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THE LATE MRS EARLY

A Comedy

NORMAN ROBBINS

SAMUEL



FRENCH

LONDON

NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY HOLLYWOOD

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CHARACTERS

Terry Early
Susan Rickworth
Mabel Sutton
Sam Early
Alice Louise Early
Joe Gittings
Reuben Rickworth
Lucy Rickworth

The action of the play passes in the living-room of the Early's terraced council house, Catlow Street, Castleford, Yorkshire

ACT I

Scene 1	Saturday morning
Scene 2	The following Saturday evening

ACT II

Scene 1	Sunday afternoon, one week later
Scene 2	The following Saturday, early evening

Time – the present

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although the characters and events contained in this play are fictitious, the town of Castleford does exist. It is a small mining district in West Yorkshire, and over twenty years of my life were spent there.

Hightown, Wilkinson's sweet shop, Catlow Street and the Commercial Hotel (which, incidentally, was hosted by my grandparents) were familiar names of my childhood, but town development has removed most of these links, and replaced them with parkland and factories.

As a small attempt to keep alive happy memories, I have used these names freely, and would like to dedicate this play to the one-time residents of that lost area and in particular to Muriel and Hilda Barnes of Ponteract, who have done more to encourage and sustain the Arts in that district than anyone else I know. My sincere thanks.

However, I have no objection to Directors of this work changing street names and districts to suit their own areas, if so required, though of course, I would prefer the originals.

NORMAN ROBBINS
1975

PS. We even had a reputed haunted house.

ACT I

SCENE 1

The living-room of the Early's terraced council house, Catlow Street, Castleford, Yorkshire. Saturday morning

The house is one of a long row of terrace houses erected about a century ago by the local council. The room is oblong, and the only window in it is set in the centre of the wall L. This looks out on to a view of the street, and a railway shunting and stockyard beyond. Two doors in the back wall, L and R, are the only means of entrance and exit. These lead off into a long narrow passage, which in turn leads to the kitchen and rest of the house. A glimpse of the stairs may be seen when the door L is open. The fireplace, a fairly modern one and therefore slightly out of place, is in the wall R, facing the window. Fire irons stand in a compendium. The room is clean and neat, but somewhat cheerless. The paper is of the faded roses type, and wall brackets and a few almost period pictures are all that break the monotony. In front of the window is a square, dark oak table. Three chairs to match are placed one above the table facing the audience, one facing the window, and one below the table facing its partner. A red chenille cloth covers the table top and a cheap vase containing a bunch of badly made imitation flowers is set in the centre of it. Net curtains, slightly yellowed, hang at the window, and thick curtains hang at each side for night-time use. Between the two doors is a heavy oak sideboard and on it stands a framed photo of Alice and Sam on their wedding day, and an old-fashioned clock. A small hideous vase, most probably an unwanted gift from the seaside, stands opposite the photo. In the corner of the room R, is a small table. On this stands an old-fashioned radio set. On top of the fireplace is a collection of tiny brass objects, all sparkling bright. A mirror hangs above them. Below the fireplace, a bright red plastic pouffe stands. At an angle to the fireplace, the heavy sofa faces front. Large cushions which clash violently are on it, and an antimacassar is draped along its back. The floor is carpeted with good but hard wearing covering and scatter rugs. Light switches by both doors. An ugly lightshade hangs from the centre of the tiled ceiling

When the CURTAIN rises the room is empty and the fire is lit. After a moment, the door L is pushed open, and Terry Early cautiously sticks his head into the room. Seeing no-one is about, he pushes the door wide open and jauntily steps into the room. He is about seventeen, dressed in figure-hugging jeans, bright sweater and plimsolls. After a further quick look around, he turns to the door again, sticks his head into the passage and calls

Terry It's all right, Susan. You can come in.

Terry moves back to allow Susan Rickworth to enter. She is a very pretty girl of seventeen, dressed in a neat skirt and blouse, and carrying a small purse

Susan (*nervously*) Are you sure it's all right, Terry?

Terry (*flopping on to the sofa*) Course it is. I told you. There's nobody in at all. (*He pats the sofa beside him*) Come on. Sit down.

Susan (*doubtfully*) I don't know . . .

Terry What are you worried about? It's not me mother, is it?

Susan Well . . .

Terry Look, I told you. She's gone over to me Aunt Ethel's. She'll be out for hours.

Susan How about your dad, though?

Terry Ah . . . you don't have to bother yourself about me dad. (*He pats the sofa again*) Come on.

Susan perches beside him, looking uncomfortable

Relax, can't you? Look—we'll have to tell him about it sooner or later, won't we? So he can break the news to Mum.

Susan (*suddenly*) Couldn't we just elope, Terry, and get it over with?

Terry Elope? What do you want to elope for? We can get married here in Castleford as well as anywhere else, can't we?

Susan Yes, I know—but—well . . . It's just the thought of facing your mother. I don't mind your dad so much, but . . .

Terry (*taking her hand*) Look. It's not as if we've *got* to get married, is it? I mean that would *really* make her blow her top. The fact is—we *want* to get married, and that makes all the difference.

Susan looks doubtful

Anyway, I don't see why she *should* kick up a fuss about it. It's not you she's got a grudge against. She's never even met you.

Susan That's the whole point, Terry. I'm scared of what she's going to say when she finds out it's me you want to marry.

Terry (*laughing*) What can she say? She must know I'm going to get married some time, so what's wrong with getting engaged now?

Susan (*exasperated*) Oh don't act so thick, Terry. You know what the position's like with your mum and dad and mine. They haven't spoken to each other for nineteen years, so how do you think they're going to react to a thing like this?

Terry (*darkly*) Probably with wholesale murder. It'll be like Romeo and Juliet all over again. Corpses littering the stage. (*With great drama*)

The rest is silence. (*He falls back on the sofa, eyes closed as if in death*)

Susan That's Hamlet.

Terry (*opening his eyes*) Oh. (*He sits up again*)

Susan It's going to be bad enough facing my mum and dad—but *yours* . . .

Terry There won't be any problem with me dad. He'll be only too pleased for us—but Mum . . . (*He shakes his head slightly*)

Susan Why should your dad be pleased for us?

Terry Why shouldn't he be? I mean—the row's got nothing to do with him, has it? It's between my mum and yours.

Susan I don't think so. I thought it was your dad and mum and my dad.

Terry My dad? Don't be daft. My dad's never fallen out with anybody in his life. He's far too interested in his flipping rose growing to waste time rowing with folks. No. It's Mum that wears the trousers in this house. If there's any rowing to be done, it'll be *her* that's doing it.

Susan I wonder what it was all about. You know. Why they fell out.

Terry I don't know. The only thing I *do* know is whenever somebody mentions your dad's name, Mum goes spare. Anyway, never mind about all that. That's their problem. We've got much more important things to be getting on with.

Susan Such as?

Terry Well, we've got the house to ourselves, for a start, haven't we? So why don't we take advantage of it, and get down to a bit of serious pre-engagement snogging? I've been waiting for this moment all week. *(He pulls her close)*

Susan *(drawing back)* Just a minute.

Terry What?

Susan I've just thought on. How can your dad grow roses? You haven't got a garden.

