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Wolf at the door

A Play

Alan Ayckbourn and David Walker

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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ISBN 978-0-573-01936-4

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WOLF AT THE DOOR

First performed at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, Scarborough on 3rd October, 1989 with the following cast:

Vignerón	James Tomlinson
Teissier	Bernard Hepton
Bourdon	Jon Strickland
Merckens	Sean Chapman
Lefort	Robin Bowerman
Dupuis	Bill Moody
Gaston	Ian Dunn
Auguste	Daniel Collings
Doctor	Bill Moody
Madame Vignerón	Elizabeth Bell
Madame de Saint-Genis	Alison Skilbeck
Judith	Jennifer Wiltsie
Marie	Robin McCaffrey
Blanche	Claire Skinner
Rosalie	Doreen Andrew
George de Saint-Genis	Dean Daley
LeNormand	Robin Newman
General Fromentin	Robin Bowerman

Directed by Alan Ayckbourn

Designed by Michael Holt

CHARACTERS

Vigneron, a manufacturer

Teissier, a former banker, business associate of
Vigneron

Bourdon, a lawyer

Merckens, a music teacher

Lefort, an architect

Dupuis, an upholsterer

Gaston, Vigneron's son

Auguste, a servant

Doctor

Madame Vigneron

Madame de Saint-Genis

Judith }
Marie } the Vigneron daughters
Blanche }

Rosalie, a servant

George de Saint-Genis }
LeNormand } (non-speaking parts)
General Fromentin }

The action takes place in Paris

Time — towards the end of the nineteenth century

ACT I	The Vignerons' drawing-room, Paris
ACT II	The same, one month later
ACT III	The same
ACT IV	The dining-room of a run-down attic apartment

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A Small Family Business
Suburban Strains
Table Manners
Taking Steps
Ten Times Table
Time and Time Again
Tons of Money (revised)
Way Upstream
Woman in Mind

ACT I

The Vignerons' drawing-room, Paris. The set is very luxurious and flamboyantly decorated. The furnishings include a piano, a bureau, a fireplace, a large dining-table lavishly set for sixteen, a sofa, various chairs, mirrors, floral decorations, etc. Various double doors lead to other rooms

As the CURTAIN rises, Vigneron is lying on the sofa in his dressing-gown with a newspaper in his hands. He is dozing. Marie, sitting beside him, is sewing; Judith is at the piano; Blanche is at the table, writing

Madame Vigneron enters

Mme Vigneron Close the piano, Judith dear, your father is sleeping. (*She goes over to the table*) Blanche.

Blanche Yes, Mama?

Mme Vigneron Have you done it?

Blanche Just a moment.

Mme Vigneron Have you checked the total? How many of us will there be at table?

Blanche Sixteen. Definitely sixteen.

Mme Vigneron Yes, that's what I make it. (*She sits beside Blanche*)

Blanche It can't really make the meal taste any better, can it? Having a copy of the menu on every plate?

Mme Vigneron No, but then it can't make it any worse either, can it?

Blanche What an extraordinary custom! You're quite sure it's correct?

Mme Vigneron Of course, it's correct. It was in the latest edition of *Ladies' Home Etiquette*, so it must be correct.

Blanche Shall we do the seating plan now?

Mme Vigneron Let's check the guest list first. Madame de Saint-Genis?

Blanche Yes.

Mme Vigneron Her son?

Blanche Oh Mama, I wouldn't forget him.

Mme Vigneron Father Mouton?

Blanche Dear Father Mouton! This means he will have given me all the holy sacraments — baptism, communion, and now marriage ...

Mme Vigner If you're going to stop to discuss every single name, Blanche, this will take till next week. Monsieur Teissier?

Blanche Yes, Monsieur Teissier. I could have done without him being here.

Mme Vigner Blanche!

Vigner (*waking up*) What's that? Is that little Miss Blanche I can hear, laying down the law in my house?

Blanche I'm afraid so, Papa, little Miss Blanche.

Vigner And what harm has Monsieur Teissier ever done to you, may I ask, young lady?

Blanche Me? None! But he's ugly and vulgar and mean. And old. And he has a horrid, shift-y way of looking at you. Ugh! So far as I'm concerned, that's quite enough to make him thoroughly disagreeable company.

Mme Vigner Blanche, dear, really ...

Vigner Right! Very well, we'll soon solve that little problem! Madame Vigner, you will have this young lady's place-setting removed and she can dine in her room.

Mme Vigner Oh dear ...

