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MURDER IN COMPANY

A Play

PHILIP KING and JOHN BOLAND

SAMUEL  FRENCH

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CHARACTERS

Alan Wilson
Margaret Stephens
Ted Smith
Philip Stephens
Ronnie Meadows
Phoebe Kershaw
Patricia Robins
Doris Stewart

The action of the play passes in a Church Hall in a small town

ACT I
A Night in February, 7.15 p.m.

ACT II
Fifteen minutes later

ACT III
A fortnight later, 7.45 p.m.

Time – the present

MURDER IN COMPANY

Produced by **Theatre South East** at the DE LA WARR PAVILION, BEXHILL-ON-SEA, on the 21st September 1972, with the following cast of characters:

Alan Wilson	Alan Buckman
Margaret Stephens	Barbara Farrell
Ted Smith	David Masterman
Philip Stephens	Richard Burnett
Ronnie Meadows	Alan Granville
Phoebe Kershaw	Peggy Paige
Patricia Robins	Virginia Moore
Doris Stewart	Janice Hoskins

Directed by Michael ffoulkes

Amateur Premiere by the Southwick Players at the Barn Theatre, Southwick, Sussex, on 13th March 1973, with the following cast:

Alan Wilson	Robin Burch
Margaret Stephens	Sue Geere
Ted Smith	Roy Twine
Philip Stephens	Philip King
Ronnie Meadows	Stanley Jones
Phoebe Kershaw	Peggy Deall
Patricia Robins	Elizabeth Flower
Doris Stewart	Pamela Grey

Directed by Philip King

ACT I*

The bare stage of a Church Hall, 7.15 on a night in February

The back wall of the stage is visible, but the sides are masked with draw curtains which act as wings. One or two folded whist tables and a small form are up against the back wall, other forms and bentwood chairs are piled up near them. There are steps leading from the stage to the auditorium

When the CURTAIN *rises, the stage is in almost total darkness—the only light coming from an extremely feeble and very dirty bulb hanging by a flex from the flies. Down stage, with his back to the audience, sitting in a bentwood chair, is a male figure (though in the dim light the audience could be in doubt as to whether it is male or female) wearing a duffle coat with the hood almost covering the head. He sits quite motionless for a while*

After a pause there is a door slam off L. *The figure rises, moves uncertainly for a split second without turning to the audience, then darts off* R *behind one of the draw curtains. After another pause Margaret Stephens enters* L. *She is an attractive woman of thirty to thirty-five, though this is not discernible in the low light. She moves slowly* C, *hesitates, then looks at her wrist-watch, takes a script from her largish handbag, opens it, but after looking at the dismal light above her head, throws the script on a chair, pulls the chair beneath the light and sits down to read the script putting her handbag on the floor*

Alan Wilson, the duffle-coated figure, emerges from behind the curtain stealthily, holding a scarf. He is a pleasant young man of twenty-one. He creeps behind Margaret and throws the scarf round her neck. She gives a really terrified scream

Alan (*through Margaret's scream*) Got you!

Margaret's scream tails off into a moan. Her head almost sags forward

(*Seeing this, alarmed*) Margaret! Margaret! You're—you're all right, aren't you? (*He releases the curtain quickly and puts his arms round Margaret*)

Margaret (*in a just audible voice*) You fool! You damned young fool! (*She is still giving little gasps*)

Alan Darling, I'm sorry. I—I—I didn't mean—(*still holding her*)—I didn't mean to frighten you . . . not really frighten you, I mean. It was just—just a joke.

Margaret (*weakly*) A joke!

Alan But you knew it was *me*, didn't you?

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*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Margaret (*gradually pulling herself together*) I suppose I did, but . . .
Alan We'd arranged to meet here early.
Margaret Yes, but . . . (*Still shaken*) Oh! Give me a minute to pull myself together.
Alan (*after a slight pause*) Margaret, darling . . .
Margaret Alan, this is madness; and it's asking for trouble. If Philip . . .
Alan Damn Philip! He's nothing but a bullying, bombastic swine!
Margaret (*sharply*) He's my husband!
Alan But you don't love him. How can you—the way he treats you? You love me; you know you do. (*He puts his arms around her*)
Margaret (*desperately*) Alan—please—let me go. This has got to stop I tell you!
Alan (*his arms tightening around her; almost in a shout*) No!
Margaret (*weakly*) It's—it's insane. (*She yields to his embrace*)

Suddenly the lights in the auditorium come up. Alan and Margaret break away with little gasps of alarm

Almost as soon as the lights come up, the voice of Ted Smith is heard from the back of the hall

Smith (*fairly loudly*) Hey! Hey! What's all this?