Terry *(groaning)* Oh, blimey. He shares an allotment with old Mr Gittings down the street.

Susan Doesn't he ever bring any home? For the house?

Terry No. Mum doesn't like 'em.

Susan Doesn't like roses?

Terry She doesn't like *any* flowers. In the house, that is. Not live ones, anyway. That's why she has them cheap plastic things over there. *(He points)* I think she gets 'em with the soap powder or something. Now stop playing hard to get and come here. *(He once more pulls her to him and they kiss)*

Susan *(breaking away)* I wonder why?

Terry Why what?

Susan Why she doesn't like fresh flowers?

Terry *(sighing)* Because she says they remind her of funerals.

Susan Why's that?

Terry *(tired)* How should I know. Ask her when you see her. I suppose it's because she takes a big bunch up to me grandma's grave once a month. Now come on. *(He pulls her back to him)* If we don't look sharp there'll be somebody coming home..

Susan *(smiling)* Sorry.

They kiss again

As they are locked together, the door R opens and Mabel Sutton peers in. She is a thin-lipped woman of forty-five, wearing a cheap print dress underneath a grubby housecoat. Her hair, which is in rollers, peeps out from beneath a turban. A cigarette droops from her lips. She steps into

the room and sees the two figures on the sofa. In order to get a better view, she moves to the top end of the sofa. After a few moments, she coughs

Mabel Ahem.

Terry and Susan spring apart. Terry scrambles to his feet

Terry (*embarrassed*) Oh! Hello, Mrs Sutton. Er—can I help you?

Mabel (*with a thin smile*) Looks to me as if you're too busy helping yourself.

Terry gives a sickly grin

I take it your mother's not home?

Terry No.

Mabel (*nodding*) I thought not. (*She glances at Susan*)

Terry (*intercepting the glance*) Oh—er—Mrs Sutton. This is Susan. Susan Rickworth. My—er—my fiancée.

Susan (*nervously*) Hello.

Mabel (*eyeing her thoughtfully*) Rickworth, eh? (*To Susan*) You—er—you wouldn't be any relative of them Rickworths from up Hightown, would you? The ones what keep that tripe shop?

Terry That's right, Mrs Sutton. Susan's their daughter.

Mabel (*her eyes lighting up*) Reuben and Lucy Rickworth? Well, well, well. Now *that's* what I call a *real* turn up for the books, and *no* mistake.

Susan Do you know my parents, then?

Mabel (*with a mirthless smile*) Well—let's just say—I know *of* them. Come to think of it—there's not many folks around here as *doesn't* know of them. (*To Terry*) Is there, young Terry?

Terry Well—maybe there isn't, Mrs Sutton. But that's got nothing to do with Susan.

Mabel I don't know if your mother would agree with *that* statement, but I wouldn't mind placing a little bet on it. You—er—you *have* told her, I take it?

Terry No. Not yet. But I'm going to tell her today. The minute she gets back.

Mabel I can't wait.

Terry She can't possibly have anything against Susan.

Mabel "Sins of the fathers", and all that.

Susan (*blankly*) Sorry? I don't understand.

Mabel No—I don't suppose you do, love. After all—you'd be the *last* one they'd think of telling, wouldn't you?

Susan Telling what?

Mabel (*shaking her head*) Least said, soonest mended, that's my motto. And in any case. What you don't know, can't really hurt you, can it?

Terry Are you trying to *say* something, Mrs Sutton?

Mabel (*surprised*) Say something? Me? Whatever gave you that idea, young Terry? It's nothing to do with me. Live and let live, is what I always say. Let them without sin throw the first stone.

Terry Sin? (*Firmly*) Now look here . . .

Mabel (*sharply*) There's no need to raise your voice, Terry Early. I'm not deaf yet.

Terry Just what are you getting at?

Mabel Getting at? I'm not getting at anything. But if you must know, I shall be very surprised to say the least, if Alice Early agrees to let her son marry a girl whose mother only just made it to the altar in time.

Susan (*rising*) Oh.

Terry (*grimly*) I think you'd better go, Mrs Sutton.

Mabel Oh, yes. You'll want to be alone, won't you? While you've got the chance. I'll pop back later though to see your mother. I shall be most interested to hear all the details. (*She turns to go*)

Susan It's not true, Terry. I was just a bit premature.

Mabel (*turning again*) Premature? Well, that's a new name for it I suppose, but I'll tell you this much for nothing. If you'd have been any more premature, you could have been one of the bridesmaids.

Mabel exits R

Susan Oh, Terry . . . It's not true.

Terry Of course it's not. But what if it was? What difference would it make? It wouldn't make me love you any the less.

Susan I know—but what if your mother . . .

Terry Oh, blow me mother. It's me you're going to marry . . . not her. Now come on. Give us another kiss and stop blubbering.

Susan (*stung*) I'm not blubbering.

Terry Well then.

Terry and Susan go into a standing embrace

The door L opens and Sam Early enters. He is about forty years old, dressed in an old suit and cardigan, and carries a gardening magazine which he reads avidly. He sits on the sofa without noticing Terry and Susan

Terry and Susan begin to subside onto the sofa, still locked in their embrace. As they finally drop on top of Sam, all three react, then struggle to stand

Terry (*gulping*) Dad!

Sam (*glancing at Susan*) Sorry, lad. Didn't mean to interrupt. (*He moves towards the door L again*)

Terry (*quickly*) No—don't go, Dad. We've got something to tell you.

Sam (*turning*) Oh?

Terry (*taking Susan's hand*) Dad—this is Susan. Susan—me dad.

Sam How do. (*He nods*)

Susan (*timidly*) Hello.

Terry She—er—she comes from up Hightown.

Sam Oh, aye.

Terry Yes. In fact—you—er—you know her parents,

Sam Do I?

Terry Mr and Mrs Rickworth.

Sam Oh, yes . . . (*He realizes*) Rickworth? Not tripe shop Rickworths?
(*He looks in horror at them both*)

Terry That's right, Dad. And we're going to get married.

Sam (*sinking into a chair*) Married?

Terry (*brightly*) Aren't you going to congratulate us?

Sam (*trembling*) Never mind about congratulating you. If your mother comes in and sees her here, I'll be *cremating* you. Oh, Terry, lad. Whatever were you thinking of bringing the lass round here? (*Jumping up*) Quick. Get her out.

Terry But, Dad. We're engaged.

Sam (*almost in tears*) Engaged, he says. Lad—she'll murder you.

Terry Well, why shouldn't I get engaged? I'm nearly eighteen, aren't I?
Another few months and I'll be able to do what I want, anyway.

Sam Yes—if you manage to *live* that long. Oh, Terry . . .

Terry But, Dad . . .

Sam Why, lad? Why? Of all the lasses there are in this district, why did you have to go and choose this one? (*To Susan*) Nothing against you, love, but . . .

Terry (*angrily*) What's wrong with getting engaged to Susan?

Sam Nothing, lad, as far as I'm concerned. She looks a bonny lass and her folks are the most respectable in Castleford—but your mother . . .

Terry What about her?

Sam You *know* what about her, lad. If anybody so much as mentions the name Rickworth when she's in earshot, the balloon goes up.

Terry But why? What's wrong with them? What have they done?