Blanche I suppose you'll be signing the wedding contract without me, too?

Mme Vigner Oh, Blanche ...

Vigner One more word and you will not be getting married. Ah! (*He appears to catch his breath. He sits for a moment breathing heavily as he recovers*)

The women look at him

Marie Papa dear, I'd like to say something. And please, give me a proper answer for once when someone mentions your health. How do you feel?

Vigner Not so bad.

Marie You're very flushed.

Vigner So, I'm flushed! It will wear off, as soon as I get out in the air.

Marie If you start having dizzy spells again, then we'll have to call a doctor.

Vigner A doctor! What are you trying to do, see me off completely?

Marie If you're going to make jokes when you know it upsets me, let's not talk about it.

She moves away from him, but he catches hold of her skirt and pulls her back into his arms

Vigneron You really care that much about your old father, do you?

Marie Yes, I do. I love you very, very much ... but you don't take care of yourself as I'd like you to, as you should do. You ought to work less and enjoy being a man of means — and above all look after yourself when you're ill.

Vigneron I'm not ill, child. I know what's the matter with me, I'm a bit tired and I've got a touch of blood pressure. It always happens at this time of year when I've finished stocktaking. That's a huge job these days, you know. We're a big factory. Do you know how much we were offered for Teissier, Vigneron and Company only last week? Six hundred thousand!

Marie Well then, you should have sold it.

Vigneron In ten years I'll sell it for a million, and in the meantime it will have made that much again.

Marie How old will you be then?

Vigneron How old? In ten years? I'll be as old as my grandchildren and we'll have plenty of fun and games together.

Auguste, a servant, enters

What is it, Auguste?

Auguste It's monsieur's architect. He would like a word.

Vigneron Tell Monsieur Lefort that if he needs to speak to me he can come and see me at the factory.

Auguste He has just come from there, monsieur.

Vigneron Then he can just go back there, can't he? I'm in my own home here, with my wife and my family. I will not be disturbed by visits from architects.

Auguste exits

Help me up.

Marie helps Vigneron get up with difficulty. He is overcome by a slight giddiness and takes a few unsteady steps

Marie Why won't you see a doctor?

Vignerón Are you still going on about that?

Marie Yes, I am. Say what you like, you're not well. You should do something about it. Go on a special diet for a week — that might cure you completely.

Vignerón Oho! I know what you're getting at. Special diet! What you're saying is I eat too much. Go on then, say it — I'm not offended. I do, I know, I eat too much. What do you expect, child? Can you blame me? Remember this — we didn't always have all these splendid meals you girls all take so much for granted. Ask your mother, she'll tell you. When we first set up house, we two, I went to bed on more than one occasion without supper. Didn't I? Well, now I'm making up for what I missed. Yes, I know it's very naughty of me, and I'm sure it's bad for my health, as you're all so keen to point out, but I'm sorry, the one thing I'm afraid I can't resist is food. *(Pause)* You know, I think it's a mistake to read the newspaper straight after lunch, it's bad for my digestion. *(He screws up the paper and throws it on the sofa)*

Vignerón's eyes light on Judith, at the piano. Her back is turned to him and she appears to be deep in thought. He tiptoes up behind her

(Shouting) Judith!

Judith Oh! Father, don't! You know I hate it when you do that.

Vignerón *(with mock fright)* Oh please, miss, don't be cross, I won't do it any more, I promise. Now Judith, tell me one thing, seriously. How's life up there in the clouds these days? Is it raining up there? Draughty at all, is it?

Judith Go on, make fun as usual.

Vignerón What on earth gives you the idea I'm making fun of you? I'm extremely proud to have a daughter called Judith, who is apparently living on a different astral plane from the rest of us. It's just that whenever we need to talk to her we need to hold a seance. Is there anybody there? Is there something you wish to tell us?

Judith I've got nothing to say.

Vignerón That's never been an excuse for not speaking.

Judith I don't know what satisfaction you get teasing me all the time. I see you, I hear you, I love you and I'm happy.

Vignerón Are you happy?

Judith Perfectly.

Vigneron Well, my dear, then you're right and I'm wrong. How about a kiss?

Judith One kiss? I'll give you a hundred, dear old darling Papa.

They embrace

Auguste enters

Vigneron Now what is it? Can't I even be allowed to kiss my children in peace?

Auguste Monsieur Dupuis is outside, monsieur.

Vigneron Dupuis?

Auguste He's the upholsterer from the Place des Vosges.