The two on stage do not reply. They stand looking very embarrassed. Smith walks down the auditorium. He is a ferrety-looking, not too clean, individual of around forty years of age, in working clothes. When half-way down the hall, he speaks again

(*Sarcastically*) Bit before your time, aren't you?
Alan (*still shaken, but trying to put a face on*) I beg your pardon?
Smith You 'eard. Night bookin's in this 'all are from seven-thirty till ten-thirty.
Alan Well, what about it?
Smith It isn't seven-thirty yet—only a quarter-past. You're trespassing—that's what about it.
Alan (*angrily*) Don't talk such . . .
Margaret (*under her breath, restraining him*) Alan—don't . . .
Smith (*to Alan*) Such *what*, son? (*With a grin*) I suppose you'd tell me if this wasn't a church 'all—and if there wasn't a lady present. (*Under his breath*) Lady! (*He comes up the steps on to the stage*)
Alan (*making a move towards Smith*) Why you . . . !
Margaret (*again restraining him*) Alan . . . !

Smith, now well on stage, looks towards the others knowingly. He stands quite at ease for a moment or two, enjoying their discomfiture

Smith (*at last, easily*) Well—seein' you *are* 'ere . . .

Smith exits L

Margaret and Alan follow him with their eyes. The Lights come up in battens and floats; the House Lights go out

Smith returns

(*Continuing with a grin*) Don't want to be gropin' about in the dark, d'you? (*Meaningly*) Or—er . . . ? (*He gives a false embarrassed cough. After a slight pause*) Let's see. You're the Dr'matic Society, aren't you?

Margaret Yes.

Smith I've only been caretaker 'ere a week yet, so I'm a bit muddled up with all you people re'earsalin'. Dr'matic Society, Op'ratic Society, Choral Society. (*After a slight pause*) But you're the Dr'matic Society, eh?

Alan (*curtly*) Two of it—not all of it.

Margaret looks at Alan warningly

Smith (*with his eyes on Alan*) Funny, aren't you? Bet you don't 'alf make 'em laugh out there. (*With a nod of his head towards the auditorium. After a slight pause*) Yes, of course! I remember now.

Alan Remember what?

Smith *Your* faces. I've a good memory for faces.

Margaret and Alan look at him, blankly

Last Friday night, after the Vicar 'ad offered me the job, he brought me 'ere to show me my duties—so to speak. You lot were just finishin' re'earsalin'—we stood at the back of the 'all till you'd stopped. That's when I saw you. Int'restin', isn't it? (*He pauses, then turns to Alan with a thin smile*) Wouldn't 'appen to 'ave a cigarette on you by any chance?

Alan (*curtly*) I don't smoke.

Smith H'm! (*With a look towards Margaret*) Bit young for it, eh?

Margaret (*quickly*) I have some. (*She dives into her bag and produces an opened packet of cork-tipped cigarettes and holds it out to Smith*)

Smith (*coolly*) Ta! I seem to've run out. (*As he takes one*) An' you don't seem to 'ave many either. Pity 'cos I was goin' to ask you if you could . . .

Margaret (*after a quick look at Smith*) I meant to get some more on the way here. (*To him, hesitantly*) Alan—would you mind?

Alan What?

Margaret I expect the shop at the corner of the street's still open. Would you mind popping along there and getting me twenty——

Smith (*cutting in, easily*) Not keen on these cork-tipped things myself.

Margaret (*again looking towards Smith, then to Alan*) —twenty Embassy Plain.

Alan But, look here . . . !

Margaret (*almost pleadingly*) Alan, please. (*Diving into her bag, again*) Here's the money. (*She hands him coins*)

Alan (*protesting*) Yes, but . . .

Smith (*pointedly*) That shop closes sharp at half-past seven; sometimes a few minutes before.

Alan glares at Smith. Margaret puts a hand on his arm

Alan (*after a moment, muttering as he goes*) Twenty Embassy . . .
Smith *Plain.*

Alan stops, turns and looks at Smith for a moment, then goes off L

Margaret moves to a light chair, brings it down stage a little and sits on it—half turned away from Smith

(*After a slight pause*) Not a bad-lookin' feller, that Alan. Bit cocky, mind, but, of course—(*eyes well on Margaret*)—he's only a kid yet, isn't 'e? Quite a kid.