Sam (*resigned*) Well, I don't suppose it'll do any harm to tell you, but whatever you do, don't let on to your mother I've opened my mouth about it. I've got enough bother on with her as it is. Sit down. The both of you.

Terry and Susan sit on the sofa

It's like this. Your dad, Susan, was engaged to my wife before he got married to your mother. I don't know the ins and outs of it all, but it seems that six weeks before they were due to get wed, he jilted her, and ran off with your mother. She's never forgiven him for that, so can you imagine what she's going to say when our Terry tells her he wants to marry you?

Terry But that's got nothing to do with Susan, Dad. She can't blame her for that. And anyway, that was nineteen years ago.

Sam What's nineteen years to a woman like your mother? She's got the mind of an elephant when it comes to an insult. (*He sighs*) If it were up to me, son, I'd tell you to get on with it. But it isn't. You know what she's going to say.

Terry Couldn't you talk to her?

Sam Me? Nay, lad. The last time she listened to me was nineteen years ago—and that were only to hear if I said "I do" without hesitating.

Susan So—it's no use then?

Sam (*shaking his head*) I'm sorry, love.

Terry Well you could at least *try* to make her see reason, Dad. We're not going to call the whole thing off because of what she *might* say.

Sam There's no *might* about it, lad. And since when has your mother been able to see any reason but her own? No—best thing you can do is just stay good friends—and don't let your mother find out about it.

Susan Good friends?

Terry But we're in love, Dad—and in any case—she's going to find out about it soon enough. Old Mother Sutton from next door's been in and seen us together.

Sam (*groaning*) That's all we need. She'll have grabbed her megaphone and be spreading the news all over town.

Terry So what? We don't care who knows about us because we're going to get married no matter what my mother has to say, so the sooner she hears about it the better.

Alice (*off*) *Terry!*

They all gaze at one another in horror

Sam She's heard. (*He dashes for the door R*)

The door L flies open violently, and Alice Louise Early barges in. She is a large, battle-axe of a woman, aged about forty-two or three. She wears a thick sensible coat over a print dress, and a hat is crushed down on her head. She carries a wicker basket which contains groceries. Her face is grim

Alice (*to Sam*) Stay where you are.

Sam stops dead in his tracks

Terry (*weakly*) Hello, Mum.

Alice (*slamming her basket down on the table*) So . . .

Sam Just a minute, Alice . . .

Alice (*snapping*) Quiet, you. I'm talking to the organ grinder, not the monkey. (*To Terry*) Well?

Terry Now calm down, Mum . . .

Alice (*loudly*) I am calm. I just want to know what you mean by telling Mabel Sutton that this—(*she indicates Susan*)—happened to be your fiancée?

Terry That's right, Mum. We're going to be married.

Alice How far gone is she?

Sam Here . . .

Alice Quiet! (*To Terry*) Well, come on. When's it due?

Terry When's what due?

Alice The baby.

Susan (*indignant*) I'm not pregnant.

Alice Well, that's all right, then, isn't it? Take your hook.

Terry Mum . . .

Alice I thought you had more sense, Terry Early. Letting an old trick like that pull the wool over your eyes.

Terry There's no trick about it, Mum. Susan and me are in love.

Alice (*snorting*) Love. Ha. What does a kid like you know about love? You're only just out of your nappies. (*To Susan*) I thought I told you to go?

Terry If she goes, Mum, then I'm going as well. (*He takes her arm and moves her to the door*)

Alice (*pulling him back*) Not so fast. You're not leaving this house until I know that whatever it is between you two is over and done with.

Terry Well in that case you'd better get used to the idea of having Susan around, Mother, because we're going to get married no matter what you have to say about it.

Alice Oh, you are, are you? Well let me tell you this, Terry Early. Unless you get that girl out of here in two minutes flat, I'm going down to Castleford Police station to get you made into a Ward of Court. That'll stop your little gallop.

Terry Ah, come off it, Mother. They don't go in for all that old-fashioned stuff these days. They'd laugh in your face.

Alice Would they? Well just you go ahead, and we'll find out, won't we?

Terry And in any case—what good's that going to do? All it means is that we'll have to get the Court's permission to marry, and that'll be easy enough.

Alice Will it? (*She shakes her head*) It's not as simple as that, our Terry. You'll have to prove you're fit to marry and can support a wife and home; and I very much doubt if you can convince 'em of that—not on an income of ten pounds forty-five a week.

Terry We'll manage.

Alice It's not a question of being able to manage. There's also the small matter of one hundred and fifty pounds you owe me for that motorbike of yours.

Sam Nay, Alice. Be right. We bought him that bike for his birthday.

Alice There's nobody asking you. (*To Terry*) Well?

Terry (*looking worried*) Like me dad said—you got me that bike for me birthday. It was a present.

Alice Maybe it was—but he'll keep his mouth shut about it, won't you, Sam? (*Warningly*) That is, if you know what's good for you. (*To Terry*) Well, our Terry? What's it going to be? Are you going to see reason and do as I tell you, or would you rather be a Ward of Court? It's entirely up to you.

Terry looks at Susan in appeal, then back to Alice

Well, come on. Let's hear it.

Terry I—I don't know.

Susan (*softly*) I think I'd better go, Terry.

Terry Susan . . .

Susan It's no use. (*She turns*)

Terry Wait. We don't have to give up hope. There's only a few months

to go before I can please myself *who* I get married to. We can hold on till then, can't we?

Susan It's not worth it, Terry. She'd find some other way of stopping you.

Alice You must be a gypsy. You can see yourself out, can't you? Terry—go put the kettle on.

Terry stands transfixed

Now!

Susan exits L, closing the door behind her. Terry exits R slowly

(*Calling*) And don't be all day about it. (*She takes off her coat and hat*) And now I'd like to have a quiet word with you, Sam Early.

Sam winces

Sit.

Sam sits on the sofa

How long has this been going on?

Sam How long has what been going on?

Alice Him—with her. (*She moves to him*)

Sam I've no idea.

Alice (*in a voice heavy with scorn*) Do you mean to tell me that your own son has been running around with that girl long enough for him to think he wants to marry her—and you didn't know about it?

Sam No. I'd never clapped eyes on her before.

Alice Well all I can say, Sam Early, is that you're either a liar or a fool—and I know which one of 'em *I* think it is.

Sam So do I. I were a fool ever to have married you, Alice. You've done nothing but make my life a misery since the day we got wed, and now you're starting on our Terry.

Alice Made *your* life a misery? And what about mine? What sort of a life do you think I've had? Slaving away over a hot stove every day for the last nineteen years. Washing, scrubbing, trying to make ends meet on what pittance you bring home each week. I've been a good wife to you, Sam Early, better than you'll ever know. Much, much better.

Sam I know you've worked wonders, Alice, but a chap wants to have a bit of peace once in a while. I can't even take a breath in me own house without asking your permission to do it. Hang it all. Our Terry's—

Alice (*interrupting*) Too young to know his own mind, and as long as I've got any say in the running of this household, he'll do as I tell him . . . without argument. And that goes for you as well.

Sam Aye, you've got me well trained, haven't you?

Alice If I have, it's taken long enough. (*She turns away*) Anyway, there's only room for one boss in this family, and we all know who that is, don't we? (*Silence from Sam*) I said don't we?

