyes. Having reached the stairs, AGATHA stops.)

AGATHA. That's a beautiful thing you have there.

MAY. Oh yes. It is, isn't it. It's my most precious possession. It was given me, years ago, by my dearest friend. I'm so glad you like it.

AGATHA (*breathing deeply and advancing one step up*). I do like it.

MAY. I'm so glad you do. It's been much admired. Everyone likes it. It's worth a lot of money, I believe.

AGATHA. Do you think you'd sell it, if you were offered a large sum? (*She heaves herself up another step.*)

MAY. Oh dear, no. Nothing would induce me. The greatest friend of my life gave it to me. I'd never sell it. Nothing would induce me.

AGATHA. May I look at it closer?

MAY. Why, certainly, do.

(*A pause.*)

AGATHA. May I have it in my hands for a moment? (*She stretches up for it greedily, but MAY pulls it away.*)

MAY. Oh dear! I feel terribly ill! I'm very sorry. My head's bursting. I must go to bed. You must excuse me. I can't . . . I . . .

(*She turns and runs to her room.*)

LUCY. Oh, now, Agatha. You've frightened her again. Poor old thing, she's in such a state of nerves. I'd better go and see if she's all right.

(*AGATHA doesn't answer. She stands leaning against the banisters, breathing heavily. LUCY hurries past her and goes to MAY's room. MAY sits trembling by the side of her bed. During the scene that follows, AGATHA remains where she has been for a few seconds, and then goes slowly, muttering, to her room.*)

MAY. Oh, Mrs Amorest, please don't be cross with me. I'm sorry to have spoilt the party, I really am. But she frightens me. She really does. The queer way she looked at the amber. And the way she looks at me.

LUCY (*sitting beside her*). But Agatha always looks a little strange—she has those big black eyes.

MAY. It wasn't only those eyes. No, it certainly wasn't those eyes. I'm sure she's going to do me a mischief. I'm sure she is. And the way she stretched out her hand for the piece of amber. Just as though it was hers. I'm sure she'll steal it from me.

LUCY (*placing her hand on MAY's*). Dear Miss Beringer, please don't disturb yourself. I know Mrs Payne is a good woman. . . . I've known her a long time. There's nothing to be afraid of.

MAY. Oh, I don't know, I'm sure. I'm sure I don't know. I've

always been afraid of something all my life. It seems to be my destiny. It's my fate to have something to be afraid of. I'm sure I don't like being under the same roof with her. She'll do something to me in my sleep.

(A long pause, during which LUCY pats MAY's hand soothingly. But at last she stands up.)

LUCY. Now, don't you worry, dear. Have a good rest and you'll find you'll have forgotten all about it in the morning. Good night, my dear. And a happy Christmas.

MAY. Good night.

LUCY *bends down and, kissing the other's withered cheek, goes from the room. MAY falls face downwards on her bed in a passion of noiseless sobbing. AGATHA, in her room, has dropped into the rocking-chair, and now, staring grimly in front of her, rocks backwards and forwards. As LUCY reappears on the staircase, a bell from the cathedral chimes the first stroke which heralds midnight and Christmas Day. She listens for a second and then continues down the stairs and across to her room. Turning up the lamp, she takes the photograph of her boy from the mantelpiece and kisses it. Then she kneels down and says her prayers. The last stroke of midnight dies away as—*

the CURTAIN falls.

ACT II

SCENE.—*The same. A few days later.*

When the CURTAIN rises AGATHA is in her rocking-chair, eating nougat. She is half asleep. LUCY, in her room, is writing. The Christmas tree has been pushed into a corner.

MAY comes in at the front door. She finds a letter on the mat and, picking it up, goes towards LUCY'S room, and knocks at the door.

MAY. May I come in, Mrs Amorest?

LUCY. Yes, do.

(MAY comes in.)

Have you been out? I was just writing to Brand.

MAY. Did you see this letter?

LUCY (*taking it*). Oh, thank you. Dear me, it's typewritten. Will you excuse me a moment. Sit down, dear, will you?

MAY. Yes. Certainly. Thank you so much. I've had that pain in my knee again today. (*She sits by the meagre fire.*)

(LUCY opens the letter. Her hand trembles as she reads.)

Oh, I hope it isn't bad news.

(*A slight pause.*)

LUCY. No. No. It isn't bad news. It's from the lawyer. I . . . he wants me to call on him.

MAY. Oh, Mrs Amorest. I *do* hope it's something nice. It will be so nice if it's something nice.

(*The letter has put LUCY in a great state of nerves, but she tries not to show it.*)

LUCY. Yes. . . . Oh dear. (*Her hand goes to her forehead for a moment.*) It's made me feel quite flustered. I . . . I'd better go and see him this morning. Yes, I certainly had. I wonder. . . . Now what's the time? I really think I'll go almost at once.

MAY. Is it about your cousin?

