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Ladies Who Lunch

A Play

Tudor Gates

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

FROM ENGLAND:

Sir John Sasson, 50s

Lady Amelia Sasson, his wife, 40

Gerry (Geraldine) Sasson, their daughter, 21

FROM AMERICA:

Harry Milchan, middle-aged

Rachel Milchan, his wife, mid-30s

Ms D L Wallis, an investigator for the SEC, 40s

FROM AUSTRALIA:

Ken Stocks, 50s

Joane Stocks, his wife, 40

MAIDS:

Mary

Bonnie

IN PROLOGUE ONLY (CAN BE DOUBLED OR ON VIDEO):

Peter Rain

Kate Glass

The Voice of **Benjie Milchan**

The action of the play takes place in the Sassons' Belgravia drawing room; the Milchans' duplex in Manhattan; and the Stocks' apartment overlooking Sydney Harbour

Time: the present

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

It is late Autumn in England and New York, although already cold there. It is early Summer in Sydney.

ACT I

- SCENE 1 London, morning
- SCENE 2 London, later that morning
- SCENE 3 Sydney, evening some days later
- SCENE 4 New York, evening about a month later
- SCENE 5 London, morning some weeks later

ACT II

- SCENE 1 London, continues from Act I, Scene 5
- SCENE 2 New York, morning two days later
- SCENE 3 New York, midday the next day
- SCENE 4 Sydney, morning two days later
- SCENE 5 New York, afternoon the same day
- SCENE 6 Sydney, morning the next day
- SCENE 7 New York, afternoon the same day
- SCENE 8 London, evening the same day

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play was written for the British Telecom Biennial and played simultaneously at thirty-nine different amateur theatres in Great Britain—and one in Fort Worth, Florida—during the latter part of October 1998.

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity of conducting a number of workshops in the preceding months and then to see six performances of the participants; in Formby, Wells, the Isles of Sheppey and Wight, Sheerness and London—the latter of which I directed myself with a company drawn from British Telecom staff.

It was not an easy play to put on, with three different sets, some demanding roles, and a host of lightning costume changes, but the companies responded to the challenges brilliantly.

Thus I have seen decor varying from one set with changing backgrounds, to three adjacent settings; from a multi-level complex to a revolving stage: I found each production offered its own original contributions. The prologue was also a test of ingenuity. One company produced a professional-looking video; another showed slides. One company thought laterally and opted for a radio version, while others played it live, but in quite different ways.

The same went for the actors; no two performances were identical. The role of Joane was not always the show-stopper; I saw some excellent Rachels—one marvellous, quirky performance—and of course Lady Amelia holds the whole piece together. There were some brilliant Amelias.

Similarly, I saw a bewildering display of Gerrys, some amazingly different interpretations of Wallis, and a (not literally) stout succession of maids.

The men were uniformly excellent even though, rather unusually, they were supporting the distaff side. The relationships of the three couples, each quite unlike the others, were often beautifully drawn—vital to the play's success. Every Sir John had something the others did not, and the same went for Ken and Harry. They are meaty, if not wordy, roles.

So I found the whole experience a tremendously satisfying one. There is a serious theme to the play, although it is a comedy, and many of the companies donated their profits to appropriate charities. Above all, for me, audiences laughed and enjoyed the piece. No author can ask for more.

If you are planning a production, do please invite me to see it. If I can come, I will, and if I can't, then please accept my apologies now and my very best wishes for a great success.

A NOTE ON THE AUSTRALIAN IDIOM

They sometimes make up names in Australia by contracting others—“Noelene” for example, or as here, “Joane”. It is not Joanne. “Joane” allows for two strangulated vowel sounds.