Sam (*resignedly*) Yes, Alice.

Alice Right—and that's the way it's going to stay. (*She moves to the door R and opens it*) Terry? Terry?

Alice exits down the passage

(*Off*) Where are you? Terry?

She re-enters

He's gone out. (*She hurries to the window*) If he's gone chasing that Rick-worth girl I'll wring his grubby little neck for him. (*She looks out*) He has. (*Rapping furiously on the glass*) Terry! Terry! (*She turns to Sam*) Just wait till he comes back.

Sam What makes you so sure he *will*?

Alice (*darkly*) He'd better.

Sam You'll push him that bit too much, one of these days. You can't tell youngsters what they can and what they can't do nowadays.

Alice Who says I can't? A good rattle round the earholes is what I'd give 'em all. They get far too much of their own way, these modern teenagers. Long-haired layabouts, that's all they are. Like him next door. Eustace Sutton. There's a perfect example of young British youth. Too idle to scratch himself. I blame the parents for it, but its not going to happen in this house. As long as our Terry stays here, he'll do as he's told.

There is a loud knocking on the back door off R

And if that's the insurance man, go tell him he's not getting anything this week. I'll pay him double next.

Sam (*tiredly*) Aye. (*He rises*)

Alice Well jump to it, then. By the time you get there he'll have started worrying in case he's got to pay out.

Sam exits

Alice moves to the table and moves the vase of flowers to the sideboard. She takes a cloth out of the drawer and covers the table. She then gets cups, saucers and plates from the sideboard cupboard, and begins to set them out

Sam enters R followed by Joe Gittings. He is a typical retired working-class fellow, aged between sixty-five and seventy. He wears a pair of dirty, baggy trousers tucked into boots. A shapeless sweater over an old union shirt, and a flat cap. He is spectacled, and a pipe is stuck in his mouth

Sam It's Joe.

Alice (*without turning*) And what's he want?

Joe (*brightly*) 'Lo, Alice.

Sam He's just popped round to see if I wanted to go down to the allotment with him.

Alice Oh. Well he can just pop back again. You'll be having your dinner in a few minutes.

Sam I wouldn't be long, Alice.

Alice (*turning to them*) I've told you. The answer's no. Good morning, Mr Gittings.

Sam But, Alice—

Alice (*loudly*) NO!

Joe Oh—well . . . (*He turns to leave*) I—er—I'll see you after then, p'raps?

Sam All right, Joe. Soon as dinner's over, eh?

Joe Aye.

Alice (*to Sam*) Aren't you forgetting something?

Sam Eh?

Alice I said, aren't you forgetting something?

Sam Like what?

Alice You happen to be coming out with *me* this afternoon—or had the occasion slipped your memory?

Sam looks blank

To the cemetery.

Sam Oh, Alice, can't you go on your own for once?

Alice No, I can't. She was a good woman was my mother, and she's going to get the respect paid to her that she's due. You haven't missed going up there with me for the last fifteen years, and you're not going to start missing now. Besides—I shall need your help to carry the flowers.

Joe How many are you thinking of taking?

Alice Nobody's talking to you, Joe Gittings—but while you *are* here, I might as well tell you that in future, you needn't bother to trundle your carcass around here every time you feel the urge for a free meal. I've got enough on trying to feed us lot on what he brings home each week, without trying to feed you as well.

Joe (*taken aback*) Well, by heck!

Alice And I'll have no cursing in my house, if you don't mind. There's far too much of it these days. Ever since your Renee died, you've come braying on our back door in the hopes of landing yourself a slap-up meal. I've put up with it till now because I'm a patient woman and I felt a bit sorry for you, but from now on it's going to stop. If you want to eat, you can either cough some money up, or you can stay at home and do it. (*To Sam*) I'm just going up to the chip shop, so you can finish laying the table. (*She puts her coat back on*) And don't put too much butter on the bread. It's not tuppence a ton, you know. I'll not be long.

Alice exits L

There is a moment of silence as the two men gaze at the door

Sam (*quietly*) Sorry about that, Joe.

Joe No—no. Don't worry yourself, Sam. It's just that—well—I hope you don't think—well—you know—about the meals . . .

Sam Eh? No—no. Of course not.

Joe (*after a slight pause*) I don't know how you put up with it, Sam. Honest I don't.

Sam (*joking*) Listen who's talking. Your Renee led you a dog's life when she were alive.

Joe (*smiling*) Aye—she did that. Still—I've got to be honest about it, Sam. We had a good marriage.

Sam Eh?

Joe Oh, aye. There were nowt wrong with our *marriage*. The trouble started after we'd *left* the church. She had her views on how to run things, and I had mine. So in the end we had to come to a compromise—and we did things her way. Still—it all turned out for the best. Thirty-seven years and never a cross word exchanged.

Sam (*sitting on the sofa*) Now come off it, Joe. I'm not having that. I've heard her yelling at you for hours on end.

Joe I said exchanged, Sam. Exchanged. She never had her mouth shut long enough for me to interrupt. (*He sits beside Sam*)

Sam (*sighing*) Sounds a bit like Alice.

Joe (*thoughtfully*) You know—I've often wondered what she were think-about—that last morning.

Sam How do you mean?

Joe Well—it were sort of funny, like. There she was, laid out in bed and stiff as a board—with a smile all over her face. First time in years I'd seen her smiling. Only thing I could think of was happen she didn't know she were dead.

Sam Gerrout, you daft beggar.

Joe It were strange at first—after she'd gone. I couldn't get used to the silence—it were sort of unnerving. That's when I started going over to the *Commercial* for a pint or two. It made all the difference. She'd never let me touch the stuff before—but by heck—I've been making up for it ever since.

Sam I wish I could. You know, Joe—there's some nights I think I could go mad for the want of a pint. Used to be a big drinker, I did, in the old days. But—well—I take one look at Alice's face . . . (*He shakes his head*)

Joe It's too late for that now, Sam. You should have taken a closer look at it before you marched her up the aisle.

Sam (*sighing*) You'd never believe a lass could change as quick as she did. Sweetness and light one day—and the next . . . (*He sighs again*)

Joe Tell you what. Hows about you and me slipping off for a quick one after you get back from the cemetery?

Sam Sorry, Joe. I daren't risk it. If Alice ever found out she'd go through the roof. You know how she feels about drinking.

Joe How would she know? She'll be going over Half Acres to their Doris's, won't she? Like she does every Saturday night.

Sam Well—aye—I suppose so.

Joe Suppose so, nothing. She's never missed a Saturday at her sisters since old Dan died—cepting that time she were having your Terry. Come on, Sam. What's to stop you?

Sam (*hesitant*) What about me breath, though? She's bound to smell it on me breath.

Joe Has tha never heard of peppermints, Sam? Just suck a couple of them before tha comes home again, and nobody'll be any the wiser.

Sam (*almost convinced*) Are you sure?

Joe 'Course I'm sure.

Sam (*deciding*) Right then. You're on.

Joe (*delighted*) That's the ticket. (*He rises*) I'll nip up to Wilkinson's right now and buy a packet.

Sam (*rising*) And I'd better get buttering that bread. I'll see you out, Joe.

