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Laughter In The Dark

A Comedy

Victor Lucas

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CHARACTERS

Gripe, a revolting butler, decrepit and decayed
Alathea Budgett, a good-looking and dominating woman of fifty
Herbert Budgett, her husband. Bald-headed, short-sighted and shy
Belinda Budgett, their daughter, sweet and shrewd
Cyril Carraway, an amiable and fatuous young man
Bunny Tucker, a likeable little blonde
Thundercloud, a very large Red Indian—with a Greek accent
Gosforth, a legal gentleman
Lydia Prentice, a sophisticated secretary—allergic to men
Alec Ogleby, hearty and expansive with a roving eye
Aunt Emily Budgett, a fierce little spinster with bright beady eyes
Several non-speaking Spectres

The action of the play takes place at Creeching Cheyney, a faded mansion in Hampshire

ACT I	Christmas Eve
ACT II	Scene 1 An hour later
	Scene 2 Later that night
ACT III	Christmas Day

PRODUCTION NOTES

The play requires zest and pace from all concerned, not forgetting Aunt Emily, whose particular responsibility it is to ensure that the tempo does not flag at the end.

Herbert and Bunny must be portrayed as real and likeable people, genuinely attracted to each other. Gripe can, of course, be played with especial relish. Beware of the danger of slowing him down to an "old man" pace which would cause him to drop the general tempo. Alec must be absolutely sure of himself. Much of the pace of the play depends on his breezy, confidence-inspiring, quick-talking performance. Thundercloud is also a very forceful character but must avoid over-riding Cyril's and Herbert's laughs.

The ghost's business in the drinking scene must not be laboured. The passing of the glasses should be done naturally and swiftly. The dialogue is timed to coincide with the ghost's moves and the directions in the script should be adhered to. Alec and Cyril cannot wait for extra business from the ghost nor should they remain unnaturally still while the ghost is on.

The door knocker should be large and heavy and the knocking equally so. The chain on the door must *not* be painted string and the bar should be of metal. As regards the chains which clank off stage . . . the heavier the better. The sliding panel can be masked behind by a large square of black cloth on the principle of a photographer's hood.

The ghost at the end of Act II, Scene Two is supposedly Gosforth in disguise but can be portrayed by another person of Gosforth's build, his features hidden by the mask.

Several pairs of hands will be needed back stage and may well belong to the actors appearing briefly as apparitions, but at the final curtain further assistance will be needed.

The glasses which Alec brings on in Act II, Scene Two should be dark in colour, so that Alec and Cyril are not obliged to empty their glasses each time in the interests of realism!

In Act II, Scene Two someone must be standing by off stage near the top of the stairs in readiness for Cyril's exit, to effect a lighting change over of bowler hats. A stage wait here would be disastrous. Have the names of the recipients clearly marked on each of the presents in Gripe's sack.

After Gripe enters to Aunt Emily, change gel to green in the flood outside the door DL and have it turned so that when the door opens the flood will shine across the stage on to the centre door. Ensure that there is no spill of light on to the stage before the door is opened.

The church bells must be muffled and distant. If hanging chimes are used instead of a record, the clock chime a few minutes later must have a different note and come from a different source. If possible have the church bells off left and the clock chime off right.

When the kitchen door opens of its own accord it is quite simply opened off by someone behind it, watching the ghost carefully through a small hole in the flat.

The twang of the bowstring can be supplied by plucking a fiddle string loudly.

The snapping and crackling as the fire is lit is best contrived by breaking up a piece of thin plywood with pliers behind the fireplace.

ACT I

Christmas Eve at Creeching Cheyney, a faded, eerie mansion in Hampshire

DL is a door leading to the kitchen. UL is an archway entrance at the top of a flight of steps. At the top of the stairs is a small window. In the back wall, right of C, is a solid-looking main door. There is another door UR, below which is the fireplace. R of the main door is a large leaded window which starts about four feet above the floor

The main items of furniture are a dining table L with three chairs around it and a settee UR. There is a deep armchair DL, an umbrella stand-cum-coat rack L of the main door, a small telephone table UL and a cabinet for drinks above the kitchen door. In front of the fireplace is a long fire-stool. The furniture is solid and antique. At the start of the play most of it is shrouded by white sheets. There are sundry bookcases, stags' heads, crossed halberds etc.