The following is a glossary of terms which may be unfamiliar to the reader:

Banana bender	Someone from Queensland
Barrack	To be in support of
Bludger	A heavy
Bondi tram	One that doesn't stop
Boomer	Big
Bull dust	Dried excreta
Bush pig	An ugly woman of doubtful morals
Bushranger	A crook
Cark it	To die
Comfort station	Toilet
Crook	Sick or damaged
Dill	An idiot
Dingbat	Someone who can't understand
Dingo	A wild dog that has been known to eat babies
Drongo	A witless individual
Eat the bum off a low flying duck	Be hungry
Galah	A fool
Good oil	Information
Hook	A confidence trick
Home and hosed	Arrived safely
Larrikin	Someone who throws his weight about
Living on the boat	Free and unencumbered
Lurk	A scheme

Mallee bull	A creature that crashes wildly around
Nong	A stupid person
Rafferty's rules	Anything goes
Root	A stud
Roustabout	Philanderer
Salvo	Member of the Salvation Army
Sheila	A female
Spit the dummy	End something
Stubbie	A squat bottle of beer

“Greenmail” is not a specifically Australian term but it seems not to be generally understood. When someone seeks to take over a company, they buy the shares, which then rise in value. If they fail to win total control, they still have a major influence. The only way to get rid of them is to buy them out. So the raiders make a huge profit. It is a form of blackmail—“greenmail” because of the colour of dollars.

PRODUCTION NOTE

The set is both simple and complex—as simple or as complex as you want it to be. Initially it is a grand drawing room in Belgravia but will later represent the living-room of an apartment in Sydney and a penthouse in New York.

The possibilities are obviously endless. Since the action of the play will always make it clear where we are, the piece could almost be played on a bare stage. If you have funds and a brilliant lighting designer, you can draw gasps from your audiences with, say, the magnificent view of Sydney Bridge and the Opera House from Darling Point, and a breathtaking panorama of sparkling Manhattan. In London, it doesn't even have to be Belgravia, if you would rather look along the Thames towards Charing Cross and Big Ben. Each of these views could be from picture windows, placed L, R and C across the back wall—or from a single window—or the window could be the audience.

There are no doors. Everyone exits and enters through the wings R and L.

The furniture should be as simple as possible so that it fits into all three sets, with any adjustments required. The two sets not in present view, if you are splitting the stage, will of course darken into obscurity. It might be easier just to move the furniture, giving it three distinct settings for the different locations. A revolve obviously makes life more simple. Appropriate music will also help set the scenes (e.g. “didgeridoo” theme for Australia). Please note also that telephone rings differ in different countries.

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I would like to thank my stockbroker friend, Edgar, for guiding me through the intricacies of international high finance, and my niece, Debra, for her advice on the colourful Australian vernacular. I am also indebted to John Hague, the Project Manager, and all my erstwhile colleagues at British Telecom for their valiant efforts—both on and off the stage.

TG

ACT I

PROLOGUE

The purpose of the prologue is to set the theme of the play. It can be performed in a number of ways. The excerpt that follows can be filmed and shown on a screen, or recorded on video and played on a monitor. This can be removed, or left on stage as a TV set. If none of these is feasible, it can be slightly adapted to play on radio, on set, as a brief curtain-raiser. The scene can also be played live, with the actors crossing the stage or entering from the stalls, in which case two actors need to be added, or the roles of the commentators doubled

If using a film clip, we show a few seconds of African children, looking helplessly at the camera, before going to a close-up of a safari-suited female reporter, Kate Glass

Kate And in the meantime, civil war continues to rage out here, and the population starves. Children die, while mothers look on helplessly. And all we who have to endure watching this can ask is: what is the West going to do about it? Kate Glass, News at One, in West Africa.

The scene on film that follows is a posh hotel, with the members of a charitable organisation, dressed to the nines, arriving for lunch. Peter Rain, microphone in hand, is the commentator

Peter Well, Kate, here in London, at the Grand Carlton Hotel of all places, someone is trying to do something about it. The Women's International Committee for the Save Our Starving Campaign, will at a luncheon here today promise to try and raise a million dollars for the fund—a tall order, you might think, but not perhaps when you consider the social fire-power of some of the ladies of the Committee.