Sam and Joe exit L. As they do so, the door R opens quietly, and Mabel Sutton slides into the room

(*Off*) Mind yourself crossing the road.

Mabel quickly poses herself by the sofa

Sam enters L and sees her

(*Startled*) Oh.

Mabel Alice about?

Sam Er—no. She's—er—she's just gone up to the chip shop to get the dinner.

Mabel Oh.

Sam (*worried*) You—er—you've just come in, have you? Through the back?

Mabel That's right, Sam.

Sam Oh—it's just that I didn't hear you.

Mabel No. No, I don't suppose you would do. I can be very quiet when I want to be. Is—er—is she likely to be long, do you think?

Sam Depends on how many there are in there, I suppose. Why?

Mabel (*shrugging*) Just wondered, that's all. I—er—I've got something to tell her. Bit of news.

Sam Oh, aye. And what might that be?

Mabel Well—that'd be telling, wouldn't it, Sam?

Sam I bet it's bad news for somebody.

Mabel (*smiling*) You might be right at that, Sam. It could be *very* bad news for *somebody*.

Sam (*sitting on the sofa*) And what's that supposed to mean?

Mabel Anything you'd like it to. Anything you'd like it to mean at all.

Sam You know—that's what I like about you, Mabel. Nothing.

Mabel (*stung*) I beg your pardon.

Sam You're about as subtle as a ton of bricks on the big toe, you are. Come on. Out with it. What nasty little rumour have you got tucked away inside that poisonous mind of yours this time?

Mabel You want to be careful who you're talking to like that, Sam Early. I haven't come round here to be insulted, you know.

Sam Oh? So where do you usually go?

Mabel (*tartly*) I shall ignore that remark. But I'll tell you this much for nothing. There's going to be some right fun and games going off in this house when Alice finds out what's been going on behind her back.

Sam (*startled*) Eh?

Mabel Yes. I thought that'd make you sit up and take notice.

Sam What are you talking about?

Mabel You'll see.

Sam If you're referring to our Terry and young Susan Rickworth . . .

Mabel I'm not.

Sam Then what *are* you getting at?

Mabel Does the word "peppermints" mean anything to you?

Sam Peppermints? Why should . . . (*He realizes*) Oh, lor . . .

Mabel Thought you could sneak off for a night's boozing with Joe Gittings while she were out at her sisters, did you? Well—I'm sure she'll be very interested to hear *that* little snippet—don't you think?

Sam (*rising*) Do you mean you were listening out there—in the passage?

Mabel I did happen to overhear—yes.

Sam Well you nosey old . . .

Mabel It's no use resorting to insults, Sam Early, because they'll just roll off my back like water off a duck. I've not lived in this street for the last thirty-two years without developing a thick skin. No—you might as well just save your breath and start thinking of what you're going to give your Alice by way of an explanation.

Sam (*worried*) Now look—Mabel . . .

Mabel Oh. It's Mabel now, is it? Music box's playing another kind of tune.

Sam It's just a quiet night out—for a drink or two. There's no need for Alice to find out about it, is there?

Mabel Isn't there?

Sam I—er—I could make it worth your while.

Mabel (*sternly*) Are you trying to bribe me?

Sam Well . . .

Mabel Are you trying to persuade me to keep my mouth shut in return for financial gain?

Sam Mabel . . .

Mabel That makes it even worse, Sam Early. Your wife happens to be a very dear friend of mine, and I couldn't sleep in my bed at night with the stench of bribery in my nostrils. My conscience wouldn't allow it.

Sam Oh, all right, then. Forget it. Tell her about it and be damned.

Mabel How much are you offering?

Sam Eh?

Mabel I said how much is it worth?

Sam (*delighted*) You mean you'll do it? Keep it dark? (*Relieved*) Oh, thanks, Mabel. I'll never forget this.

Mabel (*smiling*) I'm not an unreasonable woman, Sam. Not by a long chalk. But I'm not a woman with a short memory either. You've said some very nasty things about me in the past. Things that a lot of

women would hold against you as a grudge. But not me. Not Mabel Sutton. You see—I know that half the things you’ve said about me were said in—well—a kind of *joking* manner, wouldn’t you say?

Sam (*eager*) Aye, aye. That’s right, Mabel. Just in a joking manner.

They both laugh rather falsely

Mabel Well . . . I’m not going to let anybody say that I haven’t got a sense of humour. I can enjoy a joke as good as anybody else, I can.

They both laugh again

So shall we say three pounds?

Sam (*startled*) Eh? Nay, Mabel—see reason, can’t you? Where am I going to get three pounds from? Alice has care of all the money in this house. You know that.

Mabel You have your problems, Sam, and I’ve got mine. Our Eustace is out of work again, and I can do with a bit of extra cash to help out the Social Security. Where you get the money from is entirely up to you.

Sam I’ll give you an I O U.

Mabel Cash.

Sam But, Mabel . . .

Mabel Cash.

Sam This is blackmail.

Mabel Call it what you will, but if you want my silence, Sam Early, you’re going to have to pay for it.

Alice (*off*) Clear off, you mucky little devils. Go play outside your own houses.

Mabel Well? Do I get it, or don’t I?

Sam (*desperately*) I haven’t got it.

The door L flies open and Alice marches in fuming. She carries a newspaper parcel of fish and chips

Alice Filthy little animals. Want dumping in a bath of disinfectant, the lot of ’em. (*She sees Mabel*) Oh—so you’re here are you? (*She moves to the table*) And what do you want to borrow this time? (*She dumps the parcel on a plate*)

Mabel I’ve not come to borrow anything.

Alice (*sniffing*) That makes a change. (*She turns*) Well? What do you want then? And make it quick—the chips’ll be going cold. (*To Sam*) I thought I told you to get some bread done?

Sam Aye—well . . .

Mabel I came round here with a bit of news I thought you might like to hear.

Sam winces

Alice Oh? And what’s that? (*To Sam*) Where is it? The bread?

Sam I’ve not had time . . .

Alice Not had time? I’ve been up to the fish shop and back. (*She grumbles*)

If you want a job doing, do it yourself. (*She marches to the door R*)
Well, go on. I'm listening.

Alice exits

Mabel (*raising her voice*) It's about tonight—when you go out.

Alice (*off*) What about it?

Mabel looks at Sam quizzically, and he shakes his head with frantic pleading

Mabel (*a trifle louder*) Well—I happened to overhear a conversation between certain parties—quite by accident, you understand—about the poss—

Mabel is interrupted by a loud cry from Alice, off

Alice (*off*) Oh, no! That's *all* I needed, Sam Early, I could choke you.

Alice enters R

Didn't you know that kettle were boiling itself dry? It's ruined, you've burnt the elements right out of it.

Sam Eh?

Alice (*blazing*) That's just about the last straw this morning. I've a good mind to—oh, what's the use of talking. It goes straight in at one ear and out the other. Get in there and open the window and let some of that stench out. It's enough to turn your stomach.

Sam begins to move kitchenwards

No. On second thoughts, you'd better leave it to me. Let you near it and we'll probably be needing a new window as well. Take your hook up the road and buy a new kettle. (*She takes off her coat and drapes it over the settee*) And make it snappy. I want a cup of tea with my dinner.

