A Turn for the Nurse

A Crime Farce

by Rick Abbot

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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CAST OF CHARACTERS
(In Order of Appearance)

SYLVIA CRANE, an impoverished lady, madly enamored of
DEREK STRATTON, ne'er-do-well nephew of a wealthy family
JANE JOHNSON, maid-of-all-work at the Stratton mansion
GEORGE STRATTON, simply splendid son of that wealthy family
Ms. J.D. CULVER, the wealthy family's family lawyer
HERBERT SANDERS, the wealthy family's ambitious butler
OLIVER STRATTON, lovelorn patriarch of this wealthy family
PEGGY BRENT, his temporary live-in nurse, a health nut
WU CHANG, a somewhat unorthodox recruiter from Tibet
CORA VAN BECK, emissary of an anti-alcohol association

TIME: the present, about mid-September
LOCALE: The Stratton Mansion on Long Island

ACT ONE
Scene 1: a pleasant evening just before dinner
Scene 2: that evening at dinner

ACT TWO
Scene 1: that evening just after dinner
Scene 2: about fifteen minutes later

ACT THREE
approximately five minutes later

For
JANE NIGH DAVIDSON,
basically a beautiful person,
always an able actress, and
someday a superb "Sylvia"

A Turn for the Nurse

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

Curtain rises on the library of the Stratton mansion on Long Island. Half the Upstage wall is devoted to a pair of floor-to-ceiling bookcases. A door in the Upstage Right wall leads to the front hall. Glass-paned doors in the Upstage wall, Left, lead to a garden. Between the matched bookcases hangs a large painting; there is a wall safe behind it, visible only when the painting slides upward. Center stage is a long table with a vase of flowers at each end. In the center of the table is a silver tray with ice bucket, soda siphon, liquor, glasses, etc. upon it. Down Left, a desk with swivel chair is against the wall; at the moment, it has a large woman's purse upon it. A number** of chairs are lined here and there against the walls. Before the table, its upper edge at a level with the table surface, is a large sofa. The sofa is occupied by a man and woman. The man and woman are preoccupied by a long kiss. The man is* DEREK STRATTON, *the woman is* SYLVIA CRANE. *They are not in love, but fun is fun. As they take a breather, we see that he is young and handsome, and she is young and pretty; they seem to notice this at the same moment, and begin yet another long kiss.* JANE JOHNSON, *the maid, enters from hall.*

*some dreadful artwork
**seven

JANE. Master Derek, sir, cook is making individual desserts.

DEREK. Tell her I wish her luck. (*Resumes kissing* SYLVIA.)

JANE. Master Derek, sir, she wants to know how many.

DEREK. Just one, Jane, thank you.

JANE. For the entire family?

DEREK. For me, Jane. I never take more than one dessert. Tell her to make it extra large. (*Resumes again.*)

JANE. I mean, sir, how many will there be for dinner?

DEREK. There will be four, Jane. Uncle Oliver, George, myself and Miss Brent.

JANE. The nurse? But sir—

DEREK. Hold on, better make it five. Ms. Culver is dropping in tonight to take care of the legal end of things. She will undoubtedly join us for dinner.

JANE. (*Indicating* SYLVIA.) And Miss Crane—?

DEREK. Miss Crane is dining alone. At the Automat.

JANE. Cook will be upset.

DEREK. Because Miss Crane is dining at the Automat?

JANE. No, sir. Because that nurse is dining with the family.

DEREK. Even a nurse must eat, Jane.

JANE. But she talks medicine all the time, sir. Remember the time we had that nice tapioca pudding, and she began describing that brain tumor? Nobody finished their dessert.

DEREK. Jane, Miss Brent is a dedicated woman. Medicine is her life. She would naturally discourse upon her favorite topic. (*Beat.*) By the way—we're not *having* tapioca, are we—?

JANE. Cook said never again.

DEREK. Then tell her there will be five for dinner, Jane.

JANE. (*Darkly.*) Cook won't like it! (*Exits to hall.*)

SYLVIA. Derek, darling—

DEREK. You talk too much. (*Resumes kissing her;* GEORGE STRATTON, *another handsome young man about his same age, strolls in from hall.*)

GEORGE. Hello, Derek. Is that Peggy?

DEREK. I never consort with the hired help.

GEORGE. (*Before* DEREK *can quite resume kissing.*) Do you have any notion where she is? I can't find her.

DEREK. Have you tried cutting your throat, George? She's sure to pop up with a band-aid and a lecture on clotting-time.

GEORGE. Oliver wants her, I don't.

SYLVIA. Have you tried cutting *his* throat?

GEORGE. (*Recognizing her.*) Sylvia! Didn't expect to find *you* here. Have you and Oliver buried the hatchet?

SYLVIA. Sorry, George, no. I'm just living dangerously.

GEORGE. Well, you needn't worry much longer. Once the will is probated, you two won't have to do your necking in secret.

SYLVIA. Secret?! We'd have more privacy onstage at a Rock Concert!

GEORGE. Has Oliver come in here yet?

DEREK. He's about the only one who hasn't.

GEORGE. But you haven't seen Peggy? Do you suppose she might have taken a stroll in the garden?

SYLVIA. George, Nurse Peggy Brent is not yet thirty, there is a full moon, and the primroses are bursting from their buds like popcorn.

DEREK. She mean "yes," George. Peggy could very well have passed through here while we were otherwise occupied—her sensible shoes have rubber soles.

GEORGE. (*Starts toward garden.*) Maybe I'll find her under the trellis— (*Exits too quickly to hear:*)

SYLVIA. Or under a rock.

DEREK. Where were we?

SYLVIA. Top of the ninth, tie score. (*They resume kissing;* J.D. CULVER, *a woman in her early sixties, very well dressed, enters from hall, a coat over her arm.*)

J.D. Hello-hello-hello!

DEREK. J.D. Culver, as I live and breathe! How's the slightly graying girl lawyer?

J.D. (*En route to desk.*) Wistful. After all—autumn, a full moon, primroses perfuming the air, nightbirds singing, and now, you two, loving one another on the sofa. It makes me quite lonesome for—Wolfgang.

SYLVIA. (*Touched.*) Your husband?

DEREK. Her schnauzer.

J.D. His little wet nose, soft brown eyes, and that silly little ring.

SYLVIA. He wore a ring?

DEREK. Around one eye, dearest. Wolfgang passed from this world three months ago, in a dispute over a right-of-way.

SYLVIA. Who was disputing with him?

J.D. A milk truck. (*Tosses coat onto desk chair.*)

DEREK. (*Rises.*) I'd better get you out of here, love. Oliver is sure to show up soon.

SYLVIA. (*As they cross to* J.D.) Sorry to rush off like this, but you know how Oliver feels about me. Derek doesn't dare take any chances of him changing his will. (*Laughs lightly as she and* DEREK *start toward garden doors.*)

J.D. I don't think he'd change it again *today*. He seemed pretty sure of himself when he changed it yesterday.

(DEREK *and* SYLVIA *stop dead at the garden doors; still arm in arm, like a film running in reverse, they walk backwards until they have once more come to face* J.D. *before desk.*)

DEREK. (*Voice cracking.*) Changed?

SYLVIA. (*Similarly.*) The will?

BOTH. Yesterday?

J.D. You didn't know? Oh, well, you'll hear about it soon enough, I guess. (*Turns away toward desk, but* DEREK *pulls her frantically back.*)

DEREK. But in whose favor? Who gets the money—the estate—the stocks and bonds—?!

J.D. I'm sorry, Derek, you know I cannot reveal that information. Ethics, my boy, professional ethics.

DEREK. Damn your ethics! Who hits the Stratton jackpot?!

J.D. My lips are sealed.

SYLVIA. Till the will is read?

J.D. Of course.

DEREK. (*Calming himself with an effort.*) Look—let me put it this way—is it George?

J.D. No.

SYLVIA. Derek?

J.D. No.

DEREK. You?

SYLVIA. The servants?

DEREK. The cook?

J.D. (*Shaking head.*) No, no, no.

DEREK. Then who can it possibly . . . ? Oh, no. Not that?! (J.D. *fidgets.*) Look me in the eye, Culver. Is it—Miss Brent?

J.D. (*Beat; then:*) I can't tell you that.

(SYLVIA *and* DEREK *exchange a look of glum comprehension and sag side by side onto the sofa;* HERBERT SANDERS, *a middle-aged butler in full livery, enters from hall.*)

SANDERS. Ms. Culver, ma'am, Mister Stratton requires your presence in his room.

J.D. (*Galvanized, grabs coat, heads for hall.*) Sorry to rush off like this, but business is business! (*Exits,* SANDERS *following her out.*)

DEREK. It seems as if Peggy Brent has struck it rich at the Strattons! Funny, she never impressed me as the gold-digging type—which is probably why she's a success at it. So different from you.

SYLVIA. (*Stands angrily.*) I could have hit the jackpot myself if I hadn't been playing with a *slug!*

DEREK. (*Impatiently pulls her back down beside him.*) All is not yet lost. We still have a few hours before Uncle Oliver heads for the Himalayas!

SYLVIA. Dearest, the new will was drawn up yesterday. As far as your uncle is concerned, the time is past to woo his favor—or cut his throat.

DEREK. But there's all the time in the world for me to woo the new heiress!

SYLVIA. (*Coldly.*) How nice for *you!*

DEREK. Now, Sylvia, don't take that attitude. I shall most certainly provide you a place in my plans.

SYLVIA. I don't doubt it. There you'll be with Peggy, sipping champagne at some posh New York nitery—and I'll be right there at your side—selling cigarettes!