A stout lady in furs preens for the cameras

That's the Dowager Duchess of Heckmondshire, just arriving, whose family owns many hundreds of thousands of acres in Scotland, and that's Mrs Joane Stocks, wife of the so-called Wizard of Oz, Kenneth Stocks, reputedly the second richest man in the Antipodes.

We see Joane, one of our leading characters, wave a hand towards the cameras. She is around forty, a bit blowsy perhaps, but exceptionally well-dressed. She is extrovert in personality, and has a cheerful smile. She is followed by two other leading members of the cast, Rachel Milchan and Lady Amelia Sasson. Rachel is in her mid-thirties, attractive but a bit mousy, an American Jewish princess. Amelia is forty, elegant in speech, dress and manner. Her gentleness belies a core of hard steel

And here's another visitor from abroad, Rachel Milchan. Her husband is the famous, some say infamous, bond-broker in New York, who must be worth billions! And there's still some money left in the UK, witness the arrival of Lady Amelia, second wife of the fabulously rich Sir John Sasson, a power on the London Stock Exchange. Lady Amelia chairs the Committee and is well known in charitable circles for getting things done—they say she's a real dynamo! Believe me, if she says today they're going to raise a million dollars for those unfortunate children, then somehow or the other, and no matter what it takes, they will! (*He signs off*) Peter Rain, outside the Grand Carlton Hotel in London, for News at One.

Black-out

SCENE 1

The Sassons' drawing-room in Belgravia, London. Morning

As the CURTAIN rises, Lady Amelia and Sir John are having a row. John is in his fifties, probably balding, a man of considerable charisma. He is in a state of angry irritation. Amelia is calm and in control—always!

John Let them starve!

Amelia Don't be so theatrical.

John I mean it.

Amelia Nonsense. She's your daughter.

John Not any more, she's not. Not unless she does what I say.

Amelia Isn't that just a trifle Victorian, darling? Gerry is twenty-one.

John Geraldine. Her name's Geraldine. And she's become a blasted hippy!

Amelia John, hippies went out when you were young. She has—punk tendencies—that's all.

John All? A blasted diamond stud in her nose and a ring in her lip? What next?

Amelia I believe a pierced navel is the in-thing.

John (*snorting*) Some of us still have standards.

Amelia (*soothing*) Of course we do.

John And I have a position in the City.

Amelia I know. And that's what all this is really about, isn't it?

John That girl was brilliant at University—brilliant!

Amelia She just wants to do her own thing. Not everyone wants to carry on the family business.

John (*stubbornly*) There are opportunities now for gels in the City. We can't all do what we want to do.

Amelia No, but we can try. While we're young. Before we're forced to give up.

John She wants to throw herself away!

Amelia She's met a young man, that's all.

John Young man? An artist!

Amelia She tells me he's very clever. He was almost nominated for the Turner prize.

John You see? What did I tell you? Dead animals in formaldehyde. Home videos! Elephant dung!

Amelia (*mildly*) Possibly. He is a sculptor.

John With bits of wire, I suppose? Scrunches up a bicycle wheel and calls it art! Poor old Turner! Huh! Must be turning in his grave!

Amelia Yes, dear, that's very amusing. But now look, you're being very unfair. You haven't even met the young man.

John And I'm not going to.

Amelia You'll have to. She wants to marry him.

John Over my dead body.

Amelia (*after a pause*) Well, I suppose that would solve the problem.

John Oh, no. They won't get a penny from me.

Amelia Yes, John, you've made that very clear. But she's a clever girl. She'll get a job.

John Looking like that?

Amelia Well, not in the City, perhaps.

John Where then? In a circus?

Amelia almost loses patience with him

Amelia Look! We're just going round and around...

John You may be. I know where I stand.