The main lighting is from wall-brackets controlled by a switch immediately R of the main door. There is also a standard lamp above the fireplace

As the CURTAIN rises the stage is in darkness, pierced by a flash of lightning. Rain, thunder and gusts of wind can be heard

There is a horrible peal of maniacal laughter off stage, followed by the rattling of heavy chains. There is a loud knocking at the door. More thunder. The knocking is repeated. A grotesque shadow appears on the wall as Gripe enters at the top of the stairs holding aloft a flickering lantern. Like the house, he is old and rambling

Gripe Did somebody knock?

The wind howls and is accompanied by a high-pitched moaning offstage

Or was it the wind that howls round these old walls? Howling! . . .
Howling! (*He throws back his head and howls*)

The knocking is heard again as the wind increases

Who's there? Can't you lie quiet in the earth, blast you!

Knocking again as Gripe unbars the door

All right, all right. I'm coming. (*He opens the door about a foot on a chain*) What do you want?

Alathea (*off*) Is this Creeching Cheyney?

Gripe It is. What do you want?

Alathea (*off*) We want to come in. We're getting soaked out here!

Herbert (*off*) Open the door! Open the door I say!

Gripe Who are you? What are you doing out at this time of night?

Alathea (*off*) I'm Mrs Budgett.

Herbert (*off*) And I'm Mr Budgett.

Gripe Who? Budgett? Never heard of you. Go away. (*He shuts the door*)

There is more knocking

(*Switching on lights and opening the door a little as before*) There's nobody here. Only me. Go away.

Alathea (*off*) We've come to live here.

Herbert (*off*) Yes, we've come to live here.

Gripe Nobody lives here. Nobody could. Nobody would.

The wind rises

Go away.

Alathea (*off*) Will you open this door!

Gripe Why?

Alathea (*off*) Because I tell you to! This house belongs to us.

Gripe No it don't. Belongs to Mr Cheyney.

Alathea (*off*) No it doesn't, it belongs to us. Mr Cheyney died and left the house to us.

Gripe What's that you say? Mr Cheyney dead? The master dead! Lord save us! Why didn't you say so before. (*He unbolts the chain and opens the door*) Standing out there nattering. Keeping me hanging about here in the draught ...

Alathea and Herbert enter, their teeth chattering with cold, stamping their feet and blowing on frozen fingers. Herbert staggers under the weight of two large suitcases. Alathea is a good-looking but forbidding woman of fifty, tall and well-built. Herbert is a nice little man, bald-headed, short-sighted and shy. In his late forties

Gripe It'll be your fault if I catch my death of cold.

Alathea You horrible old man. What do you mean by shutting the door in my face! I suppose you're Gripe?

Gripe (*cupping his hand to his ear*) Eh? When?

Alathea Gripe! I said you must be Gripe!

Gripe Yes? Well I'm not surprised. And serve you right too.

Alathea Oh! I knew we should have waited until after Christmas.

Herbert But we couldn't, my dear. The terms of the will were most explicit.

Alathea I shall be glad when Cyril and Belinda get here. It will be a comfort to have a man about the place.

Herbert Yes, my dear.

Gripe (*tugging at Herbert's sleeve*) 'Ere! When did the master die, eh?

Alathea Mr Cheyney died last month and left us everything in his will. This house and all he possessed.

Gripe Left it all to you?

Alathea To my husband. Mr Cheyney was his Uncle Desmond.

Gripe He left you two all his money?

Alathea Yes.

Gripe Silly old fool.

Alathea I beg your pardon!

Gripe (*shaking her by the hand*) My name's Gripe. How do you do.

Alathea Are you the butler referred to in Mr Cheyney's will?

Gripe Eh? It will. Yes, it will.

Alathea This is insufferable! Herbert, why don't you make yourself useful instead of standing there shaking yourself like a wet dog.

Herbert I'm sorry my dear.

Alathea Take charge of this nasty old man and get him to light a fire while I see what the other rooms are like. (*Pointing UR*) Where does that door lead to?

Gripe Them was the master's private compartments.

Alathea (*switching on the standard lamp*) What's up those stairs?

Gripe Beds.

Alathea And how many servants are there?

Gripe None.

Alathea (*horrified*) Do you mean to say there's nobody else in the house!