Vigneron Well, what does he want? I settled my account with him ages ago.

Auguste Monsieur Dupuis happened to be passing and called in to enquire whether monsieur might have any further orders to place with him.

Vigneron Tell Monsieur Dupuis from me that I don't buy twice from a scoundrel. That will be all.

Auguste exits

(Going over to the table) Now then, what are you two up to?

Mme Vigneron Don't bother us now dear, please, we're sorting out the arrangements for the dinner this evening.

Vigneron Ah-ha ... Ah-ha ... *(He hovers around them for a moment)*
Madame V, come over here, I want a word with you.

Madame Vigneron rises and moves away with him

So it's all settled, is it? We've consented to give our daughter away to that whippersnapper, have we?

Mme Vigneron Did you interrupt me just to say that?

Vigneron All right, God knows, I've nothing against the marriage, I suppose. Madame de Saint-Genis seems like a respectable sort of woman. She hasn't a brass farthing but that's not her fault. Her son is a nice enough young fellow. Nice and calm. Nice and polite. Nice and ...

Nice curly hair. In time, I'll probably get round to telling him that he uses too much hair oil but ... He earns a thousand a year at the Ministry of the Interior, that's a tidy bit for someone his age. And yet at the last minute I can't help wondering: is this a sensible marriage? Will my daughter be truly happy with a young gentleman just because there's a "de" in his name?

Mme Vignerón Blanche is mad about him.

Vignerón Blanche is a child; the first young man she meets has turned her head, that's all.

Mme Vignerón What's got into you, dear? Why do you suddenly want to go back on the marriage when it's as good as taken place? You surely can't hold Madame de Saint-Genis' financial position against her; after all ours hasn't always been that wonderful. So what are you complaining about? That George is a handsome boy, with beautiful manners and from a good family? What if his name does have a "de" in it? So much the better for him.

Blanche contrives to edge a little closer in order to hear what they are saying

Vignerón No, no. So much the better for Blanche, you mean. You're absolutely tickled, aren't you, at the thought of having a son-in-law with a "de" in his name?

Mme Vignerón Yes, all right, I am. I am. I'm thrilled to bits. I admit it. But don't think for a single minute that I would sacrifice the happiness of one of my daughters over a silly detail like that. If she wasn't ... (*She notices Blanche. To Blanche*) Blanche, bring your father his jacket.

Blanche exits reluctantly

(*She moves towards Vignerón and lowers her voice*) Shall I tell you what I really think, Monsieur Vignerón? Blanche is a child, yes. She's as modest and innocent as can be, dear little thing, but she's also extraordinarily highly strung and — emotionally developed for her age ... We won't regret marrying her off young, I'm sure of it. Look, why don't you go back to work, dear, and stop worrying.

Rosalie appears in the doorway. Madame Vignerón crosses to Rosalie and they go out, talking quietly, leaving the doors open behind them

Vigeron takes off his dressing-gown and puts on the jacket that Blanche brings him

Vigeron Thank you, you ungrateful child!

Blanche Ungrateful! Why do you say that?

Vigeron If we are rich now and if you are getting married and if I'm giving you a large dowry, isn't it Monsieur Teissier we have to thank for that?

Blanche No, Papa.

Vigeron What do you mean, "No, Papa"? Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't it Teissier and his factory who made me what I am?

Blanche You mean you made Monsieur Teissier's factory what it is. If it hadn't been for you, it would have gone on losing him money. Since you took it over, goodness knows how much it has made for him. You know, Papa, I'll tell you what any other man — any fair-minded man — would say in Monsieur Teissier's place, after all you've done and all your years of effort. He'd say, "This factory used to belong to me, then it belonged to us both, and now it's entirely yours."

Vigeron Your heart's in the right place, Blanche, but I'm afraid your view of the business world is just a tiny, trifling, weeny bit sentimental. It's a refreshing attitude to have, my dear, just so long as you don't expect other people to share it with you. *(He kisses her)*

Madame Vigeron enters

Mme Vigeron What's going on, are you still here, old Vigeron?

Vigeron Madame V, tell me this: am I indebted to Teissier or is he indebted to me?

Mme Vigeron Neither.

Vigeron Would you mind explaining that?

Mme Vigeron Do you really want me to harp back over all that ancient history, dear?

Vigeron Yes, go on, harp away.