Amelia We'll talk about it this evening—you've got a meeting.

John glances at his watch and reacts

John God, yes. Rosemount. You've made me late.

Amelia double-takes

Ring for Mary, will you?

Amelia does so as John checks he has his glasses, wallet, etc.

Amelia What's Rosemount?

John Just a property company we're taking over.

Amelia That's nice.

Mary, the maid, enters with John's covert coat and bowler

Amelia takes the hat while Mary holds up the coat, for John to shrug into

John As if you were really interested.

Amelia Oh, I am, I am.

John You needn't try to soft-soap me.

Amelia I wouldn't dream of it. *(She fondly places the bowler on his head, at a rakish angle)*

John corrects the hat

John *(better-tempered now)* What are you up to today?

Amelia Saving our starving.

He looks blankly at her

A sub-committee. The officers.

John *(the penny drops)* Oh, that. The charity thing. I'll get out of your way then. *(He moves to kiss her)*

Amelia And I'm not going to let Gerry starve either!

John glares at Mary

Mary bobs and makes a hasty exit

John *(annoyed)* Amelia, she's my daughter!

Amelia Well, I brought her up, you know. She's mine as well.

John It's my responsibility. Leave it to me. I don't want to argue about it. *(He points a warning finger)* And if I find out you're giving her money, I'll cut your allowance as well.

Amelia is quite unfazed

Amelia Yes, dear. *(She kisses him)* Have a good day...

John Huh!

John goes out

Amelia stays c for a moment, considering, then moves to the other exit

Amelia It's all right. He's gone.

Gerry enters. She is as described, small, mini-skirted, with vividly coloured hair, bedecked with tattoos and pierced jewellery, as weird as you like to make her. She retains her Cheltenham Ladies' College manner, however, having only slightly broadened her vowels to an imitation Cockney

Did you hear all that?

Gerry Most of it.

Amelia (*with more confidence than she feels*) Don't worry. He'll come round.

Gerry Didn't sound like it to me.

Amelia Well ... it may take a little time.

Gerry I haven't got time. We want to go away together. Abroad somewhere perhaps. Now.

Amelia He might be in a better mood tonight. I'll speak to him after dinner.

Gerry It's not as if I need a lot.

Amelia I know...

Gerry But I don't want to give Paul any worries. He needs to concentrate on his work.

Amelia Of course he does.

Gerry He has a marvellous new concept—strange surrealist shapes—he gets them by twisting bicycle wheels...

Amelia Really?

Gerry (*crossly*) Father knows I don't get my trust money until I'm twenty-five. That's why he's behaving the way he does—he's just a bully.

Amelia Darling, he still loves you. And don't worry. I'll see that you get to do whatever you want to do. I don't know how, but I will. Leave it to me.

Gerry Can I? Honestly?

Amelia Honestly.

Gerry You don't think I ought to try and talk to him again?

Amelia Er ... no. If I were you, I'd keep out of his way for the time being. This sort of, er, new persona you've taken on seems to faze him a bit...

Gerry I don't know why. What's wrong with me?

Amelia Nothing, nothing. Now look, darling, I've got a meeting. We'll talk tomorrow. It'll be all right, I promise you.

Gerry throws herself into Amelia's arms

Gerry You're always so good to me. Just like a fairy godmother.

Amelia Stepmother, dear.

Gerry You know what I mean...

Amelia Yes. Off you go... *(She gives Gerry a kiss at the door, and ushers her out)*

Gerry exits

Bye... *(She returns c. She looks out at the audience, sighs deeply)* So many problems!

The Lights fade as Amelia starts to leave the room

SCENE 2

Later that morning

Now present with Amelia are the two ladies we saw in the Prologue, Joane Stocks and Rachel Milchan

Amelia is quite angry now, very different from the cool, collected lady we saw in Scene 1

Amelia Agh! It makes me so mad!

Rachel What?

Amelia Everything! The whole world!