DEREK. Surely, darling, you don't think that my wooing Peggy would make a difference between *us?*

SYLVIA. Do you mean to say that you expect things to keep on, just like always, after you've married Peggy?!

DEREK. (*Jumps to his feet.*) Married Peggy?! Who said anything about *marrying* her?!

SYLVIA. How else do you propose to pry the money out of her hot little hands?

DEREK. I do not propose to pry. When I have done with her, she shall pour the money right into my lap.

SYLVIA. Or onto your head?

DEREK. (*Paces, thinking aloud.*) Don't be idiotic. I intend to appeal to her finer feelings. She has a soft spot in her heart for the down-and-out. A simple hard-luck story should turn the trick—young nephew, losing his rightful inheritance to a stranger—too proud to ask for charity—

SYLVIA. —too lazy to go to work—

DEREK. (*Stops pacing, exasperated.*) You have no confidence in my genius.

SYLVIA. Not if it comes from your *uncle's* side of the family! It seems to me that when a man is as rich as your

uncle, with all the comforts that modern civilization and indoor plumbing can provide, and then he chucks it all to become an apprentice lama in a Tibetan monastery, there's a screw loose someplace, and it's not in his Rolls Royce!

DEREK. (*Drops down beside her, takes her hands.*) Darling, have faith in me. I'll get that money for us somehow. Peggy is a kindhearted, gentle creature, devoted to the alleviation of human suffering—and believe me, I'm suffering!

SYLVIA. Now just prove you're human, and it's in the bag! (*Rises to go, but he grabs her hand; she hesitates.*)

DEREK. Now, now, dearest, you're overwrought. Just leave everything to me! (*Behind them,* GEORGE *enters unobserved from garden.*) Peggy Brent will not inherit the Stratton estate!

GEORGE. Peggy—?! Who said she *would* inherit it?! (*They both react on hearing his voice,* DEREK *coming to his feet.*)

SYLVIA. *Only* J.D. Culver, your father's *attorney,* but what would *she* know?!

DEREK. (*Follows* SYLVIA *Upstage Left to* GEORGE.) Now, Sylvia, I told you that *I* wanted to break the bad news to George!

SYLVIA. That figures.

DEREK. I *mean,* Sylvia, that I would have eased the blow. As his cousin and dear friend, I would have first prepared him for the shock, poor lad.

GEORGE. What is all this? What's happened?

SYLVIA. Thanks to the machiavellian machinations of a mincing Mata Hari, your father's fat head has been turned to the tune of forty million bucks!

DEREK. Forty million bucks is not a tune—it's at least seven symphonies!

GEORGE. I still don't understand.

DEREK. Thanks to Peggy the Party Pooper, your pinheaded Poppa has signed a paper that leaves you a pauper!

SYLVIA. Thank you, Edgar A. Guest.

GEORGE. You mean—?

SYLVIA. Oliver—probably in one of his lucid moments—has cut you and Derek out of his will, and left kit and kaboodle to Florence Nightingale, otherwise known as Our Miss Brent!

GEORGE. But—I'm his own son, his flesh-and-blood heir—why would he leave everything to Miss Brent?

(SYLVIA *and* DEREK *converge upon him, each clutching an arm, alternating lines rapidly into his ears, with quick and urgent delivery, while he stares out front in growing alarm.*)

SYLVIA. Who sat up nights with him and held his hand—?

DEREK. Who waked him in the morning with a cheery smile and tucked him in at night—?

SYLVIA. Who waited on him hand and foot—

DEREK. Day and night—

SYLVIA. Rain or shine—?

DEREK. And who, in the still of the evening, twined his graying hair about her slim strong fingers—

SYLVIA. And whispered sweet nothings into his waxy ears—?

GEORGE. Is *that* what she was doing in his room every night?!

SYLVIA. She wasn't reading him *The Three Bears*.

DEREK. Face the facts. Miss Peggy Brent is an attractive woman.

SYLVIA. And Oliver Stratton is a *man*, spelled p-u-t-t-y!

GEORGE. (*His eye grim, his jaw jutted, steps forward from their grasp.*) She shan't get away with it. I shall stop her. I shall worm my way into her heartless heart—make violent love to her to expose her as the dark schemer she is—kiss her until she screams for mercy—!

SYLVIA. (*With a look at* DEREK.) You Strattons are all alike.

OLIVER. (*Off.*) The last I saw of George he was looking for *you*, Miss Brent. Perhaps he's in the library—

SYLVIA. (*Clasps her hands to her chest.*) Hark, it's the voice of the Gestapo! I really must fly! (*Bolts for garden doors,* DEREK *following.*)

DEREK. Shall I drive you to the station?

SYLVIA. No need, the bus stops just beyond your garden gate. You stay here and protect our interests!

DEREK. (*Exiting to garden with her.*) At least let me escort you down the primrose path.

SYLVIA. (*As they move Left, out of sight.*) Here we go again!

PEGGY. (*As she—a pretty young thing in nurse's uniform—and* OLIVER—*a pretty-old thing in a somber suit—enter from hall.*) Oh, there you are, George. Your father and I were just looking for you. There isn't much more time to say goodbye.

OLIVER. Nonsense. George is young. He'll forget. He's got a good job, good future, and the name of Stratton. He'll get by. And someday, he will meet a woman—and then at last he'll understand why I'm doing—what I'm doing . . . ! (SANDERS *enters from hall.*)

SANDERS. Mister Stratton, sir—a person is here.

OLIVER. What do you mean, a person?

SANDERS. I believe the gentleman's name is Wu Chang, sir.

OLIVER. Wu Chang! I wasn't expecting him for hours! Tell him I'll be right there! (*As* SANDERS *exits to hall:*) Can you imagine! All the way from Tibet, just to pick me up! . . . Oh, George, would you tell cook there'll be another guest at dinner—?

GEORGE. (*Darkly.*) Cook is making individual desserts.

OLIVER. Oh. Um. Well—tell her anyhow, then duck! (*As* GEORGE *exits to hall:*) My dear, will you excuse me while I greet my guest?

PEGGY. Of course. I'm really looking forward to meeting this man.

OLIVER. Oh, you shall, you shall—as soon as the family is assembled in here.

PEGGY. (*Turns slightly away, thoughtful; then:*) This woman you loved—was she pretty?

OLIVER. (*Never thought about it before, so muses aloud:*) She had—uh—an inner beauty. On the surface I suppose you'd say she was not quite so—oh—as attractive as—well—she was rather drab, now that I think of it—but something shone through her plain features that made her light up—not light enough to see her too well, unhappily. I never did get a really good look at her face. It was very dark on deck.

PEGGY. Did you ever think—that your behavior is rather foolish—?

OLIVER. You mean my going off this way? I daresay you're right—but that's what love does to people. My money, my home, my family—none of them matter if I cannot have *her*. That's why I'm going to Tibet—to try to forget.

PEGGY. But isn't there some way—

OLIVER. I've exhausted them all. It's as though she vanished from the face of the earth.

PEGGY. (*Shyly faces him.*) You know, Oliver, I feel rather guilty—about my job here. You weren't really sick—

OLIVER. Not physically, no. But a broken heart doesn't show up on the x-rays. You were invaluable. You gave me the will to go on.

PEGGY. Nonsense. If I somehow kept you in good spirits—

OLIVER. Don't underrate yourself, my dear. Don't ever do that. You know—if I'd been a younger man when you came along . . . ! But I'm keeping Wu Chang waiting! I'll be back presently. (*Exits to hall.*)

PEGGY. The poor man. The poor silly man. (*Sits on sofa;* DEREK *enters from garden, sees her, moves to a vantage point just above table, looking at her.*)

DEREK. You seem tired, Peggy.

PEGGY. (*With a half-turn to see who is speaking.*) Oh, Derek. Yes, you're right. Tired—and a bit sad. Your uncle—

DEREK. Yes, it's a pity, but once Oliver makes up his mind— (*Stops as she abruptly buries her face in her hands.*) Why—what's the matter?

PEGGY. I—I suppose it's the suddenness of the thing—and the silliness. A man like Oliver, throwing away so much—but there's just no dissuading him—and—I've grown rather fond of him.

DEREK. Say, this is serious! Perhaps—you should lie down or something—?

PEGGY. That's not a bad idea. The strain is making me weary . . .

(PEGGY *reclines on sofa, a forearm across her eyes;* JANE *enters from hall, Upstage of* DEREK, *who does not notice her, with a featherduster; she cannot see* PEGGY *on sofa, and moves to dust painting and books, but stops as* DEREK *speaks; we can see at once that she believes him to be speaking to her.*)

DEREK. My dear—I have something to say to you—no, don't say a word, or I won't be able to finish. Since you first came to work for us, I haven't been blind to your charm. I suppose you'll say that it's all part of your job, but you'll be wrong. You have a charm that exceeds the requirements of your position. When you come into a room, it lights up, somehow, and I feel that— No, please don't speak, not till I've said it all. I know I can't hope that you've noticed the way I feel, but someday, in the near future, I hope you might find it in your heart to care just a little for me, as I do for you . . . ?

JANE. (*Unable to contain herself.*) Oh, Master Derek! I never *dreamed—!* (*Flings herself, featherduster and all, about his neck.*)

DEREK. (*Struggling, in shock.*) Jane! What are you do-

ing! Have you taken leave of your senses? Confound it, unhand me!

PEGGY. (*Sits up.*) What—? Oh, Jane! I thought we were alone.

DEREK. (*Finally prying* JANE *loose.*) So did I!

JANE. (*Now icily reserved.*) I beg your pardon, sir.