Mme Vigeron Well, my dears, Monsieur Teissier was a small banker who lived in rue Guenegaud which is where we also lived at the time. And he was a vague acquaintance of ours. We'd taken advantage of his kindness on one or two awkward occasions — he'd given us credit and so on. It was all straightforward because we had a reputation, of course,

for being totally honest. Then one day, after some business deal or other, he found himself with a factory on his hands. He remembered your father, and offered him a chance to take over the running of the factory, for a salary. Now, by that time we'd begun to make ends meet, your father had a good position with a good company and the wisest course was for him to stay put. So we said no. Well, fifteen months went by and we'd thought no more about it. Then one evening, at precisely half past nine, I clearly remember the time, your father and I were sitting together — it was summer — a hot night — all your bedroom doors were open — it was so quiet we could hear you all sleeping. Then suddenly there was a ring at the door. It was Monsieur Teissier. He'd come all the way up to the fifth floor to see us. Something he'd never done before. He seemed in a desperate state. What it came down to was his factory was near to ruin and he'd come to beg your father to rescue things by going into partnership with him. Your father thanked him very politely and said he would give him his answer the next day. As soon as Monsieur Teissier had gone, your father said to me — I can remember his exact words — he said, "It's our big chance, old girl; it's a bit late coming, just when we were beginning to find our feet. It'll mean sleepless nights for me, and a few nightmares for you until I bring it off — if I bring it off; but we've got four children to think of, and this could make their future."

She wipes a tear away and squeezes her husband's hand. The children draw close. A pause

So in reply to your original question, it seems to me very simple. Monsieur Teissier and Monsieur Vigneron were partners in a joint venture; they've both done well out of it, so neither owes the other anything.

Vigneron Well, girls, you have a beautiful mother with a beautiful way with words. You follow this lady's example. Make sure you measure up to her, that's all. You could do a lot worse than this. *(He kisses her)*

Mme Vigneron You don't seem to be in any hurry to get back to work, dear, that's unusual for you. Are you still feeling unwell?

Vigneron No, old thing, on the contrary I'm feeling better. I reckon I've made a complete recovery. And to celebrate I'm going to ask Mademoiselle Judith, the g-r-r-reat musical genius of the family, to play something for me and after that you'll be rid of me.

Judith What do you want me to play? *Il Trovatore?* *(She looks through the piano music)*

Vignerón Righto, let's have *Il Trovatore*. (*To Blanche*) Is it jolly, this *Trovatore*? It's by Rossini, isn't it?

Blanche No, Verdi.

Vignerón Ah! Verdi. He's the one who wrote *Les Huguenots*.

Blanche No, *Les Huguenots* is by Meyerbeer.

Vignerón So it is. The great Meyerbeer! I wonder how old he is now, Meyerbeer?

Blanche He's dead.

Vignerón Really! ... Well, I never ... he died without my noticing. (*To Judith*) Can't you find *Il Trovatore*? Well, don't go searching for it, dear, don't put yourself to any trouble, I know, just play me ... *La Dame Blanche*.

Judith I don't know *La Dame Blanche*.

Vignerón You don't know *La Dame Blanche*? I can't believe my ears. You don't know ...? What's the point of all these lessons I'm paying for at ten francs an hour? What does he teach you, that piano teacher? What's he been teaching you?

Judith He's been teaching me music.

Vignerón Well then? Isn't *La Dame Blanche* music?

Marie (*leading Judith across the room*) Come along, big sister, play Papa what he's asking for.

Judith sits at the piano and launches into the famous song from the opera by Boïeldieu. Vignerón begins to sing, then Madame Vignerón, then Blanche and Marie

Judith (*singing*) Yonder see the fine domain,
Its ramparts proud, its towers tall,
Behind those gates the chatelaine
Keeps ceaseless vigil over all.
Oh, you whose heart with malice teems,
Faithless knights with wicked dreams,
Beware!

In the middle of the final lines Gaston enters. First he puts his head round the door upstage, then comes in, goes to the fireplace, picks up the shovel and the tongs and joins in the din

The lady in white is watching there,
The lady in white sees through your schemes.

Vignerón (*to Gaston*) Where have you been, you rascal? Why weren't you here eating with us?

Gaston I had lunch at a friend's house.

Vignerón And what's the name of this friend of yours?

Gaston You wouldn't know him.

Vignerón I bet I wouldn't know him. Stand still, let me look at you. (*He steps back to see Gaston better*)

Gaston is still holding the shovel and tongs. Vignerón takes them and puts them back in their place. He returns, and from a distance of a couple of paces he regards Gaston affectionately

Stand up straight. (*He goes to Gaston and spruces him up*) Show me your tongue. Good. Cough a little. More. Very good. (*Confidentially*) You're not tiring yourself out, I hope?