Joane has a broad Australian accent and her voice is loud. She—like her husband Ken whom we will see later—tends to employ colourful language. The dialogue in this script just suggests the breadth of their vocabulary, but may be moderately amended

Joane Cheeses you off, don't it?

Amelia I mean, on our last appeal, we raised a quarter of a million pounds.

Joane Too right.

Amelia Have you any idea how much food that buys?

Joane Well, you wouldn't get a ton of caviar.

Amelia No, but if it's wheat or rice, we're talking about acres and acres of warehouse space. Enough to save literally millions of lives.

Rachel's voice is soft, with a hint of native Brooklyn

Rachel Well, I guess that's the idea.

Amelia Oh, that's the idea! But the idea doesn't work. The cost of shipping the food is prohibitive and then, when it does get there, it's nearly all stolen.

Rachel Oh, surely not stolen!

Amelia Oh, I'm sorry, not actually stolen. It's all signed for as being received...

Rachel That's all we can do.

Amelia ...and then it's loaded on to army trucks for distribution. Except for "distribution", read "the black market".

Joane Look, darl, thieving's a way of life out there...

Amelia I've seen the stuff in bazaars—sacks and cartons with our markings still on them—being sold to whoever can afford it, quite blatantly.

Joane Get real, Amelia. That's always going to happen.

Rachel I guess Joane's right. Maybe we should be grateful for what does get through...

Amelia Grateful? After all that time and effort? I mean, we're trying to do something to save the starving, right?

Rachel We're doing what we can.

Amelia Maybe. But it's not enough. Nowhere near enough. We're only scratching at the problem.

Joane OK. We agreed at the meeting, this time we're going to try and raise a million dollars.

Rachel It's not going to be easy. I mean, we're not a big charity.

Joane Rachel's right. I'm amazed we managed to talk those dickheads into it. A lot of them thought we were getting too big for our boots.

Amelia Exactly—because they're little people. They think in terms of local charities, raising enough money to buy a couple of wheelchairs, through jumble sales...

Rachel Is that like a garage sale?

Amelia (*ignoring her*) Or tramps' suppers...

Rachel Why would they invite tramps?

Amelia (*still ignoring her*) They can't grasp the enormity of the situation. They think a million dollars will solve the problem—any problem. But what's a million dollars?

There is a long pause

Joane Is that a question?

Amelia A theoretical one. We three, at least, know a million dollars is small change to some people...

Rachel bridles, immediately sensing this is a reference to her husband

Rachel Well now, listen, it may be to Bill Gates, but it's still a lot of money.

Joane (*almost sadly*) I remember when it used to be. What we would do if we had a million dollars. A fantasy game we played together, like winning the Lottery.

Rachel And I must tell you, Harry has rigid rules about giving to charity. He says you've got to have limits.

Joane Yeh, Ken's a tight-wad too. I tell you, he doesn't often let the moths get out of his wallet, not for charity anyway. If there was a real lot of publicity attached, he might kick in a hundred thousand bucks. Maybe. Of course, if it was for a Government minister, that'd be different—no worries, mate.

Amelia No. Listen to me. I'm not looking for a quick fix. I've already said, even a million dollars won't do what we need to do.

Joane What's that?

Amelia Cut through all that petty thieving in the dockyards. Bribe the soldiers out there ourselves, if we have to, to make sure the food does get through. Or find some ex-SAS tough guys, send them out to do the job.

A pause

Joane Can I pick 'em?

Rachel I'm sure Harry would say that wasn't cost-efficient...

Amelia In relation to a million dollars, you're right. That's what I'm saying. We're not being sufficiently ambitious. We've got to think big.

Joane (*after a pause*) How big?

Amelia Huge.

Joane Oh come on, darl, those wet blankets on the committee would never agree to—

Amelia (*cutting her off*) To hell with the committee. They can't stop us raising money on our own. But we have to do it ourselves. *We have to.* (*She looks at them meaningfully*)

Rachel gets very nervous. Joane buries her face in her hands

Rachel Amelia, now, wait a minute...