Margaret (*suddenly turning to face him*) Mr—er . . . ?
Smith (*laconically*) Smith—Ted Smith.
Margaret (*hesitantly*) Er—when you put the lights on in the hall just now . . . (*She pauses*)
Smith Yes?
Margaret You must have seen—er—Mr Wilson and me—well, more or less in each other's arms.
Smith Not bein' blind, I did.
Margaret (*with a little false laugh*) Well—I hope you didn't get a—a wrong impression.
Smith (*quietly*) No, I don't think so.
Margaret (*after a look at him*) You see—just before you put the lights on, I—I'd had rather a bad scare.
Smith (*laconically*) Oh?
Margaret (*after another look*) Yes, you see—when I came into the hall—I didn't know anyone else was here—I thought I was alone. Then—Mr Wilson suddenly jumped out from—from nowhere, and grabbed me.
Smith (*muttering*) Damn' silly thing to do.
Margaret Of course it was, but—these youngsters—they don't think. But—I was so scared.
Smith I expect you thought it was The Prowler who'd got you?
Margaret The . . . ?
Smith You must've read about him in the local paper? This chap who's goin' round the town at night, attacking young girls.
Margaret Oh, yes, of course. (*With a little laugh*) No, I didn't think it was him, but—I was terribly scared. When Alan—Mr Wilson, realized just how much he'd scared me, he was very upset, and—I suppose it was—instinctive—he put his arms round me.
Smith (*again laconically*) 'Course. Natural, you might say.
Margaret And it was just as he put his arms round me that you—you put the lights on.
Smith (*with a derisive little laugh*) Yeh! I see!

A door is heard to open and slam closed off L

Margaret (*hurriedly*) Look! I don't want any of the others to know—so please . . .

Smith (*almost overlapping; with a meaning laugh*) No, I'll bet you don't.

Smith exits R

Margaret (*again blazing; under her breath*) You . . . !

Philip Stephens, a big, somewhat overpowering man of forty, wearing an overcoat, also a hat at a somewhat rakish angle, comes on from up L. *He is carrying a script, a book or two, and a writing pad*

(*Half surprised, half apprehensive*) Oh! Philip . . . !
Philip (*seeing her*) Good God! You here already? (*Then fairly brusquely*) Here, hold these.
Margaret What . . . ?

Philip thrusts his script, etc., into Margaret's hands, then at once "gets busy". He takes his overcoat off and throws it carelessly and untidily on to the chair which Margaret brought down. He tilts his hat back on his head, then moves up stage and takes a whist table from the back wall, brings it down to the proscenium arch, and sets it up

(*During this; quietly*) Did you get through everything you had to do?
Philip (*gruffly*) What're you talking about?
Margaret (*after a slight pause*) You rang at lunch time to say you wouldn't be home for a meal; that you'd be kept at the office and would come straight here to rehearsal. Remember?
Philip Of course I remember. What the hell are you getting at?

Smith comes on stage from R *slowly. He has a coil of electric wiring in his hand*

Margaret I merely asked you if you got through all you had to do.
Philip I *had* to get through it. (*He points a stabbing finger at the script, etc., which Margaret is holding, then stabs the table, indicating she is to put the things down on it. He moves away from the table*)

Margaret, after a look at Philip, puts the things on the table. Philip takes out his cigarette case, lights a cigarette with a match, then throws the match down on to the stage

Nobody else here yet?
Margaret (*hesitantly*) Er—Alan Wilson's arrived. He's just . . .

Smith moves down to Philip's side

Smith (*pointedly*) 'Scuse me.
Philip (*turning and finding Smith at his side*) What . . . ? Who are you?
Smith I'm the new caretaker here; started last Monday.
Philip (*with a little grunt*) Oh! Well, what's biting you?
Smith (*pointing to it*) That matchstick—would you mind picking it up?
Philip What?

Smith does not speak—just stands looking at Philip

(*Blustering*) Who the hell do you think *you* are to . . . ?

Smith (*cutting in quietly*) I've told you who I am; I'm the caretaker here, an' it's my job to see this 'all doesn't go up in flames, so—(*indicating the matchstick*)—d'y'mind?

Philip Now look here . . . !

Smith (*cutting in*) And there's a biscuit tin either side there—(*indicating the sides of the stage*)—for matches an' fag ends and all suchlike rubbish.

Philip (*fuming*) Then why don't you stuff yourself in one of 'em?

Margaret (*quickly*) Philip!

Philip moves to the chairs at the back and brings one down to behind the table. He makes a pretence of arranging things on the table

Smith (*pointing to the matchstick; truculently*) What about this?