DEREK. No, Jane, I beg yours. That was extremely stupid of me.

JANE. I quite agree, sir! (*Exits haughtily to hall.*)

DEREK. I feel like such a fool—!

PEGGY. (*Starts to giggle.*) And you looked so silly, wrestling her off your neck! (*Mimics him.*) "Confound it, unhand me!" (*Goes into nearly hysterical laughter.*)

DEREK. I suppose the whole thing did look a bit ridiculous— (*Abruptly joins in her laughter.*) How will I ever face Jane again! Playing pingpong with her heart!

PEGGY. (*Recovering from laughter.*) Well, it must be nice to know the servants think well of you. (*He laughs again, starts down around sofa to her.*) And Derek—what you said to me—I'll—think it over.

DEREK. (*Sits beside her, turned to face her.*) Then—I have a chance—?

PEGGY. (*Gently takes his hands.*) It's been a bit too abrupt for me to say, Derek. But there certainly is a possibility. I'm flattered that you've noticed me. (SYLVIA *enters from garden, gets her forgotten purse from desk, then stops in reaction to tableau.*) I always thought that you and Sylvia—

DEREK. Sylvia? Ha! It is she who desires *me*, Peggy, not I *her*. Oh, she's amusing enough, I suppose—but then, so is a flea circus! (*If* SYLVIA*'s looks could kill,* DEREK *would now be a violently mangled corpse; he suddenly pulls* PEGGY *to him, ardently.*) Oh, Peggy, it is you I want! Only you! No one but you! (*Kisses her.*)

PEGGY. (*Pulls back.*) Derek! Kissing is terribly unsanitary!

DEREK. I have a family-size bottle of Listerine in my room. We can go up there afterwards, and gargle hand-in-hand! (*Kisses her again.*)

PEGGY. (*Pulls free again, and says sardonically:*) And if you take me out, should I pack a roll of Sucrets? (*But* DEREK *has just caught sight of* SYLVIA, *who turns in fury and exits to garden; he jumps up and starts after her.*)

DEREK. Uh, yes, certainly, anything you say. Excuse me! (*Exits after* SYLVIA, *fast; as* PEGGY *looks after him in some bewilderment,* GEORGE *enters from hall.*)

GEORGE. Hello, Peggy—have you seen Derek—?

PEGGY. I think he just went to his room to gargle.

GEORGE. (*His manner changing slightly.*) Then we are—alone? You and I—?

PEGGY. (*Apprehensive, not sure why.*) Yes—yes, I suppose we are, George . . . ?

GEORGE. Good. Because— (*Moves down to right end of sofa, smiling down upon her.*) My dear, I have something to say to you—no, don't say a word, or I won't be able to finish. Since you first came to work for us, I haven't been blind to your charm—

PEGGY. (*Naturally both fascinated and suspicious.*) Is that a fact!

GEORGE. I suppose you'll say that it's all part of your job, but you'll be wrong. You have a charm that—

PEGGY. (*Will rise on her line.*) I have a charm that exceeds the requirements of my position—?

GEORGE. Uh. *Yes* . . . But—?!

PEGGY. And when I come into a room, it lights up, somehow, and—?

GEORGE. Yes, that's right, but—how in the world did you know what I—?

PEGGY. I have such an eerie feeling—as if history were repeating itself . . .

GEORGE. I beg your pardon—?

PEGGY. George, what is going on here? Is that an original speech?

GEORGE. (*Quite flustered and abashed, now.*) Well—as a matter of fact—no.

PEGGY. Ah! Then where—?

GEORGE. Derek and I were in a play in college, once, where the leading man was in love with the governess, and—

PEGGY. (*Laughs with delight.*) *Now* it comes out! Look—if I might mimic Priscilla Mullen—speak for yourself, George!

GEORGE. (*Grins wryly, scratches briefly behind one ear.*) I guess it *was* a bit theatrical, wasn't it!

PEGGY. (*Takes his hands, makes him sit down beside her on sofa.*) Come on, boy—sit thee down here beside me and spill what's buzzing in your brain—but in your own words, for heaven's sake!

GEORGE. (*Takes a breath for courage, considers, then says:*) All right. You're pretty. You're charming. You're fun to be with. I like you. When you're not around, I wish you were. There. Isn't that the flattest speech you ever heard?

PEGGY. (*Sincerely.*) Cyrano de Bergerac couldn't top it. (*Facetiously.*) And may I go off the deep end and say that I have not exactly been blind to *your* charms, either? When you come into a room, it lights up, somehow, and—

GEORGE. Please! Stop. I surrender, Peggy.

PEGGY. I like you to call me Peggy. I feel like part of the family. When you call me Miss Brent, I feel like part of the furniture.

GEORGE. Do I sound bad as all that?

PEGGY. Habitually! But the way you are now—without that icy armor plate you normally wear—you're, well, kind of nice, George . . . dear George . . . dear sweet George . . . (*They melt into a terrific clinch and kiss, just as* JANE *enters from hall; she sees them, reacts, clears her throat.*)

JANE. Master Derek—

GEORGE. (*Coming out of clinch and shifting to face her.*) It is I, Jane. Derek has gone a-gargling.

JANE. (*A bit startled by his identity.*) Oh. Well. Uh—dinner is served. (*Almost turns, but hesitates.*)

GEORGE. Is there anything the matter, Jane—?

JANE. (*Not certain how to explain her confusion.*) No, sir—not really—only— Well, a person certainly needs a program to know who's up at bat around here! (*Exits huffily to hall.*)

GEORGE. Now, what could she mean by that?

PEGGY. (*Who knows, and who'd rather not explain.*) Say, shall we go in to dinner? Cook doesn't like to be kept waiting! (*Takes his arm, pulls him hallward.*)

GEORGE. But what did Jane mean about being up at bat?

PEGGY. (*As she tows him out into hall.*) Who knows? Maybe she noticed you were getting to first base! (*They are barely gone when an angry* SYLVIA, *followed by a desperately unhappy* DEREK, *come swiftly in from garden.*)

SYLVIA. (*In mid-speech as they enter.*) —and as far as I'm concerned, you can lose every red cent of that inheritance. If you love me, then announce our engagement to everyone, Oliver included. I'm sick of sneaking through the shrubbery, throwing pebbles at your window, disguising my voice when I telephone—!

DEREK. (*Pulls her anxiously to a stop, just above table.*) Wait! Darling, you know I can't do that. It would spoil everything. I have Peggy right where I want her, now, and—

SYLVIA. (*Turns to face him, furious.*) The only way you'll get any money from that woman is to beat her over the head with a chair-leg and take it! Will you please *forget* all this sordid scheming and announce our engagement, or not?! Because, believe me, Derek Stratton, if you don't, then there *is* no engagement!

DEREK. Darling, darling, you just don't understand!

SYLVIA. What's to understand?! There's me, and there's

Miss Brent, you've made your choice, and that's that! The least you could do is spare me the biological details!

DEREK. No-no-no, listen, you've got it all wrong. (*More calmly.*) Sylvia—why do you suppose Uncle Oliver disapproves of you so heartily?

SYLVIA. I've never stuck around long enough to ask him. I suppose because I'm not on your social level.

DEREK. Not at all. Oliver is really very tolerant about people's status in society.

SYLVIA. Then why? Why does he go purple when he catches a glimpse of me? What have I got, the plague?

DEREK. Something much worse, in Oliver's eyes: You have *me!*

SYLVIA. You? But—Derek—?

DEREK. (*Patiently.*) It's quite simple. Uncle Oliver reasons that since I am a wastrel, a no-good, and general all-around bum, no *worthwhile* woman would look twice at me. Since you obviously adore me, he's certain *you* are up to no good, do you see? He probably assumes you are after my money.

SYLVIA. But, Derek—you *have* no money!

DEREK. I'll *get* some, if you don't louse things up! Don't you see—if Oliver once suspects that *Peggy* is nuts about me—

SYLVIA. He'll disapprove of *her!* And change his will *back!* Is that it?

DEREK. Exactly! *Now* do you see why I can't announce our engagement?!

SYLVIA. I—I'm beginning to—but—this isn't a trick? I mean, you won't go ahead and marry her or anything?

DEREK. Sylvia, you have my word as a gentleman, I love only you! On my honor!

SYLVIA. You haven't been a gentleman since the day I *met* you! And as for your honor—! (*Before he can reply,* OLIVER *enters from hall; both freeze.*)

OLIVER. Ah, there you are, Derek! Have you seen Peggy

and—and— Miss Crane! Derek, I distinctly told you that woman was never to set foot in my house again!

DEREK. But—Uncle—your last night at home—!

OLIVER. I'd like it to be a pleasant one, if you don't mind! Young lady, you will do me the courtesy of—

SYLVIA. (*Turning on the kilowatts.*) Leaving? Ah, but Mister Stratton, how can I? I realize that you think little of me, and I daresay you have grounds, but, from all that Derek has told me of you, I can't help but admire you tremendously!

OLIVER. Honeyed words have no power to—to— Admire?

DEREK. Tremendously.

SYLVIA. And so, now, although I have not the right, since you have forbidden me to come here, I just had to see you, just this once more. You are leaving tonight, and—well—I thought that, no matter what you did to me, I'd have to look upon your noble face for one last time, to gather a memory I could hold and cherish forever!

OLIVER. Dear lady . . . I didn't realize . . . I had no idea . . .