Sam (*glancing at Mabel*) But—er—what about the chips?

Alice Never mind about them. I'll put 'em in the oven till you get back.

Now look sharp. (*She picks up the chip parcel*)

Sam I've got no money, love. You've not give me me allowance yet.

Alice (*putting the chips down again and picking up her purse*) Here—take this. (*She gives him a ten-pound note*) And don't forget the change. (*She picks up the parcel again*)

Alice exits R

Mabel (*sweetly*) You'd better get a move on, Sam. They'll be closing for dinner in a few minutes.

Sam Mabel . . .

Mabel It's still the same price.

Sam Oh—all right. Don't breath a word to Alice and you'll get your money.

Mabel When?

Sam As soon as I've got some change.

Mabel Better make it quick, Sam. I can't hang on to this bit of information too long, now can I? It's what you might call perishable.

Alice enters R

Alice Haven't you gone yet?

Sam (*backing to the door*) Just going, love.

Alice Well *move* then! (*To Mabel*) Well?

Mabel Well what?

Alice (*patiently*) What's this bit of news you can't wait to tell me?

Mabel Oh—the news. Yes—well—it's nothing very exciting, Alice. It's just that I overheard these two women talking about—er—er—the—er—the bus strike that's due to start tonight.

Sam smiles with relief and exits L

Alice Bus strike? Tonight? That's the first I've heard of it.

Mabel Me as well. I couldn't believe me ears.

Alice I bet that came as a shock. You're only too willing to believe 'em for most of the time. Anyway, it's all a load of rubbish. If there were any bus strikes planned for this district, I'd be one of the first to know.

Mabel Oh?

Alice You haven't forgotten our Ethel works for the West Riding, have you?

Mabel (*annoyed with herself*) Oh, of course. I expect they were mistaken then—these two men.

Alice I thought you said they were women?

Mabel Oh, yes. I mean women. (*She laughs falsely*) You can't tell 'em apart, these days, can you?

Alice (*drily*) So it seems.

Mabel (*changing the subject*) So—er—so what's happening about your Terry and that Rickworth girl, then?

Alice Nothing's happening.

Mabel You mean—the wedding's off?

Alice It was never on, so it can hardly be off, can it? When I think it's time for our Terry to get himself wed, then I'll let him know. But till that time comes, he's going to have nothing to do with the hard-faced little trollops around this district.

Mabel (*bridling*) I hope you're not including my Denise in that statement, Alice Early.

Alice And why's she so important she should be left out?

Mabel (*indignantly*) There's nothing of the trollop about *my* daughter.

Alice I wouldn't be too sure about that. I saw her trotting off into town last night with her face painted up like a streetwalker's. And as for that blouse she had on—well—I've seen more cotton in the top of an aspirin bottle.

Mabel (*defensively*) It's the latest fashion.

Alice (*snorting*) Fashion. If they told these young lasses nowadays that a

slab of horse muck were the latest fashion, they'd all be rushing to queue up for some.

Mabel (*trying to pass it off*) Well—I expect we were just as bad when we were their age, eh?

Alice You speak for yourself. *I* were always dressed the way a young woman were supposed to dress—and in no other way. My parents saw to it that *I* were brought up the same way that they were. Clean, neat, tidy, and respectful to their elders. Chapel every Sunday—morning and evening—and all day Good Fridays. When were the last time your two showed their face inside a place of worship? When you had 'em christened?

Mabel Well things are different today, Alice. Besides—we're all Church of England, so it doesn't matter so much for us.

Alice That's obvious.

Mabel Well we might not be first in line when it comes to showing off new clothes and sitting in front pews so's everybody can gawp at us, but we're just as good a Christian as them that does. And I'll tell you this much for nothing, Alice Early. Our Denise might dress up a bit showy like for round here, but she's managed to keep herself chaste this last nineteen years.

Alice Yes—and how often has she been caught?

Mabel Well—really!

Alice She's just like the rest of 'em, is your Denise. Out for a good time and doesn't care how she has it. (*She goes to the window*) Where is he with that kettle?

Mabel If you weren't a friend of mine, Alice Early, I'd walk straight out of this house after a remark like that.

Alice (*peering out*) You needn't let the ties of friendship hold you back. If the truth hurts too much, you know where to find the door.

Mabel (*undecided as to what to do*) I've got half a mind . . . (*She stops*)

Alice (*turning*) Well at least you've got the good grace to admit that much. (*She goes to the door R*) Them chips'll be frizzled to a cinder if he doesn't hurry himself up. (*Suddenly turning back to Mabel*) You're not using your kettle for the minute, are you?

Mabel Well . . .

Alice Good. I'll borrow that then. You can go out the back way, but watch where you're putting your feet. I only did that doorstep this morning.

Mabel It's not a modern kettle, you know, Alice.

Alice That's all right, Mabel. I want to boil water in it, not admire it. Come on. I'll let you through.

Alice and Mabel exit R. After a moment the door L opens and Terry comes in to slump on the sofa in utter dejection Alice returns, marching in R with a plate of bread and a butter-dish

(*Moving to the table*) Oh—so you've decided to come back, have you? And just where do you think you've been?

Terry (*morosely*) Out.

Alice (*slamming the bread and butter down on the table*) If you use that tone of voice to me again, Terry Early, I'll rattle your earhole for you. I asked you where you'd been.

Terry I've told you. I went out. Up the street.

Alice Running after her.

Terry No.

Alice Don't lie to me. I saw you.

Terry I wasn't. I just wanted to think things over, that's all.

Alice What things?

Terry Me and Susan.

Alice And??

Terry And what?

Alice What great decision did you come to?

Terry (*quietly*) I haven't made me mind up, yet.

Alice Well you needn't strain your mental resources any longer. I've made the decision for you. You'll not see that girl again and that's the end of it. (*Buttering the bread*) Now go get yourself washed and come and get your dinner.

Terry rises slowly

And while you're about it, you can get yourself out of them trousers and put yourself into a decent pair. Them things are so tight, folks can tell your religion.

Terry But Mum, I'm going out this afternoon.

Alice All the more reason for covering yourself up.

Terry I'm going out on me motorbike.

Alice You're doing nothing of the kind. You're coming with me and your dad up to the cemetery.

Terry Mum . . .

Alice There's a clean shirt in your drawer. And not one of them coloured ones. A white one's more respectful to the dead.

Terry But I've promised, Mum. I'm meeting the lads at two.

Alice You're meeting nobody at no time. You're coming with us, and that's final. I'll keep you respectable if it kills me.

Mabel enters R carrying a very battered electric kettle with a frayed flex

Mabel I've got it. But you'll have to go careful though. It's a bit on the wonky side.

Alice (*taking it from her*) Took you long enough, didn't it?

Terry exits L

Mabel Well, our Eustace was using it. He was shaving, you see.

Alice Oh . . . he's managed to borrow a razor blade from somebody, has he?

Alice exits R with the kettle

Mabel (*glaring after her*) Honestly, some folks. (*She calls*) Be careful how much you put in it, Alice. It's a bit funny sometimes. You have to cover the element, you know. But not too much or else it starts to throw sparks out when it's boiling.

Alice (*off*) I have used an electric kettle before.

Mabel (*shrugging*) Well, I'm only telling you.