Gaston How do you mean, Father?

Vignerón You've been out playing the fool recently. When I say "You're not tiring yourself out" I know very well what I mean and so do you, you rogue, and you don't need me to spell it out. Do you need any money?

Gaston No.

Vignerón Hold your hand out.

Gaston No, I won't.

Vignerón He's a chip off the old block, this one. Put this money in your pocket and be quick about it. You enjoy yourself, son, I want you to enjoy yourself. Act the swell, be a devil, go out and have a wild old time. But just one thing! When you're out of the house, you're your own master; here, in front of your sisters, mind how you behave, no loose talk, and above all no leaving love letters lying around. If you need someone to confide in, you've got me.

Judith Father, we're waiting for you, for the second verse.

Vignerón (*taking out his watch*) I'm afraid you'll have to sing the second verse without me. (*He takes his hat and makes for the door. He stops, looks around at his little family circle like a man who's happy where he is and regrets having to leave*) Madame Vignerón, come over here.

Madame Vignerón goes over to him. He takes her arm

Judith, up you get.

Judith rises

Let me have a look at you girls. If it was up to me, my little loves, I'd put my dressing-gown right back on again and I'd stay with you till dinner. Unfortunately, my work doesn't get done on its own and I'm not a man with the sort of investments that allow him to live without working. Maybe that will come when I'm a landlord. But it'll have to wait till my houses are built and till my children's future is properly seen to. Who would have thought that Blanche, that little slip of a girl, the youngest of all, would be the first to get married? Whose turn is it next? Judith? Ah, Judith's a young lady who won't be easy to marry. Short of meeting a prince, she'll remain a spinster. Well then, let that prince come along and introduce himself. I'll pay whatever's needed.

Gaston laughs

(*To Gaston*) As for you, you scallywag, laughing away while I'm speaking, go on, go and sow your wild oats. But I warn you, your high-living days are numbered. Any day now I'm going to put you on my payroll and you'll start earning a living by sweeping the workshop ... from top to bottom ... then I might transfer you to dispatching. After that, we'll see whether you're fit for something more responsible. Out of all of you, my little Marie's the one who gives me least cause for concern. She's not a dreamer (*to Judith*) like you, nor a sentimentalist (*to Blanche*) like you; she'll get married to a fine strapping fellow, hard-working and tireless, who'll remind you of your father when I'm not here any more. (*To Madame Vignerón*) I'm not saying anything about you, my old kitten; at our age you don't have any grand desires or great needs any more. You're happy when the brood's happy. I don't think our children could have been any happier anywhere else in the world. So what's left to be done? Old man Vignerón just needs to work a few more years to ensure a good future for all these youngsters, and afterwards I think he'll be entitled to retire. I give you all good day.

The Children (*variously*) Goodbye, Father. Give me a kiss. Goodbye.

Vignerón slips away from them and exits

Marie gathers up Vignerón's dressing-gown

Mme Vignerón Now ladies, time to get ready. Blanche, stay here for a moment, I've something to say to you. (*She takes the dressing-gown from Marie*) Marie, go through to the kitchen, dear, and be sure Rosalie understands she's not to keep us waiting — tell her to get a move on. She's very attached to us, dear old Rosalie, but she's always hours late serving dinner. Now, Gaston, let your sister get away to her room. You can practise your music another time, Judith.

Judith, Marie and Gaston exit

Now listen to me, young lady. I haven't time for long lectures so listen to what I am going to tell you, and you're not to say a single word — I don't want a discussion. I have not been at all satisfied with either your behaviour or general conduct when your fiancé is here. You stare at him, you simper, you both keep creeping away into corners together ... Well, I want none of that today, especially not today when we have strangers with us. I'm delighted George pleases you, I'm thrilled that you love him, that's splendid. And just as well, since you are going to marry the boy, but you're not married yet. Until you are, Blanche, I want you to control yourself, as a properly brought up young girl is expected to do.

Blanche sniffs

Now, there's no point in crying, I've said all I'm going to say. Wipe your eyes, give your mother a kiss and go and get dressed, you silly girl.

Blanche makes to leave and reaches the door R

Auguste enters UC

Auguste Madame de Saint-Genis.

Blanche stops and gives a delighted cry

Mme Vignerón Blanche, go and dress.

Blanche exits

Hungry for More?

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