SYLVIA. (*Wiping away an imaginary tear, holds up a hand.*) No. You're quite right. I should not have come. I only felt that I could not let you depart without my risking your displeasure to come here and tell you what has been burning in my heart these many months. (*Solemnly tragic.*) And now it is said. And now I shall go. (*Turns toward garden doors.*)

OLIVER. Oh, come now, it's not so bad as all that—! (*She waits, her back to him, a triumphant smile on her lips.*) I mean—I'm sure that, on my last night here, I should be a bit more—um—*tolerant* of people. Besides, right now, it is as though I'd seen you for the first time, somehow, and I find that you are quite—um—

DEREK. (*Helpfully.*) —tolerable?

SYLVIA. (*Lays her hand upon* DEREK's *arm.*) Derek—I

have disturbed this marvelous man quite enough. Will you please see me home?

DEREK. (*Incredulous.*) To the Bronx?!

OLIVER. Wait! Derek, I have been a hard-hearted old fool. By all means, Miss Crane, stay. Stay for dinner! Derek, go tell cook there will be one more guest for dinner—

DEREK. Cook is making individual desserts . . .

OLIVER. Oh, drat, I forgot. Well—pop your head in the kitchen, shout it fast, then run!

DEREK. (*Darkly.*) Cook won't like it. (*Exits to hall;* SYLVIA *slowly turns to face* OLIVER.)

SYLVIA. You know—underneath that gruff exterior, you're rather nice.

OLIVER. Oh—shucks, Miss Crane!

SYLVIA. "Sylvia." Please.

OLIVER. It's a lovely name. For a lovely woman. You know, if I were a younger man—oh well, no point in mulling it over. I leave for Tibet, tonight, and that's that.

SYLVIA. Oliver—how—how *can* you leave all this, to—to become a monk?

OLIVER. Ah, if you had the secret sorrow I have, you'd become a monk, too.

SYLVIA. (*Leaves purse on table, leads him to sit on sofa.*) Tell me about it. It's a woman, isn't it! It would have to be a woman!

OLIVER. Yes. Yes, you're right. It is a woman. A one-of-a-kind woman. Drab, but charming. Middle-aged, but kind. Not too bright, but gentle.

SYLVIA. (*Nods understandingly.*) You loved her and she didn't love back.

OLIVER. (*Shakes head.*) Oh, yes, she did. She said so. But then—!

SYLVIA. Something happened . . . ?

OLIVER. (*Sighs.*) Yes. Something that— Shall I tell you about it?

SYLVIA. (*Gently pillowing his head upon her shoulder.*) If it will help the hurt. Tell me, Oliver. Tell me all.

OLIVER. (*Wistfully reminiscing.*) I was returning from Europe. The ship was cruising gently through the night. There was a moon, and a breeze blowing softly through the blue-velvet air. I was standing on the foredeck, looking at the sea, and thinking about life—and love—and the meaning of it all. I turned my head . . .

SYLVIA. And there she was.

OLIVER. Yes.

SYLVIA. Staring at the stars—?

OLIVER. Well, actually, she was being sick over the rail. Ah, but when she finally straightened up, our eyes met. Then suddenly, her hand closed over my own, on the rail. Something inside of me surged and roared, and I could tell she felt the same way. And the next moment—

SYLVIA. Yes . . . ?

OLIVER. We were *both* being sick over the rail. After that, of course, ours was a whirlwind romance. We had both lost our hearts!

SYLVIA. Among other things.

OLIVER. Exactly. We exchanged remedies for hours on end. I knew I couldn't let it all end there. I had to see her again. The ship was to dock the next morning. I took down her name and address on the inside of a gum wrapper—Juicy Fruit—and put it into my pocket.

SYLVIA. And then—?

OLIVER. Morning came. The ship docked. We disembarked. Crowds, the fuss with customs, the hurry and all . . . I didn't catch sight of her. And then, when I returned home here, and took the gum wrapper from my pocket—!

SYLVIA. Yes, Oliver, yes—?

OLIVER. The ink had smeared. I couldn't read it. I had been smuggling in a small bottle of French perfume. It had popped its cork, and run all over the gum wrapper, leaving the sweet smell of total illegibility!

SYLVIA. (*Nods solemnly.*) Crime does not pay.

OLIVER. Well put, well put. I called in detectives, put ads in all the papers, had leaflets scattered from planes, bought advertising space upon billboards, in theatre programs, inside fortune cookies—but to no avail.

SYLVIA. She didn't respond?

OLIVER. Actually, how could she? I didn't recall her name, so I couldn't very well put that in the messages. It was night on the boat deck, and I wasn't feeling too steady, so I didn't see her well enough to furnish the detectives with a description. All I could recall was her voice, her beautiful voice, but when I tried imitating it for the detectives, they merely laughed. Oh, many a woman replied to my message, but never the right one. And so—

SYLVIA. You abandoned all hope.

OLIVER. Yes. What was left for me? Except—to try to forget. And so—that is why I am going to become a monk. I'll shave my head and eyebrows, get a robe and ricebowl, sit on a rock—and sigh a lot.

SYLVIA. Ah, but must you? Go so far for your forgetfulness, I mean? With the right person—the right *woman*—to help you, you could—you could forget right here! Right here on Long Island—in this house—in this room—on this sofa—!

OLIVER. (*Lifts his head from her shoulder, stares at her.*) Sylvia! You mean yourself, don't you! You would sacrifice your sweet youth to comfort an old man like me.

SYLVIA. Yes. Yes, I would!

OLIVER. I couldn't let you do that!

SYLVIA. Yes. Yes, you could!

OLIVER. I shouldn't even consider it!

SYLVIA. Yes. Yes, you should!

OLIVER. It's—it's too noble of you . . .

SYLVIA. Let me *try,* at least! (*Starts to twine his hair about her fingers, playfully.*) Little by little, day by day, I can force myself to give you the necessary distractions, and—

OLIVER. Uh . . . well . . . I suppose . . . perhaps . . . No! It's too late. Wu Chang is here. I can't send him back emptyhanded. He's come halfway around the world to get me. Last week, you might have convinced me. But now—I am irrevocably committed.

SYLVIA. Nothing is irrevocable! If you explain to this Wu Chang—

OLIVER. You don't understand—he is a recruiter. I read his ad in the New York Times. He gets points for everyone he brings in, toward his retirement. He says getting me will put him over the top. So, really—

SYLVIA. Please, Oliver—at least let me *try* to win your heart! I'm sure that—

OLIVER. (*Pats her shoulder, paternally.*) Yes, yes you could win my heart—if I had not already lost it—to her! (SANDERS *enters from hall, his manner nervous.*)

SYLVIA. But Oliver—

SANDERS. Excuse me, Mister Stratton, sir—second call for dinner!

OLIVER. (*Jumps up.*) *Second?!* Good heavens, cook will be furious! Thank you, Sanders! (*Extends his arm as* SYLVIA *stands.*) My dear—?

SYLVIA. (*Taking his arm.*) Thank you, Oliver. (*Looks up as* PEGGY *and* GEORGE *enter from hall.*)

PEGGY. Oliver, I have devastating news!

OLIVER. Why, Peggy, what is it?

PEGGY. Cook prepared the roast with garlic!

OLIVER. But, Peggy, I like garlic.

PEGGY. But garlic doesn't like you. I'm still your nurse, and I forbid you to eat a bite of it. Why, if you took a boat trip with that in your stomach, you'd never reach Tibet alive!

GEORGE. She's right, Oliver. I remember that time we brought home the pepperoni pizza, and you were up half the night, retching and heaving—

SYLVIA. George! Please!

OLIVER. My dears, nothing could upset me tonight. This

lama, Wu Chang, is a man of contemplation, peace and harmony. I guarantee you, just to have him walk into a room brings the most incredible serenity! When I am under his influence, not even garlic can upset me.

PEGGY. Oliver, contemplating your navel won't alleviate acute gastritis!

SYLVIA. Will you all please shut up while I still have an appetite left?!

OLIVER. Listen, all of you, mere words tell you nothing. I shall go and bring Wu Chang here. I promise you that when he enters through that door, this will be a place of peace and harmony and serenity, as his spell enfolds you like a bright, golden cloud! I'll be right back! (*Nearly bumps into* DEREK, *just entering from hall.*) Oops, sorry.

DEREK. (*Watching him exit.*) Where's he off to? I hope nobody *else* is staying for dinner. Cook was most upset when I told her about Sylvia.

PEGGY. Sylvia? Staying for dinner? Do you mean—she and Oliver are on friendly terms at last?

SYLVIA. *Very.* Kind of rocks *your* applecart, doesn't it!

PEGGY. George, what is she talking about?

GEORGE. (*Miserable.*) Oh—Peggy—stop it, please. I wish things could be different, but—well, I know what you've done. But I want you to know—I forgive you.

PEGGY. Thanks a heap. What are you forgiving me *for?* Or am I supposed to know?

SYLVIA. I suppose it's slipped your mind that you've had your eye on the Stratton fortune ever since you arrived here?

PEGGY. *What?!*

SYLVIA. I suppose you and old Oliver haven't been playing footsie upstairs when you were supposedly taking his temperature?

PEGGY. That's so ridiculous I won't even deny it!

DEREK. See, George? She won't deny it!

PEGGY. Listen, Derek, your uncle is my employer, and that's *all* he is!

GEORGE. You didn't tell him you were fond of him?

PEGGY. Suppose I *did?!* I *am* fond of him! Aren't *you?*

DEREK. George's devotion to Oliver is notoriously unselfish!

PEGGY. And mine isn't?!

SYLVIA. See, George, she admits it! (JANE *gallops in from hall, snaps to attention near door.*)

JANE. Last call for dinner! Cook is blowing her top!

PEGGY. (*To* DEREK *and* SYLVIA.) You're not only hateful, you're stupid!