Alice enters R

Alice I suppose you'll be staying for a cup?

Mabel opens her mouth, but Alice sweeps on

I thought as much. (*She goes to the sideboard for another cup and saucer*) And that reminds me—you still owe me a quarter of tea from last week—and two eggs.

Mabel Oh aye—that's right. I'd not forgotten.

Alice No. And neither had I. (*She puts the cup and saucer on the table*)

Mabel Mind you—it's the kind of thing that one *could* forget quite easy, isn't it? I mean for somebody in *my* position.

Alice Oh? And what's your position?

Mabel Well—being a widow with two children. It's not the easiest thing in the world, Alice.

Alice I don't see as how it's any different from what it was when your Fred were still around, except you've got one less mouth to feed. He didn't do a day's work in the twenty-five years I knew him.

Mabel Well, he had his heart trouble, didn't he? He couldn't do much with a complaint like that. And anyway—there's nobody can say as he didn't *want* to work. Look at that morning he died. Right there in the Labour Exchange, he was when his heart give out.

Alice Yes. Just after they'd found him a job.

Mabel fumes

Sam enters L with a box

Sam I've got one. (*He looks at Mabel*)

Alice I thought you were making it the time it took you. Anyway, I've borrowed hers, so you can put that down and go wash yourself.

Sam puts the box down on the sideboard

And while you're at it, you can tell our Terry to get a move on. I'm putting the dinner out now.

Alice exits R

Mabel Well? Did you get the change? (*She holds her hand out*)

Sam Eh? Oh—aye . . . (*He fishes in his pocket and brings out two pound notes*) There's two here, and I'll have to give you the other one later.
Mabel All right, then—but don't forget—or else.

Terry enters L. He is now dressed in neat trousers, and slip-on shoes. His torso is naked and he carries a white shirt in his hand

(*With arch delight*) Oh, look at Tarzan here.

Terry scowls at her and moves below the sofa

Alice enters R with the chip parcel

Alice (*spotting Terry*) What are you doing running round half naked. Put your shirt on. (*She goes to the table*)

Terry It's got a button missing.

Alice Then put one on that hasn't. (*She puts the chips down*)

Terry You said a white one. All my others are coloured. (*He sits on the sofa arm*)

Alice (*fuming*) Men. (*She crosses to him and takes the shirt*) Get over there and eat your dinner while I do it for you. One of these days I might get a hot meal if I'm lucky.

Mabel Would you like me to do it for him, Alice? (*She gets hold of the shirt*)

Alice No thank you. I'd sooner it were done properly.

Sam Oh, go on, Alice. Let her do it for you, and you come and have your dinner. (*He moves above the table by the parcel*)

Mabel (*needled*) Not if you don't think I'm good enough.

Alice (*after a moment's indecision*) I'll get you the needle and cotton. (*She goes to the sideboard drawer and rummages in it*)

Sam Come on, Terry. (*He begins to unwrap the chip parcel*)

Terry I don't want anything, thanks. I'm not hungry.

Sam stops what he is doing

Alice (*turning*) Sit down at that table and do as you're told. I'm not wasting good money on food so that you can turn your nose up at it. (*She brings out cotton and needle*)

Terry moves silently to the table and sits. Alice hands the sewing things to Mabel, who sits on the sofa with the shirt

Mabel That kettle should be boiling by now. (*She begins to thread the needle*)

Alice And not before time. I'd have done better with a couple of candles under the other one.

Mabel Well I did warn you, didn't I? It's an old one.

Alice (*to Sam*) Don't just stand there staring at 'em. They won't unwrap themselves, you know.

Terry (*turning in his chair*) Why can't me and Susan get engaged? What's wrong with *her*?

Alice Get your dinner.

Terry I'm asking you a fair question, Mother. What's wrong with Susan?

Alice Never you mind what's wrong with her. You're not going to marry her, and that's final.

Terry Well that's where you're one off, because I *am* going to marry her. No matter what you or the flaming magistrates' court has to say about it, so you can stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

Alice Don't you talk to me like that, Terry Early.

Terry I'll talk to you any way I like. I'm sick and tired of you telling me what I can and can't do. (*He rises*) I'm seventeen years old, mother, and I'm going to make my own decisions in future—and the first thing I've decided is I'm going to buy an engagement ring for Susan this afternoon and I'm not going up to that bloody cemetery.

Alice (*her eyes blazing*) You are not buying an engagement ring for that girl this afternoon, Terry Early. Not this afternoon or any other. Not by *any* stretch of the imagination, you aren't.

Terry Just you try and stop me.

Mabel (*anxiously*) Alice. The kettle. It'll be sparking.

Alice (*ignoring her*) You'll buy that engagement ring over my dead body. (*She moves to the door R*) Do you hear? Over my dead body.

Alice exits R

There is a deathly silence. Terry sits again. Sam begins to unwrap the chips. Mabel looks down at her sewing. There is a loud scream from Alice off. Everybody looks up, startled

Mabel (*rising*) The kettle . . .

Sam (*rising*) Eh?

Mabel It's got a fault in it. I warned her.

Sam (*calling*) Alice! Alice! (*He hurries to the door R*) Are you all right?

Sam exits R

Mabel (*panic-stricken*) I told her it was faulty. I did tell her.

Sam (*off*) Alice! (*Louder*) Alice . . .!

There is a silence. Mabel looks at Terry

Mabel Go and see what's happened.

Terry makes no move

Quick—she might need a doctor.

Terry still makes no move

Don't just *stand* there.

Terry (*looking at her*) It's all right—she'll be all right.

Mabel (*insistent*) Go find out.

The door R opens slowly and Sam stands there, his face blank

Mabel and Terry stare at him

(Suddenly) Well? What's happened? Is she all right?

Sam is silent

Say something, can't you?

Sam (to Terry, quietly) Looks like you'll be able to buy that ring after all, lad.

Terry stares at Sam in disbelief. Mabel gives a soft moan and collapses on the sofa, as—

the CURTAIN falls

SCENE 2

The same. The following Saturday evening

When the CURTAIN rises, the room is empty and in darkness. The heavy curtains at the windows are drawn, and only a faint glow from the fire penetrates the blackness. After a moment, the sound of voices in the street begins to make itself known. It is Sam and Joe, who in drunken tones are singing "Two o'clock in the morning". The voices come closer, then the clatter of milk bottles rings out as they are kicked over

Joe (off) Hey up.

Sam (off) Milk-o.

They laugh. The clatter of bottles breaks out again

Mabel (off) What's going on down there? What do you think you're playing at?

Sam } (off) Meowwwwwwwwww Meowwwwwwwwww. } (Speaking together
Joe } and laughing)

Mabel (off) Is that you down there, Sam Early? Is that you?

Sam (off) Soft—what light in yonder window breaks? Tis Mabel. Frosty faced old Mabel.

Mabel (off) I'll give you frosty faced, you drunken pig. Take that!