Gripe That's right. Just you. (*He grins toothlessly*) And me.

Alathea This is dreadful. I can't think why your Uncle Desmond insisted we live here for a whole year. He must have had a warped sense of humour.

Alathea exits DL

Gripe 'Ere. (*He plucks at Herbert's sleeve*) 'Ere, tell me. Tell me, what did he die of? Was it ... was it - poison? Eh? How did you do it, eh? In his porridge?

Herbert Certainly not! I don't understand you. He died in Australia.

Gripe (*removing a dust sheet from the umbrella stand*) Oh, I see. That makes it a bit more difficult, don't it?

Herbert You'd better light a fire. You heard what she said.

Gripe Yes, all right. I don't mind. I'm a bit chilly myself. (*He crosses to the fire and kneels before it*) Now, come on, tell me all about it. (*Ominously*) You don't want to live here, you know.

Herbert Why shouldn't we?

Gripe (*pursing his lips*) Ooh, I wouldn't if I was you! Course it's different for me. I don't mind 'em. I'm used to 'em.

Herbert You're used to what?

Gripe (*conspiratorially*) I'll tell you. Come 'ere.

Herbert moves towards him, but Gripe suddenly changes his mind

No, I won't. Better not. You wouldn't like it.

Herbert What do you mean?

Gripe Nothing. (*He chuckles soundlessly*) Nothing at all. (*He strikes a match to light the fire*)

Alathea enters DL

Look out. Here she comes.

Alathea The kitchen is quite disgusting. There's a pile of dirty plates that must have been there for a month.

A snapping and crackling sound comes from the fire

(*To Gripe*) You must get a girl from the village tomorrow to clean the place up. I wouldn't trust you to do it yourself.

Gripe Can't get nobody tomorrow. It's Christmas Day. Anyway, they wouldn't come. Not Christmas, nor any other day.

Alathea Why not?

Gripe Aaah . . . !

Alathea I shall lose my patience in a moment. If the employer was anything like the servant, I'm grateful we never met your Uncle Desmond.

Alathea exits UL

Gripe What's this? You never met him? What did he leave you this house for then? There's something fishy about this.

Herbert Not at all. It was something of a surprise but I believe he was always rather eccentric.

Gripe I don't know about that, but he was always a wicked old scoundrel. Filled with all the sins of the flesh. (*He uncovers the armchair*) He was a proper devil for the women. Couldn't leave 'em alone. (*He cackles*) I could tell you things about what went on in this house that would make you break out in a cold sweat. Screams in the night. Goings-on in the bedrooms. Jiggery pokery in the pantry.

Herbert You oughtn't to speak like that you know. After all, he was your employer.

Gripe He wouldn't mind. A handsome feller he was, in his youth, with a roving eye and a ready wit. Ah well, he's gone now. God rest his wicked old soul.

Herbert Amen.

Gripe Left you this house, has he? The old devil. I bet he's having a good laugh now, wherever he is.

There is a piercing scream off UL

Herbert What was that!

Gripe I didn't 'ear nothing.

Herbert Someone screamed!

Gripe Oh, I thought you meant something unusual had happened.

Herbert (*moving quickly to the foot of the stairs*) It sounded like Alathea.

Gripe I don't take any notice of screams in this house. Nor will you when you've been here a bit longer.

Alathea screams again and hurriedly enters UL

Alathea Something touched my face in the dark! It was cold and hairy! It . . . it hissed in my ear!

Gripe I expect it was Mephistopheles.

Herbert What!

Gripe Or Beelzebub.

Herbert Who?

Gripe They're my two bats. I hope you didn't upset them, screaming like

that. Very sensitive things, bats . . . easily frightened. You be careful and don't go disturbing them. I'd better see if they're all right. Coming in here, frightening other people's bats . . .

Gripe exits UL, grumbling to himself

Alathea The place is a shambles. I'm beginning to think your Uncle Desmond must have been out of his mind.

Herbert Oh come, my dear. "De mortuis nil nisi bonum."

Belinda and Cyril come into view behind the leaded window

Alathea Thank heaven he lit the fire, anyway.

Belinda taps on the pane to attract their attention

There's Belinda. Go and open the door for her.

Herbert Yes, my dear.

Alathea And then carry the bags upstairs.