JANE. I don't have to stand for that kind of talk! (J.D. *enters from hall.*)

J.D. Is Wu Chang in here?

GEORGE. Peggy, I hate to do this, but— J.D., isn't it true that Peggy is my father's sole heir?

JANE. (*Still nursing her erroneous sorrow.*) I work hard, and I don't deserve to be shouted at! Especially by—

PEGGY. (*Responding to* GEORGE.) *Me?*

JANE. (*On same wrong track.*) Who else?!

J.D. Well, Peggy, it was supposed to be a secret, but—

JANE. I slave, I toil, I labor—

GEORGE. There, Peggy, you *see?*

PEGGY. But I didn't *know!*

JANE. That's because you never *watch* me!

PEGGY. (*Half-catching this.*) What—?

GEORGE. Didn't know?!

J.D. How could she know? Until tonight, the only ones who knew were myself and Oliver!

JANE. All I ever asked was a little consideration—

GEORGE. Until *tonight?!*

JANE. *Even* tonight!

GEORGE. (*Half-catching this.*) What—?

PEGGY. Ms. Culver, who found *out* tonight—?

J.D. Derek tricked it out of me.

GEORGE. Derek! Aha!

JANE. He's been up to all *sorts* of tricks, tonight!

DEREK. Now, George, take it easy—

GEORGE. You called this sweet innocent woman a gold-digger!

JANE. That's not *all* he called me!

GEORGE. What—?

DEREK. (*Apprehensive, since* GEORGE *looks ready for a brawl.*) Now, George—if I happened, by merest chance, to give you the impression—

GEORGE. (*Lunges at* DEREK.) Why, you louse!

SYLVIA. (*Trying to come between them.*) Please—!

DEREK. (*Swings at* GEORGE, *on:*) *Who's* a louse?! (*His fist neatly connects with* SYLVIA's *eye, and she topples flat on her back onto the sofa, out cold;* PEGGY, *the nurse in her uppermost, sits on edge of sofa to take her pulse.*)

JANE. Listen, everyone—cook is just about at the boiling point—!

GEORGE. Hit a defenseless woman, will you?!

DEREK. (*Sparring with him.*) I already *did!*

(DEREK *grabs up ice bucket to crown* GEORGE; JANE *screams and faints back into* J.D.'s *arms; distracted,* DEREK *is set upon by* GEORGE, *who gets him to floor and begins choking him.*)

PEGGY. (*Left hand on* SYLVIA's *wrist, looks blankly at her own right wrist, which is bare, then asks brightly.*) Has anybody got a watch?

J.D. (*Valiantly trying to support the comatose* JANE.) What does it matter what *time* it is?

GEORGE. (*Not only choking* DEREK, *but pounding his head on the carpet.*) Derek's time is running out, anyway!

PEGGY. (*Anxiously chafing* SYLVIA's *wrist between her palms.*) Won't somebody *help* me—?

J.D. Somebody help *me!*

DEREK. (*Through a constricted throat.*) How about helping *me?!*

(*And as all three start to ad-lib "Help!" over and over,* OLIVER *enters from hall with* WU CHANG, *a short man whose face is almost hidden in his hooded robe;* ALL *freeze in place, and go silent, for:*)

OLIVER. (*Speaking as he enters:*) Can't you feel the serenity already—?! (*Then he reacts to the tableau, and as* GEORGE, PEGGY *and* J.D. *stare at him in confusion—*)

Blackout

ACT ONE

SCENE 2

*The dining room of the Stratton mansion.** [*This is a half-stage setting, accomplished by cast and crew working like lightning to 1) move desk and chair Upstage near garden doors, 2) set flowers, liquor, etc. from tabletop onto seat of sofa, then flip over tabletop—which is actually a hinged board, its underside equipped with fastened-on tableware, place settings, tablecloth* (*long enough to cover front of sofa to floor once in place*), *and even a centerpiece if you want one—and have everybody bring the other Onstage chairs to 3) rest around "dining table" with one chair at each end, and five chairs along Upstage edge, and then 4) seven filled stemmed goblets of wine are set in place for diners, and 5) a curtain—or even a long folding screen—comes into place just Upstage of the five chairs, for dining-room wall. At extreme Left, this divider reaches almost to Left wall, but at Right, enough space is left to expose hall door, which is now the "kitchen door."*]

* See "RECOMMENDATIONS" at end of play.

JANE *is standing looking out into kitchen, in mid-conversation with the cook, holding a water pitcher.*

JANE. Yes, Mildred, they're finally coming—unless another fistfight's started. You sure you got seven desserts? I can't think of anybody else who might drop in, but maybe you should've made an extra one, just in case— . . . Mildred, don't stand there with your face getting that color, I was only kidding! (*Glances toward Left, moves swiftly to set pitcher on table.*) Whoops, here they come. I'd better start serving!

(*She exits to kitchen, fast;* DEREK *and* SYLVIA *enter from Left—the "hall"—dressed as before, but* SYLVIA *wears a pair of very large and dark sunglasses.* [*NOTE: Seating arrangement, when all are in place, will be, from Right:* OLIVER, J.D., PEGGY, DEREK, SYLVIA, GEORGE *and* WU.])

DEREK. (*Genuinely solicitous.*) Does it hurt much, darling?

SYLVIA. (*Sarcastically.*) No, of course not! I *like* a punch in the eye now and then—it keeps me on my toes!

DEREK. Please don't take that attitude!

SYLVIA. What attitude is one *supposed* to take when the man one loves hauls off and *belts* one one?

DEREK. That blow was intended for George.

SYLVIA. I wish he'd succeeded in strangling you!

DEREK. You don't mean that.

SYLVIA. No, you're right. Strangling is too good for you. I wish he'd set fire to your necktie!

DEREK. You'd stand by and watch a thing like that?

SYLVIA. Hell, no! I'd grab a newspaper and fan the flames!

DEREK. You're joking.

SYLVIA. Sure I'm joking. Nero was joking. Mrs. O'Leary's cow was joking.

DEREK. Sylvia—are you upset with me?

SYLVIA. (*Laughs hollowly.*) Upset? Why should I be upset? All you've done tonight is made love to another woman, compared me to a flea circus, and knocked me cold with a left jab!

DEREK. That was a right hook. And I'm sorry. Maybe I could go and ask cook for a piece of beefsteak for that eye.

SYLVIA. And maybe you'd come back with your individual dessert on your head.

DEREK. (*With an uneasy glance kitchenward.*) She *is* a bit touchy, tonight . . . Here, let me see that eye— (*Lifts glasses to expose a masterpiece of a shiner.*)

SYLVIA. Isn't it lovely? My left eye, that I've had ever since I was a little girl, gleaming like a pool of deep blue water—cunningly set in the center of a burnt doughnut! (*Tilts glasses back in place to hide the sight.*)

DEREK. Darling, if there's anything I can do—?

SYLVIA. There is. Set fire to your necktie and hand me a newspaper!

DEREK. Sylvia, don't be childish!

SYLVIA. *I'm* being childish?! I suppose telling George Peggy is a gold-digger is adult behavior? I suppose calling me a flea circus is the mark of a mature man? I suppose bashing in the eye of the woman you profess to love is the pinnacle of emotional stability?

DEREK. Sylvia, you are being idiotic, unreasonable and illogical!

SYLVIA. Of course I am! I'm a woman!

DEREK. (*Takes her shoulders.*) You know something—you're right! (*Kisses her gently but firmly; then, when he stops:*)

SYLVIA. Why did you do that—?

DEREK. Why did you do that back—?

SYLVIA. (*Turns away, nearly in tears.*) It must be love. I know it sounds silly, considering my chances, but it's the only explanation—my soul is bared, cards are on the table, and the cat is out of the bag. I adore you, you louse! (*Starts to sniffle; he turns her tenderly to face him.*)

DEREK. This is all Peggy's fault!

SYLVIA. Stop passing the buck! Peggy didn't know a thing about the will!

DEREK. But if she had, I would have been right, and George wouldn't have tried to belt me, and you wouldn't have gotten popped in the eye.

SYLVIA. *Now* who's being illogical?!

DEREK. Listen, the others will be here soon—close your pretty little painted mouth and I will tell you my new plan.

SYLVIA. Oh, no you don't! Tell me over the phone. I'm getting out of here while I still have *one* good eye!

DEREK. Darling, this can't miss!

SYLVIA. (*A protective palm over her left eye-area.*) The other one didn't!

DEREK. (*Restrains her from leaving.*) It can't fail. Look, Uncle Oliver hates booze-hounds. If Peggy should over-indulge at dinner, he might see her in a new light.

SYLVIA. Her *own?*

DEREK. Don't be sarcastic.

SYLVIA. That was the voice of sanity. Derek, how could we get her to do it? Do I sit on her chest while you ply the flask and funnel?

DEREK. Of course not! We use finesse!

SYLVIA. All right, *you* sit on her chest, while *I*—

DEREK. Sylvia, they're coming! Just follow my lead and help out, okay?

SYLVIA. My heart tells me yes, my good eye tells me no . . . Oh well. Sail on! (OLIVER *enters from "hall."*)

OLIVER. Derek, maybe I can get some sense out of *you*—what was that fiasco in the library all about?

DEREK. When George slugged Sylvia, I guess I lost control. (SYLVIA *gapes in surprise.*)

OLIVER. Why would *George* slug Sylvia? . . . I mean, why would *anyone?*

DEREK. Because she implied that Miss Brent put less alcohol on her patients' backs than she did on her own tonsils!

OLIVER. Sylvia—you told George that Miss Brent drinks to excess?