Margaret moves quickly, picks up the matchstick, and moving to the side of the stage, picks up an (unseen) biscuit tin and, after putting the matchstick into it, places it beside the table on the floor

Philip (*looking up from reading; to Margaret*) What are you . . . ? (*Then, seeing the tin, in a sudden burst of temper*) Get that damn thing away from here! (*He kicks the tin viciously up* L)

As Philip kicks the tin, Ronnie Meadows appears up L. *He is a cheerful, tubby little man between forty and fifty. He carries a briefcase*

Ronnie (*as the tin almost lands at his feet—at once*) Right! Give the half-back a chance! (*He dribbles the tin across to* R, *then kicks it off stage*) Goal! Come and kiss me, somebody.

Philip (*his eyes still on Smith; curtly*) Cut it out, Ronnie!

Ronnie Eh?

Philip (*ignoring him; to Smith*) You—you're a new broom here, you say?

Smith So what?

Ronnie (*alert, but speaking brightly*) Hello, hello, hello! What . . . ?

Philip (*to Smith*) Well, don't start sweeping too bloody clean. Play it down a bit or you might find yourself out on your arse.

Margaret (*sharply*) Philip!

Ronnie (*still alert, but brightly*) Ladies present, old boy!

Philip (*ignoring him*) Your boss—the Vicar—we're good friends, and if I . . .

Smith (*quietly*) Talk the same kind of language, I expect.

Philip (*about to go for Smith*) Why you . . . !

As Philip moves to him, Smith raises the coil of wire threateningly

Ronnie (*coming between them; "cheerfully"*) Hey! Hey! Hey! Break it up! Break it up! "All good pals and jolly good compan-ee", eh?

Philip (*after glaring at Smith; speaking generally*) Let me know when that —(*indicating Smith*)—So-and-so is off this stage and then we'll get on with the rehearsal.

Philip storms off up R

Margaret (*pleadingly, in lowered voice*) Ronnie—go after him—calm him down!

Ronnie (*smiling at her*) Hey! I'm the stage manager of this Society, not the ruddy lion-tamer! (*As he goes off* L) Now where's that naughty Philip? (*He has taken his briefcase with him*)

Ronnie exits

There is an awkward pause. Smith is making a pretence of examining the coil of wire

Margaret (*at last*) I—I'm sorry my husband was so—so . . .

Alan Wilson returns quickly from up L. *He has a twenty packet of cigarettes in his hand. He stops on seeing Smith*

Smith (*meanwhile*) Your—husband, eh?

Margaret (*quietly*) Yes.

Smith Thought so from the way he talked to you. Young Alan was right, wasn't he, when he said he was a bit on the bombastic side?

Margaret and Alan both react

Margaret (*almost desperately*) Alan, did you get the . . . ?

Alan (*with his eyes on Smith*) Yes. (*He hands the packet to Margaret*)

Margaret Bless you. (*She quickly strips the Cellophane and opens the packet. Moving to Smith*) Would you—(*she tips the packet so that a cigarette is protruding*)—care for . . . ?

Smith (*with a thin smile, taking a cigarette*) Ta! These are more in my line.

Margaret Light? (*She takes a lighter from her bag and flicks it*)

Smith, with no word of thanks, lights his cigarette from the lighter which Margaret is holding out

Smith (*after drawing on the cigarette and exhaling smoke*) Damn! (*To Alan*) Why didn't I ask you to get *me* a packet while you were at it?

Margaret (*in a controlled voice*) You can—take these if you're—short.

Smith (*with feigned surprise*) Oh! Oh well! (*Taking the packet*) Thanks. Thanks very much. (*Not putting his hand in his pocket*) Now, let's see. How much are they now?

Margaret (*still controlled*) Please—don't bother about . . .

Smith (*with the thin smile again*) You're very kind. Thanks a lot. Well, if you'll excuse me. I've got one or two jobs to see to. (*He looks at Margaret, then Alan, smiling*) Be seein' you.

Smith moves to the steps leading to the auditorium, and after throwing the coil down on stage by the table, descends the steps and disappears at the back of the hall

Alan (*when Smith is half-way down the hall; under his breath*) I'd like to kill that swine!
Margaret (*putting a hand on his arm; quietly*) Sssh!