Herbert opens the door

Belinda (*off*) Hello, Daddy. What a spooky looking place.

Belinda enters, carrying a suitcase. She is sweet but shrewd

The outside's enough to give one the willies.

Cyril enters with another suitcase. He is an affable but fatuous young man

Cyril Hello, Mrs Budgett. There doesn't seem to be a garage so I've parked my little two-seater under a tree. How are you Mrs Budgett? Are you nicely settled in now?

Alathea That we are not. (*She draws the curtains across the window*)

Herbert Our train was over an hour late and we've only just arrived.

Alathea What's more we had to walk nearly a mile across the fields because there wasn't a taxi at the station. All we found was a ticket collector whose breath reeked of gin. There was no necessity for you to wish him a Merry Christmas in such an envious tone.

Herbert I'm sorry, my dear. It was merely a pleasantry on my part.

Cyril is wandering about examining the panelling etc

Cyril I say what a wonderful old place this is. Absolutely bung full of atmosphere. You can feel the past crawling up your spine. Laying its cold dead fingers on the back of your neck.

Alathea That reminds me, I must tell Gripe to air the beds.

Belinda Gripe? What's Gripe?

Alathea Gripe, I have just gathered, is the entire domestic staff.

Gripe enters UL

Gripe What! More of 'em!

Belinda Mother, you're joking. You surely don't mean there aren't any maids in the house?

Gripe Maids they may have been but the master made them into mistresses.
(He leers disgustingly)

Gripe exits into the kitchen

Herbert That was Gripe.

Cyril Yes, it looked it.

Belinda Do you mean there's only that old man to do all the work about the place?

Herbert There seems to have been some misunderstanding.

Althea Mr Gosforth said the butler would meet us on arrival, but that dreadful old man didn't seem to know anything about us.

Gripe enters with a long loaf of bread in his right pocket and a string of black puddings trailing from the left. He carries a tray containing plates and a tablecloth

Gripe I expect you'd like something to eat. I'm just seeing what we've got to be finished up.

Herbert Gripe, this is my daughter Belinda and this is Mr Carraway.

Gripe How do you do. *(He puts the tray on the table)* You're not staying are you? You don't want anything to eat do you?

Belinda Well, really . . .

Cyril I don't know about you darling, but I'm feeling pretty peckish. I could eat a horse.

Gripe *(putting the bread and black puddings on the table)* Oh no. We can't have that. I can't go killing off the livestock just for you. You'll have plain simple fare just like everybody else. *(He is about to exit into the kitchen)*

Althea Just a moment. Why were you not expecting us? Weren't you given instructions by Mr Gosforth?

Gripe Gosforth? Who's he? Never heard of him.

Althea Mr Gosforth is the late Mr Cheyney's solicitor. I understood that he had notified you of our intended arrival.

Herbert Do you mean to say that you had no communication from him?

Gripe Oh no. Nothing like that.

Cyril What's this doing here? *(He has found a long important-looking envelope in the tray of the umbrella stand)* Isn't your name Gripe? It's for you.

Gripe Oh yes; I've been looking for that. That came last week. *(He opens the envelope and takes out a letter)* I've been meaning to read it some time when I could find my glasses. 'Ere, you'll have to tell me what it says. *(He looks very closely at the envelope)* I can see the stamp. *(He turns his scrutiny to both sides of the letter)* But I can't make out which side the writing's on. *(He hands the letter to Cyril)*

Althea This is impossible! He'll have to go. As soon as we can get somebody else.

Cyril This explains the whole thing. It tells you of Mr Cheyney's death, of his leaving the house to Mr Budgett and finally instructs you to have everything in readiness for their arrival. Mr Gosforth adds a postscript to the effect that he is coming down here tonight himself by the later train.

Gripe No . . . No he can't do that.

Alathea Why not pray? There are plenty of bedrooms aren't there?

Gripe Yes, there's bedrooms in abundance, but they haven't been opened since the master left, fifteen years ago.

Alathea Then you'd better start getting them ready.

Gripe Unlock the chambers I will, and put warming pans in the beds. That's a good idea; it'll help to dry the sheets somewhat. More than that I cannot do. I'm very short handed. I've only got one pair. (*He turns to go*)

Alathea When you have finished preparing the meal, you will light the fires in all the rooms.