SYLVIA. Not in so many words—I merely said she was the only nurse I knew who could sterilize a wound by breathing on it!

OLIVER. But—I was planning on leaving her my entire estate! . . . Oh, drat, that was supposed to be a surprise!

DEREK. (*Nudges* SYLVIA, *and they both over-register surprise, on:*) Oh, it *was!*

SYLVIA. Yes, indeedy! Gosh!

DEREK. If only Miss Brent were—worthy!

SYLVIA. (*Solicitously patting* OLIVER's *shoulder.*) Don't listen to Derek, Oliver. If you want the Stratton fortune to filter by driblets into the nearest distillery, you just go right ahead and leave everything to Peggy.

OLIVER. Sylvia—Derek—is this some sort of joke—?!

SYLVIA. If it is, why did George slug me?

DEREK. George could never take a joke.

OLIVER. Nonsense. George is a good sport.

SYLVIA. But his favorite sport is boxing.

OLIVER. It's hard to believe. Peggy seems so healthy . . .

SYLVIA. She *is* healthy—alcohol kills germs.

DEREK. One nice thing about being a drunkard—you never get a sore throat.

OLIVER. I still cannot believe—if there were some way to be sure—

DEREK. Oh, but there is. Put her to—the Test! (*Just as*

earlier with GEORGE, SYLVIA *and* DEREK *each clutch him by an arm, leaning in to whisper in fast alternation in his ears.*) Just watch her during dinner . . . every move—

SYLVIA. Every sip—

DEREK. Every gush from the bottle—

SYLVIA. Every tilt of the glass—

DEREK. Every swallow—

SYLVIA. Every belch—

OLIVER. I'll do it! And if what you suggest is true—

DEREK. Yes?

SYLVIA. Yes?

OLIVER. I'll cut her off without a cent!

SYLVIA. And who *will* get the money?

OLIVER. Oh . . . George and Derek, I suppose . . . why do you ask?

SYLVIA. (*Pseudo-casually.*) Just curious.

DEREK. Ah, here comes Miss Brent now! . . . Young, vivacious—

SYLVIA. —and ninety proof.

(GEORGE *and* PEGGY *enter from "hall"; she has changed from her uniform to a becoming evening dress; as they enter, she stumbles slightly, and* GEORGE *catches her by the arm.*)

PEGGY. (*With a little laugh.*) Darn these high heels!

DEREK. Of *course* it's the heels.

SYLVIA. *We'll* never tell.

GEORGE. Huh—?

OLIVER. (*To* DEREK *and* SYLVIA.) It may have been an accident. I shall watch and wait.

GEORGE. Wait for what?

OLIVER. (*Coldly.*) A man who would strike a defenseless woman deserves no explanations!

(*As* GEORGE *and* PEGGY *react blankly,* J.D. *and* WU *enter*

from "hall"; WU hesitates near left end of table, but J.D. will cross below table [others are above it] and take her place.)

PEGGY. What's that got to do with George?

OLIVER. And I've got my eye on *you*, too! (*As they react again, he sees J.D. sit down.*) J.D., please! Our guest! (*J.D., flustered, stands; OLIVER gestures WU to proper chair.*) Wu Chang, you shall sit opposite me, at that end.

(*As WU does so, everyone else moves to proper place, and when he is seated, all will sit; as soon as they are seated, SYLVIA picks up her wine glass and stands; all the men but WU immediately stand, too.*)

SYLVIA. Take it easy, boys, I'm not leaving. (*They sit again.*) I just want to propose a toast.

OLIVER. I thought women did that sitting down.

DEREK. No, Uncle, *ladies* do that sitting down.

SYLVIA. Very funny. Okay, so I'll *sit* and propose a toast! (*Sits, raises glass, frowns.*) It doesn't feel right.

OLIVER. Well, you can stand if you prefer.

DEREK. On your head, if you like.

SYLVIA. (*Stands serenely.*) If everyone will kindly shut up a moment)—? (*Sees they are quiet, raises glass.*) To Oliver Stratton—great man, fond father, loving uncle, good friend, and future lama. May his spirits always be as high as the mountains to which he travels tonight! . . . That's it, folks, drink up!

GEORGE. (*After they all drink and SYLVIA sits, rises.*) And I have a toast—to my father, a great man, a good friend, and a good egg in general! (ALL *drink, and as* GEORGE *sits,* DEREK *stands.*)

DEREK. And here's another one—to Uncle Oliver, whose loving kindness to me I shall always remember on those

cold winter nights when I'm out on some windswept street corner selling pencils!

(ALL *laugh, and—unseen except by* J.D., DEREK *dumps remainder of his own wine into* PEGGY's *glass, then fakes draining his glass as all drink except* J.D., *who watches* DEREK *sit; then:*)

J.D. Derek, why did you do that?

DEREK. (*Trapped, blurts:*) Uh—old Spanish custom!

J.D. You're not Spanish.

SYLVIA. The wine is! It's manzanilla!

GEORGE. I thought manzanilla was an olive?

PEGGY. Isn't that the black kind?

DEREK. I'm sure they come in green, too.

OLIVER. Seems to me they come in all colors.

SYLVIA. Well, live and learn.

J.D. Derek—?

DEREK. . . . Yes, J.D.?

J.D. What was I just going to ask you?

SYLVIA. How would Derek know?

J.D. Well, that's true enough . . . maybe it will come back to me. (JANE *enters from kitchen.*)

JANE. Shall I serve the soup?

DEREK. We haven't finished toasting Oliver.

JANE. (*Looks briefly at* OLIVER, *half-expecting him on a barbecue spit.*) He looks all right to me . . . but listen, the soup will get cold—

DEREK. Oh, have cook put it in the oven, or something.

JANE. (*Leaning away from kitchen, says in hoarse whisper:*) I don't dare! She's just readying the individual *desserts* for the oven!

OLIVER. What sort of desserts, Jane?

JANE. I believe it's baked alaska, sir.

WU. Baked alaska? . . . What is baked alaska?

GEORGE. (*As all others look toward* WU.) It's a sort of

combination thing—cake topped with ice cream, and then meringue over all of it, browned in the oven. . . . I think.

WU. Maid brings this now?

OLIVER. Hardly, Wu Chang. That is the dessert.

WU. Ah, the dessert! . . . Maid brings this now?

OLIVER. You don't understand—the dessert is always the last thing served.

WU. Why? . . . (*There is a pause, while all rack their brains, look at one another, and realize they don't know the answer.*)

OLIVER. Be-because—it wouldn't—uh—*be* dessert if it came first.

WU. What would it be?

DEREK. The—antipasto.

WU. What is antipasto tonight?

JANE. (*Curtsies.*) Cream of chicken soup, your highness, sir.

WU. Why do we not have soup for dessert, and baked alaska for antipasto?

OLIVER. Well—I suppose—? (*Looks around at others, all of whom shrug helplessly.*) I guess we *could*. . . . Jane, tell Mildred we'll have the dessert first.

JANE. *You* tell her.

OLIVER. I beg your pardon?

JANE. (*Draws herself up with dignity.*) Sir, I've worked for you for five years, now, and I know Mildred! After telling her five for dinner, then six, then seven, then making three calls for dinner while she tried not to burn the roast, and watching her assemble those baked alaskas, one by one, I'm not going out there to tell her you've decided to serve the dessert first!

OLIVER. Now, Jane, really!

JANE. I'm not *afraid* of her, mind you. Not the least bit. Not at all.

OLIVER. Then go tell Mildred we'll have the dessert first.

JANE. *You* tell her.

OLIVER. I thought you weren't afraid of her?

JANE. I'm not afraid of water, either—but I don't jump into it when it's boiling!

OLIVER. Jane, Mildred may become *upset*, but there is nothing to actually *fear!*

JANE. Then *you* tell her.

OLIVER. All right, damn it, I will! (*Jumps up and storms out into kitchen; everyone Onstage waits and listens; there is a silence; then from the kitchen comes a CRASH of cutlery, pots, pans, plates, etc., followed by a thunder of FOOTBALLS and the SLAM of a door;* OLIVER *re-enters, stops just within room; all eyes are on him; after a brief and uncomfortable moment, he clears his throat, then speaks.*) How about a *buffet* supper?

PEGGY. (*Rises, will start kitchenward on:*) Oh, don't be silly, Oliver. Here, you sit back down, and Jane and I will tend to everything. Come on, Jane. (*As he obediently resits, they exit to kitchen.*)

DEREK. (*Lifts water pitcher.*) Almost out of water!

OLIVER. I beg your pardon?

DEREK. This water-pitcher's nearly empty.

OLIVER. Nonsense, it's nearly three-quarters full.

DEREK. And it's already at room temperature.

OLIVER. With ice cubes in it?

DEREK. (*Rises, with pitcher.*) And there's a beetle in it.

SYLVIA. Picky-picky!

DEREK. (*Starts toward "hall."*) I think I'll refill it.

GEORGE. The water faucets are in the kitchen.

DEREK. The ice bucket is in the library.

J.D. The ice trays are in the refrigerator.

WU. (*Joining into the spirit of the thing.*) The hat of my aunt is on the table.

SYLVIA. (*Following his misdirected drift.*) I have lost my red pencil box.

OLIVER. (*Blankly, as others all chuckle.*) Is everybody nuts around here?

SYLVIA. (*As* DEREK *exits to "hall" with pitcher.*) All in favor say "aye."

WU. Where is baked alaska?

GEORGE. Peggy and Jane are bringing it.

WU. I think that I shall like it.

OLIVER. I hope so. It just cost me a cook.

WU. In mountains of Tibet, we have no cooks.