There is a loud yell from the men. A clatter of bottles. Then the sound of the front door bursting open. Sam and Joe emerge through the door L, Sam turning on the light as he enters. Both have wet shoulders and hair. They look at each other and giggle happily

Joe Here—I hope that weren't what I thought it were. (He wipes at his shoulder)

Sam So do I. (He sniffs at his own shoulder) Pooh—it were! Cor blimey—I wish she'd change the water in that flower vase more often. (He takes his jacket off and hangs it on a chair back)

Joe (*taking his jacket off*) What did she want to go and do a thing like that for? Miserable owd devil. (*He drapes his coat on the sofa back*)

Sam (*moving to the window*) She must be one of them folks what don't like Shakespeare, Joe. (*He sniggers*) Still—never mind. So long as it didn't get into the beer. (*He dries his hair on the curtains*)

Joe (*grinning*) No fear o' that, Sam. (*He pulls a bottle of beer out from each of his jacket pockets*) Safe as houses.

There is a loud knocking off R

Mabel (*off*) Sam Early! Sam Early!

Joe Aye aye.

Sam Sounds like Juliet's come down from her balcony.

The knocking comes again

All right, all right, hold your horses. I'm coming. (*He moves up to the door L*) Hide them bottles, Joe. We don't want the ale to go flat when she pokes her face in.

Sam exits L

Joe hides the bottles under the sofa cushions

Mabel (*off*) What do you mean by waking folks up at this time of night?

Eh? Don't you think we've got enough noise going on during the day-time without you shouting and bawling your head off at a quarter to one in the morning. Some folks are trying to get a decent night's sleep, some folks are.

Man's Voice (*off*) Quiet down, there, can't you?

Mabel (*off*) Quiet yourself!

Man (*off*) Drunken old cat!

Mabel (*off*) Don't you call me a drunken old cat, Bert Stebbins!

Woman's Voice (*off*) Make less noise down there!

Mabel (*off*) You keep your nose out of things that don't concern you!

Man (*off*) Quiet!

Woman (*off*) Clear off!

Mabel (*off*) Clear off yourself!

Sam (*off, singing*) The street is alive—with the sound of voices.

Voices (*off*) Quiet! Make less noise! Shut that racket!

Mabel (*off*) Now see what you've done, Sam Early. You've woken the whole flaming street up.

Voices (*off*) Quiet! Shut up!

Mabel enters L. She is dressed in an old flannelette nightdress topped by an even older and grubby looking dressing gown. Her hair is in rollers and covered by a chiffon scarf, and her face is shiny with cream. She wears slippers

The voices are cut off as Sam closes the door off

Mabel (*spotting Joe*) Oh—so you're here as well, are you? I might have known it.

Joe Blimey! It's the new Miss World.

Sam enters L, closing the door behind him

Mabel You ought to be ashamed of yourself—the both of you. Look at you. Just look at you. Well, all I can say, Sam Early, is thank goodness poor Alice isn't here to see what you get up to when she's out of the way. Just one week—that's all it is. Just one week since she fell down dead in that kitchen, and here you are, drunk as lords and acting like—like—I don't know what. (*To Sam*) If your Alice knew what condition you were in at this minute, she'd scratch her way up out of her grave and throttle you.

Sam She'd have a job on. I had her cremated. (*He laughs*)

Mabel Yes—you can laugh, Sam Early. But I don't know how you can sleep nights having what you've done this last week on your conscience.

Sam And what's that?

Mabel I'll tell you what that is, Mr Clever-know-it-all Early. Your conscience is a little thing that keeps nagging away at you all night and all day.

Joe That's best bit of self-description I've heard in a long time. (*He laughs*)

Mabel You keep your trap shut. There's a bus coming.

Sam I didn't mean that, Mabel. I meant what *have* I got on my conscience?

Mabel Well, if you don't know, I'm certainly not going to tell you.

Sam Good.

Mabel There's your Terry for a start.

Sam What about him?

Mabel What about him? I'll tell you what about him.

Joe (*tiredly*) I thought she would.

Mabel Getting himself engaged to that Rickworth girl and *then* having the brass face to put it in the *Express* before his mother's poor body had time to go cold. How that woman can rest quiet I just don't know. I just *don't* know.

Sam (*nodding*) Aye—aye, you've got something there, Mabel. I don't know either, come to think of it.

Mabel (*self-satisfied*) Oh . . . so you do have *some* thought for the dear departed, then?

Sam (*frowning*) It never struck me before. I never thought on. But it's just come to me. Somewhere up there—(*he indicates heaven*)—or more likely down there—(*he indicates the floor*)—poor old Alice must be watching us. Me out every night getting sozzled, and our Terry engaging himself to the last girl in the world she wanted him to marry. Both of us enjoying life more than we ever have done over the last nineteen years, and her not being able to do a thing to stop us. (*He shakes his head in sorrow*) She'll be as frustrated as hell. (*He lets out a huge bellow of laughter and slaps Joe's back*)

Mabel (*shocked*) Oh!

Sam And now let *me* tell *you* something, Mrs Mabel-nosy-Sutton. *I'm* the boss in this house now, and if I want to go out for a few drinks with my pal on my anniversary, then I *shall* do. And neither you nor anybody else is going to stop me. Understand?

Joe (*fishing out the bottles*) That's right, Sam. You tell her.

Mabel Anniversary? What anniversary? You were married in July.

Sam I'm not talking about me wedding anniversary. I've spent the last eighteen years trying to forget that. I'm talking about my FREEDOM anniversary. It's exactly one week today since Alice Louise Early went to that better place she were always preaching about—and if *that's* not something to celebrate, then I don't know what is.

Mabel Oh—you disgust me, Sam Early. Utterly *disgust* me.

Sam Maybe I do—but then—you didn't have to live with her, did you? No, it were me what had to put up with her bossing and organizing, day in and day out, not you. You didn't have to suffer like I did.

Mabel Suffer? What do you mean, suffer? She were a good wife to you were your Alice. Far better than you deserved.

Sam Perhaps so. I've never claimed to be perfect.

Mabel It's a good job, an' all. You'd have been sued under the Trades Description Act.

Joe Oh, cut the cackle and take your hook, Mabel.

Mabel (*to Joe*) And we'll have less chelp from you, while we're at it. I blame you for all this lot, Joe Gittings. If you hadn't persuaded him to sneak off for a quick booze-up, poor Alice'd still be with us.

Joe Don't you come blaming me, Mabel Sutton. It were your kettle what did the job, not mine.

Mabel Yes—but if he hadn't let theirs burn its bottom out, she'd never have borrowed mine.

Joe Aye. But she did. And like that coroner chap said at the inquest . . . you should have had more sense than to lend somebody summat as dangerous as that kettle was.

Mabel (*on the defence*) What did he know about it? She *made* me lend it her. *You* know that. What right had *he* got to say things like that about me—her best friend?

Sam Best friend me foot. You were scared stiff of her like all the rest of us. Licking her hand every time she kicked you. (*With sudden inspiration*) It wouldn't surprise me if you didn't lend her that kettle on a purpose!

Mabel (*horrified*) Oh—Sam Early.

Joe (*with a straight face*) Look at the guilt on her face.

Mabel (*backing*) It's not true—I didn't. (*Dropping to her knees and looking upwards*) Alice—oh, Alice. If you're up there somewhere watching me—I swear I didn't do it on purpose. I swear it.

There is a tremendous crack of thunder which makes them all jump

Sam By heck—that were a close one.

Joe Sounds like we're in for a storm.

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