Gripe I couldn't do that. It wouldn't be a very nice thing to do. They wouldn't like it.

Herbert Who wouldn't like it?

Gripe The bats. They'd be very upset. (*To Alathea*) How would you like flames and smoke crackling through *your* winter quarters?

Gripe exits to the kitchen

Belinda Why is Mr Gosforth coming tonight?

Alathea It seems there were certain conditions attached to the legacy which were not to be made known until seven days after the reading of the will.

Cyril Doesn't anybody know what these conditions are?

Belinda With all that lovely money at stake it doesn't matter what they are. I'd run about without a stitch on in Selfridge's bargain basement rather than lose my share.

Alathea Really! Belinda!

Cyril You'd better see a psychiatrist.

Alathea Herbert, what are you doing?

Herbert (*at the telephone*) Nothing my dear. I was merely wondering if the telephone was in working order. One wouldn't wish to be cut off from the outside world.

Alathea Never mind about that. Make yourself useful. Go into the kitchen and scour out the saucepans.

Herbert Yes, my dear.

Alathea And clean the knives and forks; they're filthy.

Herbert Yes, my dear.

Alathea And get in between the prongs.

Herbert Yes, very well my dear, I will.

Alathea And then we shall need some more wood for the fire. You needn't think you're going to loaf about while you're down here.

Herbert Yes, my dear.

Alathea What did you say?

Herbert No, my dear.

Herbert exits to the kitchen

Belinda Poor Daddy.

Alathea (*removing the dust sheet from the settee*) Your father is a fundamental idler. (*She turns to Cyril*) All our married life I've had to tell him what to do. The only thing he ever wanted to do himself was to open a second-

hand bookshop. Of course, he would have been bankrupt inside a year and then what should we have done? But he couldn't see that. I had to stand over him and make him hold on to his job as a Civil Servant. You'd think he'd have been grateful to me, but oh no! I don't complain but it's very wearying to have a man leaning on you all the time.

Cyril Poor old Herbert.

Althea What do you mean by that remark?

Cyril (*in confusion*) I only meant it must be very uncomfortable . . . I mean, not being able to stand on his own two feet . . . having someone else standing on them for him . . . I think I'd better take these bags up. (*He picks up two suitcases*).

Belinda Come on Cyril, we'll go exploring.

Cyril starts to go up the stairs

(*At the foot of the stairs*) Let's take a look at Gripe's abundant bedrooms and chilly chambers. See you later, Mother. Don't be too hard on Daddy. He only wants a quiet life, you know.

Gripe enters DL with a hunk of cheese in one hand and a log for the fire in the other

You go first Cyril and scare away the bats.

The telephone rings

Who's this, I wonder? (*She lifts the receiver*)

Gripe is by the fire. He turns and listens

Hullo . . . Who? Mr Budgett? . . . Who's speaking? . . . Oh! . . . Well could you hold on? I'll get him to come to the phone. It's for Daddy.

Althea Who is it?

Belinda She won't say. She says it's a surprise.

Althea A woman! For Herbert!

Belinda (*at the kitchen door*) Daddy, you're wanted on the phone.

Herbert enters wearing a moth-eaten green baize apron

Herbert Are you sure it's for me? (*He takes the receiver*) Hullo . . . Who? . . . Flossie? . . . ? Oh! . . . Oh yes, of course, Flossie.

Althea Flossie!

Herbert Yes, of course I remember. It's one of the things I try to forget . . . No, no, I don't wish to be reminded of those hectic nights . . . Yes, I do indeed. I also remember the time we fought each other with pillows.

Althea Oh!

Herbert It wasn't very kind of you to lock me out all night in my pyjamas.

Althea Pyjamas!

Herbert Yes, very well . . . All right. Goodbye. (*He hangs up*)

Althea Herbert!

Herbert Yes, my dear?

Althea Who was that woman?

Herbert I don't understand you. It was only Ogleby.

Belinda You'd better own up Father. I'm afraid I let the cat out of the bag by telling Mother it was a woman on the phone.

Herbert Oh no, my dear. You're mistaken, I do assure you.

Alathea What were those references to pyjamas and pillow fights? Don't pretend you weren't expecting her to ring. Now I know why you were so concerned about the telephone.