LUCY. Oh yes, of course, it must be. There's nothing else it could be, is there? I . . . oh . . . well, I'll finish the letter to Brand when I come back, then I can tell him everything. Unless, of course . . . it doesn't. . . . Oh, I mustn't think about it. (*She collects the notepaper together and puts the stopper in the ink.*)

MAY. No, it doesn't do to think about a thing like that. I mean one way or the other, does it? But I hope, I *do* sincerely hope for

your sake, Mrs Amorest, that your cousin's kept his promise. Oh dear, dear. Now you'll think I'm impertinent.

LUCY. Not at all, of course I won't. But still I think it's better not to talk about it. Anyway, I'll soon know. What an untidy mess the table's in. (*She commences to clear away the remains of her lunch—a coffee cup, a tumbler, a plate with crumbled biscuits and a half-empty sardine tin.*) They're so convenient for lunch—sardines—don't you think?

MAY. They save a lot of trouble. Yes.

LUCY. Now I ought to turn the remaining ones out, I suppose.

MAY. Indeed you ought. It's extremely dangerous to leave them in a tin. One's liable to get some odd sort of poisoning—ptomaine, isn't it?—if one leaves them in the tin. Or so I've always heard. Here, let me do it for you, Mrs Amorest, while you're putting the other things in the cupboard.

LUCY. No, don't worry, dear.

MAY. Yes. I insist. (*She is already at the table, scooping the rest of the sardines on to a plate.*)

LUCY (*at the cupboard*). I had such a curious sensation during Cousin Francis's funeral the other day. I knew, of course, it wasn't poor Cousin Francis *himself* there, but . . . I don't know . . . it somehow seemed that it *was*, and that he'd be feeling cold and lonely. I must have been in a morbid state. I don't generally feel things like that.

MAY (*into whose eyes has come a look of terror*). You must have been . . . overwrought. . . . It wouldn't do if we really believed those sort of things, would it?

LUCY. No, it wouldn't do at all. (*She comes back to the table again and changes the cloths.*) I certainly never believed it at the time. I knew it was just a feeling.

MAY (*helping her*). When poor little Pip died I felt like that. But then, of course, they say that animals don't go to Heaven. Nevertheless I . . . I feel certain I *shall* be seeing him again. I . . . can't help feeling it.

LUCY. And I'm sure you're right. (*She takes the white tablecloth and folds it over her arm.*) Our Lord must be fond of dogs. I'm sure He is. And I'm sure He's got a sense of humour, too.

MAY. Oh dear, dear. Well, I've never heard that point of view before. (*She sits down, absorbed in the conversation.*)

LUCY. When you think of it—He must have. Otherwise—without a sense of humour—how could He endure the . . . self-absorption and conceit, and everything else . . . of human beings? Ourselves and . . . everybody? (*She, too, sits down, momentarily forgetting the tablecloth.*) I don't know. It seems to me sometimes that I attach far too much importance to myself and what becomes of me.

MAY. It's very difficult not to. But I'm sure one does. Oh yes. I used to have philosophical discussions with Jane sometimes at

St Lennans. Not often, of course. Oh, no, Jane was such a jolly person. But still, we used to talk very seriously sometimes. Oh, yes. It's a very good thing, I think. And helps one to understand people.

LUCY. Yes, it does. Certainly. But on the whole, I think, people are very simple, don't you? More so than one admits.

MAY. Oh, I don't know. No, I don't think they are. People seem very strange to me. But then, I never have been able to get really *near* people, *know* them, if you know what I mean. Dogs, yes . . . I can feel I know them, but people. . . . I remember once when I was a girl, I found my mother crying in her bedroom. And I wanted so much to put my arm round and comfort her. But I . . . I couldn't think what to say. And even now I don't know why she was crying. . . . (*Her voice tails off.*)

(*A pause. LUCY sighs, gets up, puts the cloth away, and bangs the drawer in.*)

LUCY. Well, I think I'll be getting off, now. (*Going to the wardrobe, she puts out her hat and coat.*)

MAY. Have you noticed a new picture postcard of the King and Queen in Becroft's window? It's extremely good of them—extremely good.

LUCY. Really?

MAY. Oh, yes. They do work so hard, poor dears, don't they? I'm sure the dear Prince is overworking himself.

LUCY. Do you think so?

MAY. Oh, I'm sure he is. I only hope he won't knock himself up.

LUCY. Listen! Was that Agatha's door banging?

MAY. Oh, dear, I hope not! Why?

LUCY. I believe it was. That means she's coming down. She's always coming down lately. I wonder if I can get out before she arrives.

(*In point of fact, AGATHA has left her room, and now appears at the head of the stairs, down which, in slow stages, she commences to totter. LUCY hurriedly gets into her hat and coat.*)

MAY. Oh, let me help you. (*She does so.*)

LUCY. No, listen.