Joane Oh, oh. I'm not sure I want to hear this...

Rachel (*brightly*) Maybe we should break for lunch now?

Joane Great idea. I could eat the bum off a low flying duck.

Rachel Did you book San Lorenzo?

Amelia, calm again now, waits for them to finish. Joane shrugs defeat, realizing there will be no budging her

Joane (*sighing*) OK—break it to us gently. What's the crackpot scheme this time? And what are we looking at? (*She jokes*) Two million? Three?

Joane and Rachel exchange smiles at the nonsense of it. Amelia looks from one to the other and allows a pause for impact

Amelia A hundred million.

Long pause

Rachel She's got to be kidding.

Joane I don't think so.

Rachel We have as much chance of making a hundred million dollars——

Amelia (*relentlessly*) Pounds!

Joane ——as a pig in... (*She reacts*) Pounds!

Rachel Hey, I agreed to stay on over here so we could really hammer out some kind of meaningful strategy, but——

Joane Look, darl, we don't want to over-feed them, we'd have nothing left to do. (*Hopefully*) You're joking us, right?

Amelia No. And I must say I'm surprised, at both of you. I thought you had more spirit.

Joane Well, we're just colonials, you know? We haven't got that British stiff upper lip.

Rachel Amelia, hey, you must know we have no chance——

Amelia No, I don't! And I'll tell you why not. Just hear me out. Suppose it was not I who was talking, but my husband...?

Rachel (*surprised*) Sir John?

Amelia Yes, Sir John. And suppose he was talking not to you, Rachel, but to your husband...?

Rachel They don't know each other. Not personally.

Amelia ...who was listed in Forbes Magazine last year as the twenty-second richest man in America...

Joane Uh, uh, I think I see where this is going...

Amelia And not to you, Joane, but your husband, Kenneth Stocks.

Joane (*grimacing*) The Melbourne Mouth.

Amelia Take-over king, newspaper magnate, brewery mogul...

Rachel And he has television. I saw that magazine article. It says he's——

Joane A bushranger is what it should have said. A bloody highwayman. But go on, make your point.

Amelia My point is that if I were my husband saying to your husbands: "Hey, fellows, how about raising a hundred million quid?"——would they be so shocked?

Rachel Oh, Amelia! They're men!

The other two glare at her

I mean, that's business!

Joane Well, yeh, we are talking about charity—that's a big difference!

Amelia I agree with you. Both of you.

Rachel You do?

Amelia Yes. But my question is, if they can raise that kind of money for business, why can't we raise it for charity—by the same methods?

Joane and Rachel exchange helpless glances. Amelia is irritated by them

I mean, why the hell do we have to have an inferiority complex about this? If they can do it, so can we.

Joane (*shaking her head*) I've lost the plot.

Rachel Amelia, you've obviously got some crazy idea, so you'd better spill it.

Joane I know. We all kill our husbands and when they cark it, we become mega-rich. (*She raises a hand*) I'll barrack for that.

Amelia No. It's a simple business proposition.

Joane I love it.

Amelia picks up the Financial Times and displays it to them

Amelia Here's a copy of today's *Financial Times*. Not everybody's favourite reading—but instructive. And one likes to keep up with what one's husband is doing.

Rachel (*shuddering slightly*) I just can't...

Joane (*grimly*) I wish the hell I could.

Amelia Well, I'll tell you—part of the story anyway. (*To Rachel*) Your husband is floating another billion dollar junk issue...

Harry Milchan's obsession with his business is obviously a sore point with Rachel

Rachel Please ... don't tell me...

Amelia Yours just sold a casino in Hong Kong, and an apartment block in Manhattan.

Joane Which one?

Amelia It's on East 72nd.

Joane Oh, that. What's he bought?