Herbert No . . . No this is a misconception! It was an old schoolfellow. Alec Ogleby. I was his fag at St Michael's.

Alathea I wasn't born yesterday.

Herbert Oh no, my dear. I know you weren't.

Alathea What!

Herbert You're under a misapprehension, my dear. We were chums at school. He was recalling horseplay in the dorm . . . It isn't what you think at all.

Alathea How can you tell such lies! I heard you address her as Flossie.

Belinda It's no good, Daddy. I say, you're quite a dark horse aren't you?

Alathea It's a wise child that knows its own father!

Herbert No, my dear, it was Ogleby.

Alathea Then who was Flossie?

Herbert (*after a pause*) I was Flossie. It was a nickname bestowed upon me over thirty years ago. In my salad days.

Alathea I don't believe a word of it.

Herbert You can set your mind at rest. Ogleby will be here in a few minutes. He was telephoning from the *Rose and Crown* in the village. He wants to come and talk over old times.

Alathea Is this the truth?

Herbert I swear it.

Alathea I'm not a woman you can deceive easily.

Herbert (*to himself*) No, my dear. That's very true.

Alathea I'll speak to you later.

Alathea exits to the kitchen

Belinda Daddy, you've got yourself into a mess, haven't you?

Cyril (*eagerly*) Is she really coming here tonight?

Herbert It was only Ogleby! Why did you pretend it was a woman?

Belinda It's all right, Daddy. You don't have to keep up a front with me. I spoke to her on the phone. I know as well as you do that it was some fascinating witch of a woman.

Herbert But I swear . . .

Belinda Don't worry, I'm on your side. I think it's a very good thing if you do kick over the traces now and then with some of your wild women friends.

Herbert You mustn't say such things! You'll get me into trouble! My life is an open book.

Cyril Some of the pages are a bit dog-eared.

Belinda We'll back you up, but it's a pity you hit on such an unlikely story. Come on Cyril, let's brave the dangers of the dark.

Cyril Good luck . . . You'll need it when your girl friend turns up.

Belinda and Cyril exit UL

Gripe You're a lad, you are.

Herbert Certainly not. It's all a mistake.

Gripe If you want to get rid of the old battle-axe . . . *(He nods towards the kitchen door)* . . . I can always grind up some glass.

Herbert What do you mean?

Gripe That's the stuff to make 'em writhe and wriggle.

Herbert I don't understand you at all.

Gripe Snag is, you've got to get rid of 'em afterwards, and our boiler's not very big.

Herbert I trust I misinterpret you.

Gripe Acid's best but acid's expensive.

Gripe exits to the kitchen

Herbert What can I do! Poised between the hammer and the anvil! *(He sits right of the table)*

Bunny Tucker enters through the main door. She is a lovable little blonde with a generous nature. She wears an imitation fur coat which she is clasping together in a state of agitation. She is breathless as if she has been running

Bunny Thank goodness there's somebody here. I'm all out of breath.

Herbert rises in amazement

You look a nice little man. You'll take care of me, won't you?

Herbert What do you mean? What do you want?

Bunny I don't want to be a nuisance but I'm going to ask you to take me under your wing tonight.

Herbert Heavens! What are you suggesting?

Bunny You will, won't you?

Herbert Certainly not. I wouldn't do such a thing. I'm a married man. I . . . I'm a father.

Bunny All the better. Then perhaps you'll lend a sympathetic ear to my problems. You see it's like this. I'm in trouble.

Herbert Good Heavens!

Bunny I'm really in a jam I can tell you.

Herbert Mercy me!

Bunny You see there's a man after me. With a tommyhawk. I'm going to ask you to do me the biggest favour a man can do for a girl.

Herbert I'm afraid it's not feasible. I won't comply.

Bunny Oh, you are a naughty man. You've got a wicked mind. I only meant I wanted you to put me up for the night without asking anything in return.

Herbert You want to stay here?

Bunny I've just got to. I'm in a desperate situation.

Herbert No! No, it would never do.

Bunny You won't refuse to help me, will you? You've got such a kind face. I don't know where else to turn. If he catches me again there's no knowing what he may do.

Herbert I find it difficult to follow you.