OLIVER. You do your own cooking?

WU. We cook nothing. We eat food as it is caught.

GEORGE. How can you catch anything when you sit around contemplating all day?

WU. When food comes close by, we catch it.

GEORGE. And if *no* food comes by?

WU. We contemplate a little harder.

J.D. Just what *do* you contemplate?

SYLVIA. (*With a what*-else? *shrug:*) Food!

(PEGGY *and* JANE *enter with trayful of individual baked alaskas; they move to* WU, JANE *holding tray while* PEGGY *hands out the plates—each plate having its dessert fork on it, of course, since the on-table cutlery is fastened down—and starting with* WU, *a dessert is put at each place, on:*)

PEGGY. For our guest of honor . . . and here's for George . . . Sylvia . . . one for Derek . . . one for myself . . . J.D. . . . and last but not least! (*Sets final dessert before* OLIVER *as* JANE *exits to kitchen with empty tray; sits at her own place, then all watch* WU *anxiously as he takes a tentative forkful and eats it; then:*) Well—? How do you like it?

WU. (*Thoughtfully.*) Top is hot . . . inside is cold . . . bottom is spongy and wet. It reminds me of . . . *life!*

OLIVER. Fascinating! Isn't it fascinating?

SYLVIA. Oh, yes, very. But—I don't get it.

GEORGE. Me, neither.

J.D. Could you explain it, please, Wu Chang?

WU. In the summer, all is dry and hot. That is top of baked alaska.

OLIVER. I told you he was marvelous! Go on, Wu Chang!

WU. In the winter, all nature is shrouded in bitter cold, but love can make the bitterness sweet. That is center of baked alaska.

SYLVIA. (*Caught up in the moment, offers tentatively:*) And the cake is dry and crumbly like autumn, and the melting ice cream is soggy and wet, like spring, April, time for romance—?

WU. (*Looks her up and down, then speaks.*) How would you like to become a monk?

OLIVER. In a Tibetan monastery, women are not allowed.

GEORGE. No wonder they sit and stare!

OLIVER. George, that's profane!

SYLVIA. (*Still muddled by it all.*) But Wu Chang—if summer, spring and the other seasons are locked into the baked alaska—I still don't see what it has to do with *life*. I mean, where do *people* get into the act?

WU. People eat the baked alaska.

GEORGE. That doesn't make sense.

OLIVER. It doesn't have to make sense! Wu Chang is a mystic!

(DEREK *re-enters with water pitcher;* WU *holds up emptied wine glass to him.*)

WU. I will have some of that.

DEREK. (*Oddly uneasy.*) What—? Oh, come now, you don't want any of this! I'll have Jane bring you more wine!

WU. My body is not accustomed to wine. I would prefer the water.

DEREK. But—this pitcher is from *our* end of the table—!

OLIVER. Stop babbling nonsense, Derek, and pour Wu Chang a drink of water!

J.D. (*Conversationally, as* DEREK *glumly fills* WU's *glass.*) The way he hangs onto that pitcher, you'd think there was *gin* in it! (*All laugh but* DEREK *and* SYLVIA, who exchange looks of, respectively, despair and dawning comprehension.)

DEREK. (*As he finishes pouring.*) There you are, old man. Uh—sip it slowly—! (*Then stands there in horror as* WU *drains glass in one gulp; a moment later,* WU *quivers, blinks, and freezes in position.*)

OLIVER. (*Noticing none of this.*) You know, Wu Chang, I'm still a bit confused about the baked alaska . . . Wu Chang—? . . . Wu Chang—? (WU *sits silent, fist fast about stem of emptied glass.*)

DEREK. (*Trying to avert disaster.*) What are you confused *about?*

OLIVER. Oh, that's right, you missed it. See—meringue is summer, ice cream is winter, cake is fall, and drippings are spring. I don't get it.

DEREK. (*Honestly.*) Now *I'm* confused!

PEGGY. Baked alaska, Derek. Wu Chang says it reminds him of life.

DEREK. You mean it starts out fairly frothy, but after awhile it's not so hot?

SYLVIA. Bravo, Derek, that's one up on Wu!

GEORGE. (*Reaching for pitcher* DEREK *still holds.*) I give up. I'll settle for water. *That* I can understand—! (*Looks in surprise as* SYLVIA *restrains his reach.*) Hey, what is this, Indian wrestling?

SYLVIA. That's Wu's water!

DEREK. Right! After all, he's guest of honor!

OLIVER. (*Peering across table at* WU.) Wu Chang—is there anything wrong—?

WU. (*Shudders, blinks from frozen stasis, takes pitcher from* DEREK.) Oliver Stratton—whence comes this water?

OLIVER. From the faucet—no, wait, Derek, where *did* you get it? There are no faucets in the library.

DEREK. Uh. Melted ice. In the ice bucket. I filled it from that. Colder that way. Puts hair on your chest.

SYLVIA. *Now* he tells me!

WU. (*As* DEREK *sits in his place with reluctance and foreboding.*) Oliver Stratton—in Tibet, no such water as this exists.

OLIVER. Then what do you drink?

WU. Oh, there is water—but *this* magical liquid—drinking it—I am alive!

GEORGE. What were you *before* you drank it?

SYLVIA. Thirsty.

WU. This must be traced! Before the glass—the pitcher . . . before the pitcher—the ice . . . before the ice—?

PEGGY. You mean where did we get the water in the first place? I think it's from the river—after a lot of chemistry and filtration.

WU. Ah! Chemistry! That explains it! The people of New York are thrice blessed to dwell amid such wonderful technology! It quenches—and yet, it burns!

GEORGE. Now I *am* thirsty! (*Starts to reach for pitcher,* SYLVIA *grabs his arm again.*) Sylvia, do you *mind?!*

SYLVIA. Leave it alone! That's Wu's water!

GEORGE. Cut it out! (*Pulls free, gives her a shove, she slaps his hand.*)

OLIVER. (*Who looked their way too late.*) George? What's happening over there?

WU. The young lady smote the young gentleman.

OLIVER. Sylvia, why did you smite—uh—slap—George?

SYLVIA. Uh—there was a mosquito on his hand!

GEORGE. (*Looks at hand.*) Where?

SYLVIA. He got away.

DEREK. Say, Sylvia, I'm thirsty, would you pass me some of Wu's water?

SYLVIA. Sure thing! (*Jumps up, leans past* GEORGE, *grabs pitcher and hands it to* DEREK, *who immediately tries to pour some into* PEGGY's *glass.*)

PEGGY. (*Preventing him.*) Derek, what are you doing?!

DEREK. The wine's very strong—I thought I'd *dilute* it a bit for you!

OLIVER. I thought *you* were thirsty—?

DEREK. Peggy's thirstier.

SYLVIA. I can see her lips cracking from here.

PEGGY. How can you see anything with those dark glasses on?

SYLVIA. I'm used to the dark.

GEORGE. That's what comes of dating Derek.

SYLVIA. You've never seen me on a date with Derek!

GEORGE. Nobody has. It's too dark.

OLIVER. What's that supposed to mean?

GEORGE. Don't ask questions. I'm a mystic.

WU. (*Dreamily.*) The Hudson is a marvelous river.

OLIVER. What makes you bring that up? (WU *suddenly hiccups.*)

GEORGE. What makes you bring *that* up?

PEGGY. Wait a minute—let me see that pitcher of water!

SYLVIA. On second thought, you don't look as thirsty as I thought. (PEGGY *gets grip on pitcher; they tug-of-war.*) Let go! You're going to spill it!

PEGGY. Give me that pitcher! Give it to me! *I* want a drink of that!

DEREK. (*To* OLIVER.) See? And this is only *water!* (*As* OLIVER *reacts,* SYLVIA *suddenly wrests pitcher free, loses balance, and dumps entire pitcher in* DEREK's *lap; he sits quite still; then, after an exquisite pause:*) If you thought I needed a shower, you could have said so.

SYLVIA. (*Glumly sets pitcher on table.*) Well, unless anyone wants cold sandwiches, I'd say dinner was finished.

WU. Is there no after-dinner entertainment?

SYLVIA. Could be. If some kind soul will strike a match, perhaps Derek would do his famous imitation of a shrieking crepe suzette! (SANDERS *enters from "hall."*)

SANDERS. Mister Stratton, there is a person on the phone.

OLIVER. Person?

SANDERS. A lady, sir. She desires to bring you some literature.

OLIVER. I already have more books than I know what to do with.

SANDERS. I believe this literature is in the nature of a tract, sir. The woman is affiliated with some sort of temperance movement.

OLIVER. You mean she's a demon-rum prohibitionist?

SANDERS. That was my impression, sir.

OLIVER. Wonderful! And opportune! Tell her to come by at once! (*To* PEGGY, *as* SANDERS *exits.*) Some day you'll thank me, my dear. (*As she reacts blankly he continues to* WU.) That is—do we have time to see this woman, Wu Chang?

WU. If you have the Hudson, we have the time.

DEREK. (*Picks up pitcher, starts out.*) I'll get some more. But then I've got to change.

SYLVIA. Oh, Derek—don't ever change! Stay just as you are.

DEREK. (*Pauses short of exit to "hall."*) Debonair and charming—?

SYLVIA. All wet. (DEREK *scowls and exits.*)

WU. (*Dreamily rotating goblet.*) A man could really contemplate if he could sit beside the Hudson. Or dabble his feet in it. Or bathe in it.

SYLVIA. Or drown in it.

WU. How would you like to become a monk?

SYLVIA. Who knows? A little of that *Hudson* and I might get into the *spirit* of things.

OLIVER. How's that again?