Amelia Today? (*She checks the paper*) A string of West End theatres.

Joane Tchah! That bloody actress!

Amelia (*checking further*) Oh—and a stud at Newmarket.

Joane (*thoughtfully*) Now that I could take an interest in.

Amelia Not that kind of stud, darling. Now let's concentrate.

Rachel I'm sorry, I do have to think about my flight back...

Joane Your kid'll survive another day, sweets.

Rachel But I get so nervous when I'm away.

Joane (*ignoring Rachel; to Amelia*) OK. So what's the plan?

Amelia (*to Rachel*) Did you know about Harry's new bond issue?

Rachel Me? No. Well, I suppose so...

Joane I think she means yes.

Rachel Well, I don't take an interest, but I hear Harry on the phone. Even when he's home, he's working...

Amelia Hold it there. (*To Joane*) Did you know about Hong Kong?

Joane (*shrugging*) A bit, I s'pose.

Amelia And Manhattan?

Joane Kind of...

Amelia And the theatres?

Joane Definitely bloody not.

Amelia Or the stud?

Joane He blabbered something about it the other day.

Amelia All right. There's another item here. About my husband. (*She reads*)
Sir John Sasson, Chairman of blah blah, blah blah, reported a twenty seven per cent increase in profits, etcetera, etcetera.

Joane Good on you, darls. Hit him for a necklace.

Rachel (*curious*) Did you know?

Amelia Yes, I did. Quite by chance. The Finance Director was here for drinks, with his wife. And she told me.

Joane (*whistling*) No bull?

Amelia Oh, I'm sure she'd never have told anyone else. And I said nothing, of course. But do you see where I'm going?

Rachel No.

Joane I think so—but I hope I'm wrong.

Rachel What do you mean?

Amelia Each one of us was aware of something that only a tiny handful of people knew about—and they were all pledged to secrecy.

Rachel I still don't see what you're getting at...

Joane I think I do.

Amelia (*consulting the paper*) Perth Leisure, the company selling the casino, rose from ten twenty to twelve fifty.

Joane That's definitely worth a necklace.

Amelia (*still reading*) Stocks Real Estate, trading on the New York Stock Exchange, also rose two dollars a share.

Joane And a bracelet. Matching.

Amelia While the shares of that particular company, of which my husband is Chairman, rose by twenty per cent.

Rachel I don't see how all this affects the charity...?

Joane I do. What Amelia is suggesting, in her impeccably well-bred English way, is that we use the good oil...

Rachel The what?

Joane The information...

Amelia ...to make a profitable investment. What could be wrong with that?

Joane is amused but concerned

Joane You know what could be wrong.

Rachel You mean we make money for Save Our Starving by investing? I guess Harry could help with that...

Amelia I know Harry could help.

Rachel Maybe he could devise some kind of bond for us?

Joane Oh, don't be a thick turd, Rachel. Amelia means we use the knowledge we have, or that we obtain...

Amelia ...quite properly, to build a really worthwhile fund.

Rachel (*confused*) You mean our husbands would?

Joane No hubbies, darls. Not with their knowing, anyway. What Lady Amelia is talking about is called "in—sider dea—ling".

Rachel (*shocked*) What?

Joane A crime punishable by death.

Amelia Joane, you do exaggerate.

Joane For guys who get caught, it's a fate worse than death.

Rachel I have heard Harry talk about it...

Joane I bet you have.

Rachel He always laughs...

Joane He's obviously got a great sense of humour. I bet Sir John wouldn't laugh, would he?

Amelia No, you don't understand. Look—we can't be insider dealers because we're not inside. In the sense that we don't work in the city, we're not officially charged with any information whatsoever.

Joane Well, that's true.

Amelia We just happen to pick up odd scraps of information...

Joane (*with a tinkling laugh*) Right. Like the cleaning lady, out of the wastepaper basket.

Amelia Exactly.