Bunny He said he'd cut my ears off and I believe he meant it. Look what he's done already. *(She slips one arm out of her fur coat and reveals that she has a large bruise on her right shoulder and also that she is dressed in a scanty two-piece cowgirl outfit, with bare midriff and a tasselled fringe)* Look!

Herbert No! No! You mustn't expose yourself to temptation!

Bunny You are funny. Shall I tell you something? I like you.

Herbert You mustn't say such things.

Bunny Why not? I mean it. I think you're cute.

Herbert This is not the place for dalliance. You must go. At once. Before we are surprised.

Herbert starts to bundle her towards the door. She does not want to go

Bunny What is there to be surprised about?

Alathea enters DL

Alathea Herbert! So this is the explanation!

Cyril and Belinda enter UL

Cyril Oh, I say! Caught in the act!

Herbert No! No! I'm utterly in the dark!

Alathea *(to Bunny)* What do you mean by coming here?

Bunny I've come to appeal for protection. This man's after me. He won't leave me alone. Look what he did to me yesterday. *(She exhibits more bruises)*

Cyril *(looking admiringly at Herbert)* What a man!

Belinda He did that?

Alathea And he said he took the dog for a walk! The beast!

Bunny He said he'd kill me if I told anyone about it but I don't care. I've got bruises everywhere . . .

Bunny is about to reveal them but Herbert forestalls her, closing her coat in panic

Herbert It's a plot! It never happened!

Alathea Do you deny that what this woman says is true?

Bunny You won't let him get hold of me again will you?

Herbert I tell you my conscience is clear!

Bunny *(puzzled)* I daresay it is. I didn't say it wasn't. But that doesn't help me very much, does it? *(To Alathea)* You won't let him get me alone again will you? He's terrible when he's roused. Just like a wild beast. He does whatever comes into his head. There's no stopping him. I just couldn't stand it . . . not twice nightly.

Herbert I'm innocent. I swear it.

Alathea Is this unfortunate woman the one you spoke to on the telephone? Or is it yet another? You Jekyll and Hyde! How many more skeletons are there in your cupboard?

Herbert I have never set eyes on this lady before.

Alathea You scoundrel!

Bunny Hey, wait a minute. What's going on here?

Alathea Men like you should be put away. You're not fit for decent society.

Bunny Hold everything. I'm not talking about this little man.

Alathea What! but you've just told us how he beat you, how he bruised you . . .

Bunny Jumping Jelly Babies, no! You've got it all wrong. It was Thundercloud.

There is a blank silence

The knife thrower . . . the Red Indian.

Alathea (*faintly*) Red . . . Indian . . . ?

Bunny Well he's Greek really.

Herbert There my dear, you see? I wish you weren't so ready to think ill of me.

Belinda Cyril, I think you'd better try to sort this out.

Cyril I'll have a shot at it. Who's this knife thrower chap? Where is he?

Bunny Search me. I don't know. That's the worrying thing about it. He chased me through the woods but I gave him the slip.

Alathea Where have you come from?

Bunny Hackenschmidt's Big Top.

Cyril I beg yours? Who's what?

Bunny Hackenschmidt's Big Top. We're performing over Christmas. "Every night at five and eight, matinees at two-thirty. Come early and be sure of a seat".

Cyril Ah, the penny drops! The circus.

Belinda That's right. We saw that big coloured poster by the Town Hall.

Cyril And he's chasing you? This knife-throwing Thundercloud?

Bunny He certainly is.

Belinda Why?

Bunny Well, he's been drinking and I wasn't going to stand there in front of all those people and let him do what he said he was going to do. So I ran away right in the middle of the act.

Herbert What did he say he was going to do?

Bunny He said he'd throw his last knife at the bullseye.

Cyril Could you explain? I think I see what you mean but perhaps I'm wrong.

Bunny It's enough to make anyone run away. (*To Alathea*) How would you feel? You see it's like this. I stand against this big dartboard thing and he throws knives all around me. Like he's playing darts, see? First he throws one at double six and then double seven and so on until he's scored two hundred and fifty. Tonight he said he'd only go up to two hundred and then . . . bullseye!

Herbert Oh, you poor little thing!

Cyril What a cad's trick! Don't you worry, we'll see he doesn't bother you again, little girl. (*He is patting her hand*) My name's Cyril.

Bunny I'm Bunny Tucker. Pleased to meet you.

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