SYLVIA. A play on words.

OLIVER. I don't follow it.

SYLVIA. Don't ask for explanations. I'm a mystic.

DEREK. (*Re-entering with freshly filled pitcher.*) Have some more Hudson, Wu.

WU. (*As* DEREK *refills his glass.*) Three thousand blessings upon you. (*Hiccups.*)

SYLVIA. Three thousand and one.

DEREK. Did I miss anything while I was gone?

SYLVIA. Me, I hope.

WU. (*Takes sip of drink as* DEREK *sits, then speaks to* OLIVER.) Ollie, old boy—let's start our own lamasery, on the banks of the Hudson!

J.D. (*Rises and moves toward* WU.) Oliver, we'd better get Wu to bed.

OLIVER. Bed? But what about our ship?

J.D. I don't think Wu is in any condition to sail.

SYLVIA. Too bad you're not flying. That he could do.

OLIVER. (*Rising, goes to assist* J.D. *with* WU.) I don't understand. What's happened to him?

J.D. Nothing he can't sleep off.

OLIVER. But all he had was some wine. Could it be that his austere life in the lamasery has ill-prepared him for the life of a Long-Islander?

DEREK. (*To* SYLVIA.) In plainer words, are we stuck with a looped lama?

SYLVIA. Well, while everyone takes a vote, I'm going to have me a roast beef sandwich! (*Starts toward kitchen.*) Garlic or not, here I come!

DEREK. (*Following her.*) Not a bad idea. I hope the gravy's still hot. (*They exit.*)

OLIVER. (*As he and* J.D. *assist* WU *toward "hall."*) Peggy, when that temperance woman arrives, I want you to give her your undivided attention.

PEGGY. *My* undivided attention? Oliver, are you sure *you* don't need her help?

GEORGE. Yes, Dad. I mean, Peggy's barely had one glass of wine.

OLIVER. Don't try to cover for her, son. I know you love her.

GEORGE. What? *Me?* In love with *Peggy?!*

PEGGY. (*Stung.*) Well, excuse *me, Mis*-ter Stratton! (*Exits to kitchen.*)

J.D. Come on, Oliver, this monk is heavy!

GEORGE. Just a moment! Where did you get this nutty notion about Peggy?

OLIVER. A blind man could see you're crazy about her.

GEORGE. I mean about her needing a *temperance* lecture!

OLIVER. Why—from Derek and Sylvia.

GEORGE. And you *believed* them?

OLIVER. I can't think of a reason why they'd make such a thing up.

GEORGE. I can think of forty million reasons! Don't you see? They want you to cut her out as beneficiary!

OLIVER. What?! But how did they know she *was* the beneficiary?

J.D. Uh—I'm afraid *I* may have let it slip . . . (*Almost drops* WU.) Like that.

OLIVER. But it was supposed to be a secret!

GEORGE. Well, it's all over the house, Dad.

OLIVER. Say, do you know you've called me "Dad" more times this evening than you ever did before in your life?

GEORGE. Well—I—I suppose it's sophisticated for kids in the "best" families to use first names—but—well, you're leaving, and—all at once, I wanted you to remember my calling you "Dad," instead of "Oliver."

OLIVER. Why, son. I'm touched. You've made me very happy.

GEORGE. I'm glad, Dad. And as for that beneficiary thing— (DEREK, SYLVIA *and* PEGGY *enter with sandwiches.*) Do as you like. Leave the money to us, or leave it to Peggy. It doesn't make any difference.

DEREK. Not to *you,* naturally!

GEORGE. (*Icily.*) And just what is *that* supposed to mean?

DEREK. Isn't it obvious? If he leaves it to *you,* you *get* it. If he leaves it to *Peggy,* you *marry* her and get it. (*To* OLIVER.) If you were leaving it to Sylvia, I could be every bit as noble as George.

PEGGY. And what makes you think *George* has a chance of marrying me? He doesn't even *love* me!

GEORGE. I didn't *say* that!

PEGGY. Then you *do* love me?

GEORGE. I didn't say *that,* either.

DEREK. Oh, good, it's still open season!

SYLVIA. I was afraid of that!

J.D. Afraid of what?

SYLVIA. You didn't see Derek's hotblooded session on the sofa with Little Miss Hygeine!

DEREK. Sylvia, I love no one but you.

SYLVIA. Derek, do you mean it? Why didn't you tell me?

DEREK. Until tonight, I never saw you with the lights on.

SYLVIA. Well, I guess I can vouch for that!

OLIVER. Enough of this squabbling! I am leaving my money to Peggy, and the rest of you can do what you like about it!

PEGGY. Oh, Oliver, how can you be so uncaring about your own flesh and blood!

OLIVER. Well, if that's all the thanks I get for my generosity, you can put down that sandwich and get out of my house!

GEORGE. If Peggy goes, I go!

DEREK. I'll call a cab.

OLIVER. *SILENCE!* (*He gets it.*) J.D.—take Wu Chang upstairs. He's not very large; you can make it.

J.D. (*Struggling Off Left with* WU.) Sanders! Sanders, are you out there? Give me a hand! (*From Off Left, we hear loud CLAPPING.*) Not like *that,* you idiot! (*Exits with* WU *barely stumbling along beside her.*)

OLIVER. (*Points after them, but while facing group.*)

Now, listen, all of you—maybe I'm a fool, but—Wu Chang is a very wise man. When he has awakened from his slumber, I intend to ask *him* to whom I should leave my money. I'm sure he will give a most learned answer.

SYLVIA. (*Dryly.*) Act Two: The Emerald City of Tibet!

OLIVER. Nonsense. Wu Chang is dedicated to higher things than money. I shall ask him, and I shall abide by his decision. Good evening, all of you. (*Exits Left.*)

PEGGY. Well—back to the clinic, I guess.

GEORGE. I'm going with you.

DEREK. Can you roll bandages?

SYLVIA. Oh, shut up, all of you. We've got to figure out what to do, and quickly! If we keep up this squabbling, we'll *all* be rolling bandages! United, we have a fighting chance. What do you say? A fourth of forty million is still better than unemployment compensation!

DEREK. True, but—united to do what? Wait till midnight, tie handkerchiefs over our faces, and machine-gun Oliver in his bed?

GEORGE. He's not *going* to bed. He's sailing, remember?

DEREK. (*Shrugs.*) Okay, so what's Plan *B?*

PEGGY. (*Giving it all up.*) Let me know if you think of one. *I'm* going to get a drink of water—*real* water!

GEORGE. (*Stops her before she can exit toward kitchen.*) Wait, Peggy. Derek's right. We must come up with a plan.

PEGGY. Well, look—it seems to me that, if Oliver is going to make his decision after he talks to *Wu Chang*—

SYLVIA. We influence *him!* Of course!

DEREK. Yes, but how? What kind of motivation moves a monk?

GEORGE. Sex!

SYLVIA. But monks have sworn *off* sex!

PEGGY. But it *must* still *appeal* to them! Look at how interested Wu Chang seemed to be in Sylvia—!

SYLVIA. Only as a new recruit. How could I spend the money if I wound up on some mountain-top with a rice bowl and a shaven head?!

DEREK. *You'd* find a way.

SYLVIA. (*Turns on him.*) I've had just enough of your innuendoes, Derek! (*Takes a roundhouse swing at him.*)

DEREK. (*Grabbing her arm.*) Hey, watch it—!

GEORGE. (*Grappling with* DEREK.) You're breaking her arm!

PEGGY. (*Grappling with* GEORGE.) George, this is no time to get physical!

DEREK. You mind your own business, you—hired girl!

GEORGE. You can't talk to Peggy like that!

SYLVIA. (*Writhing in* DEREK's grip.) Derek, the bone is starting to splinter—!

GEORGE. Let her go!

PEGGY. George, you're becoming emotional!

(*And as all four wrestle, ad-libbing grunts and various imprecations,* JANE *enters from kitchen with soup.*)

JANE. Doesn't anyone want dessert—? (*But by now the quartet is out of sight behind the table, from which point we hear screams, shouts and cries, and see an occasional flailing arm, flying shoe, etc., popping up into view;* JANE *calmly sits at Right end of table and begins sipping at a bowl of soup herself, on:*) Well, no use letting it go to waste . . . ! (*And as she sips serenely, and the free-for-all gets louder and louder—*)

The Curtain Falls

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

The library, looking as we last saw it, just a short time later. SYLVIA, DEREK, PEGGY *and* GEORGE *are all seated side by side on the sofa, facing out front; all have elbows on knees, fists on chins. Until otherwise indicated, they remain in this position, not even looking toward one another as they speak, all lines directed out front. A few seconds after curtain-rise,* PEGGY *sighs, and:*

DEREK. Was that despair, exhaustion or self-pity?

PEGGY. Approximately one-third of each.

SYLVIA. If only we had the combination to the safe.

GEORGE. Are you suggesting we simply *take* the money? That's sheer thievery.

DEREK. You mean "efficiency."

PEGGY. Sounds more like larceny.

SYLVIA. Or just plain ingenuity.

DEREK. Why don't we hire ourselves out as a thesaurus?

GEORGE. Why don't we all shut up until we find a solution to our problem?

SYLVIA. It could get awfully quiet in here.

DEREK. We'd wind up covered with cobwebs.

(*As their morose dialogue continues,* JANE *and* SANDERS *enter, carrying a large tool box, and move to picture.*)

GEORGE. You know, there's a secret way to open the picture over the safe, but only my father knows it.

SYLVIA. Are you sure? Maybe Jane found the button while dusting, or something. (JANE *presses section of library shelf, and picture slides up to expose safe.*)