Rachel Harry shreds everything, you know.

Joane (*ignoring her*) Except the cleaning lady wouldn't know what to do with it—and if she did, she hasn't got the money.

Rachel Money? This costs money?

Amelia Just a few thousand each, for a start-up fund.

Joane You want to use my bank? Or go offshore?

Rachel (*automatically*) Offshore is best.

Amelia and Joane look at her

That's what Harry says.

Amelia Salzburg. I have it all arranged.

Joane Salzburg? You're not going, are you?

Amelia No. A trusted intermediary.

Joane Who's that?

Amelia I'm not sure yet, but I'll tell you if and when it's agreed. Or you might prefer not to know. It's up to you.

Joane (*admiringly*) You've got this all worked out, haven't you?

Amelia Yes.

Rachel Honey, you do realize you're crazy?

Amelia Am I? Are you saying the scheme won't work?

Joane It's a bloody brilliant idea—if we get the right info.

Amelia That's up to us.

Joane Yeh, but we don't want them to carry the can, do we? I mean I know Stocksie's a bit of a root but I did marry the scumbag.

Rachel Yes, Amelia ... they are our husbands...

Amelia They won't be involved.

Rachel Then that's OK...

Amelia That's the whole point of the scheme. They must never, ever be involved. Then what we're doing would be illegal.

Rachel (*nervously*) Oh?

Joane Yeh, come on, Amelia, there's got to be a catch. Someone's going to lose.

Amelia Who?

Joane I dunno. The owners of the shares we'll be buying?

Amelia Why? Their shares will go up.

Joane Yeh, but whoever buys the shares after. We've been in first, we've had the rich pickings.

Amelia They don't know that. Why should they worry? Someone has to go in first.

Joane It's going to worry some people. The regulation board, for a start.

Amelia At first, they won't even notice. And by the time they do, we'll be out.

Joane I bloody hope so.

Amelia What's a hundred million pounds in terms of the gross trading turnover on the world's stock exchanges? Nothing. A pin prick. A tiny, tiny percentage.

Joane considers, shrugs agreement. Rachel chimes in too

Rachel That's what Harry says.

Amelia Who owns all these shares anyway? Not widows and orphans. Rich corporations. Wealthy individuals.

Joane Just people like us, really.

Amelia Yes. Except we do try to help the poor and starving while they don't

make the slightest effort. Well, if they won't give, we'll take it from them. But painlessly, so it won't even notice.

Joane A bit like Robin Hood?

Amelia If you like. Come on, it's an adventure. So are you both with me?

Rachel Oh, I can't say...

Joane (*unusually sternly*) Do you realize, Amelia, what my husband is going to feel when he finds out someone has bought and sold his stock on inside information? He'll be horrified, shocked, that someone close must have betrayed him—and he doesn't have a clue who it can be! (*She whoops*) Darling, I love it—I'm in!

Rachel I wouldn't want Harry to find out about this.

Joane In your case, if he did, he'd still never believe it.

Amelia It's just passing on a few scraps of information.

Rachel But I wouldn't know if they're important or not.

Amelia Leave that to me.

Joane But how will you know?

Amelia I'll have an adviser.

Joane Who?

Amelia Someone whom no-one—certainly not John—would suspect in a million years. It's—

A knock on the door

Yes?

The door opens and Mary enters

Mary I'm sorry, my lady, I know you said you didn't want to be interrupted...

Amelia That's all right. What is it, Mary?

Mary ...but Lord Runcorn is here. He says you're expecting him.

Amelia claps a hand to her forehead

Amelia Oh my God. The charity's patron. I asked him to lunch.

Joane You what?

Amelia I didn't know then what our agenda would be... (*Sweet and calm again*) Show him up, would you, Mary?

Mary bobs and goes out

Rachel We haven't met him, have we?

Amelia I don't know. But watch your language, Joane. It's the Bishop of Walworth.

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