(*They stand still for a second, listening.*)

It's no good. I can hear her on the stairs. Oh, well, poor old thing, there's no harm, after all, in my talking to her for a few moments.

MAY. Oh, I shan't stay. I shan't stay.

LUCY. Now you *must*, dear. You *must* get 'over this feeling about her. It's nearly all imagination.

(*She sits down and taking MAY's hand compels her to sit also.*)

MAY. It isn't. You know it isn't. Otherwise, why should you not want to talk to her?

LUCY. Only because she annoys me by not knocking before she comes in. She's very, very friendly. She's been more friendly than ever since Christmas Eve. And you remember how you felt then. She hasn't done you any harm since, has she? In spite of what you thought.

MAY (*breathlessly*). Oh, but she has, Mrs Amorest. I've never told you before, because you'd think it silly of me, but she has.

LUCY. What has she done?

MAY. She taps on my wall at night. She won't let me sleep. All night she taps on my wall.

(MAY stops abruptly as AGATHA enters the room. A pause.)

LUCY. Would you mind, dear, knocking before you come in? It's pleasanter, don't you think, for both of us?

AGATHA. Why it's Miss Beringer. How are you today, Miss Beringer? You're not looking so well. That's a pity.

MAY (*rising*). I'm very well, thank you. Very well. But I was just going to my room, if you'll excuse me. Have you a book, Mrs Amorest? I'd like a nice book to read this afternoon.

LUCY. Why, certainly, dear. Which would you like?

MAY. Oh, it doesn't matter. Any one will do. I'll take this. (*With dignity she takes a book and goes to the door.*) Bye-bye. Bye-bye for the present.

LUCY. Good-bye, dear. I'll see you soon.

(MAY shuts the door behind her. During the scene that follows she goes to her room, and after putting the kettle on and getting the tea things out, wraps a green shawl round her, pulls her chair to the fire, and starts to read.)

AGATHA (*when the door has closed*). 'Bye-bye! Bye-bye!'

LUCY. Oh, don't be so stupid, Agatha. I dare say you say things just as annoying. I'm going out almost at once.

AGATHA (*turning L. of the table, to face LUCY*). Have you heard anything about the money yet?

LUCY. No, not exactly. Well, no—I haven't.

AGATHA (*sitting*). Do you think he's left it to you?

LUCY. Oh, dear, I really can't say. I wish I hadn't told you about it.

AGATHA. Well, you'll be in a fine hole if he hasn't. What are you going to do if he hasn't?

LUCY. I don't know, dear, but I'm sure our Lord will care for me in the same way that He always has.

AGATHA. Cared for you—when He's left you all alone?

LUCY. How can I be alone when He's with me?

AGATHA. Tcha! Do you really believe that?

LUCY. Of course I do.

AGATHA. You're a fool, Lucy. Have you heard from your boy?

LUCY. No.

AGATHA. Your cousin did promise you the money, didn't he?

LUCY. Well, yes.

AGATHA. He said that when he died . . .

LUCY. Agatha, don't you think there's something rather dreadful in our talking about money like this when we're so old?

AGATHA (*hoarsely*). We can have twenty years yet. You're strong and I'm strong. I knew a little girl who died when she was five. What's the good of thinking about it?

LUCY (*with vigour*). We ought to think about it. Not in an unwholesome way, of course. But as though we were going from one country into another. And we must give an account of ourselves. And why shouldn't we think about God's love? It's very nice to think about it.

(*There is a short silence between them, which is broken by AGATHA.*)

AGATHA. That's a fine coloured piece of Miss Beringer's, isn't it?

LUCY. Yes, I've told her how greatly I admire it.

AGATHA. I don't know what an old woman like her's doing with it. She can't appreciate it.

LUCY. She likes it because her best friend gave it to her, and that's a very good reason. (*A pause.*) Well, I'm going now, or I shall be late. You will excuse me, won't you? (*She starts to pull her gloves on.*)

AGATHA. Where are you going to?

LUCY. Oh, nowhere much.

AGATHA (*with awakened interest*). Nowhere much? What do you mean?

LUCY. If you must know, Agatha, I'm going to the lawyers. I heard from him.

AGATHA (*galvanized out of her chair*). What? A letter? Why didn't you tell me? Why've you kept it a secret?

LUCY. Because you will talk about it so much, Agatha, and I don't like it.

AGATHA. What does he say in the letter? About the money.

LUCY. He simply says that I'm to go and see him. It may not be about the money at all. Good-bye, dear. Stay down in my room, if you like. If you're feeling tired. (*She goes to the door.*)

AGATHA. No, I'll see out of the front door. (*She follows LUCY.*) Well, I never. Aren't you in luck? Whatever will you do with it all?

LUCY. Oh, don't, Agatha.

(*She continues through the hall. AGATHA totters behind. As LUCY opens the front door, AGATHA speaks.*)

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