A door at the back of the auditorium slams as Smith exits

Alan (*turning to Margaret and taking her by the arms; eagerly*) Margaret . . .
Margaret (*stepping back; urgently*) For God's sake . . . !
Alan (*pulling up*) What . . . ?
Margaret (*in a low voice, urgently*) Be careful. Mind what you say. Philip —he's up in the men's dressing-room.
Alan But—that caretaker chap. You shouldn't have played up to him. I mean—giving him those cigarettes. It was blackmail; nothing more or less.
Margaret It certainly wasn't generosity on my part. (*Moving*) Damn the man!
Alan D'you think we're going to have trouble with him?
Margaret Of course we are. You heard what he said about Philip being bombastic. He obviously heard every word we said—before he put the house lights up.
Alan If he *does* make trouble, I'll break his neck.
Margaret Don't talk nonsense.
Alan But what *can* we do?
Margaret For one thing, we can stop all this right now.
Alan Stop what?
Margaret (*almost sharply*) Don't be so naive; you know what. I must have been mad to ever let it start.

A door is heard to open up R

Look out!
Alan (*after a quick look* R) But—Margaret . . . (*He moves towards her*)
Margaret (*quickly as she moves a step back; still in a low voice*) No! Stay where you are. (*She looks* R) And—don't say anything—stupid.
Alan (*quickly, hurt*) Stupid?
Margaret (*with slight exasperation*) You know what I mean. Talk about —ordinary things. (*Again the look* R) Philip may be back any moment, and Ronnie's here—and the others will soon . . .
Alan (*desperately*) But—when am I going to see you again—alone?
Margaret (*in a low voice, but almost angrily*) Alan . . . !
Alan I've got to see you, Margaret. You don't know what hell it is for me when I don't see you—if only for ten minutes. I . . .
Margaret (*tensely, under her breath*) It's got to stop, I tell you. We've both got to pull ourselves together, d'you hear?
Alan You mean you . . . ?

The door off L *slams again*

Margaret (*at once, in a slightly artificial "ordinary" voice*) I had intended knowing my first act—(*she takes a script from her bag*)—but instead of studying last night I got stuck in front of the telly, and . . .

Phoebe Kershaw, a plumpish, slightly masculine-looking woman of fifty enters L. *She is carrying a handbag, a bottle of milk, a shopping basket and an umbrella. She is shrewd but pleasant-natured*

(*Breaking off; brightly*) 'Lo, Phoebe!

Phoebe 'Lo, Margaret. I thought *I'd* be first!

Margaret No. Philip and Ronnie are here, and—(*indicating him*)—Alan.

Phoebe 'Lo, Alan. Didn't see you there. (*After a quick look at him*) What's the matter?

Alan (*almost surly*) Matter? Nothing. Why?

Phoebe (*with a shrug*) Just thought you looked a bit down in the mouth. (*She gives a quick look towards Margaret*)

Margaret, aware of the look, looks away

(*To Alan*) Look! Be a lamb, will you, and put this down in the kitchen for me? (*She holds out a bottle of milk*) It is my turn to do the coffee tonight, isn't it?

Margaret I don't know, darling. I know I did them last week.

Phoebe Yes, I'm sure it is. (*To Alan again*) Oh, and would you mind turning the hot water thing on for me. Scares me to death to go near it. It ought to be seen to. You don't mind, do you?

Alan No. (*He moves* R)

Phoebe Thank you, dear. (*With a smile*) Don't electrocute yourself with the boiler, will you?

Alan (*gloomily*) Why not?

Alan, after a quick look towards Margaret, goes off L

Phoebe has noticed the look. Margaret, aware of this, moves slightly, with her back to Phoebe

Phoebe (*quietly*) He's a bit sorry for himself tonight, isn't he?

Margaret (*with a slightly overdone casual tone*) Alan? Is he? I hadn't noticed.

Phoebe looks towards Margaret's back for a moment, then moves up to the form, puts her bag, etc., down on it, then removes the capacious cape she is wearing

Phoebe (*as she does this*) How's that husband of yours?

Margaret (*turning*) How do you mean—how is he?

Phoebe What sort of a mood is he in tonight? He was in a hellish one last Friday.

Margaret Well—you know what it's like—when you're—*producing* a play.

Phoebe No, I don't. I've never produced a play. (*With a grin*) 'Spect some people would say I'd never *acted* in one either.

Margaret (*smiling*) Now then! No false modesty. You know you make the rest of us look even more amateurish than we really are. (*Slight pause*) How long were you a professional, Phoebe?

Phoebe (*after a slight pause*) Long enough to realize I'd never get anywhere.

Margaret I don't believe that. You're a terrific actress. Marvellous in any part you tackle.

Phoebe I'm going to be ruddy awful in this one, let me tell you.

Margaret Rubbish!

Phoebe (*skimming through the pages*) What a load of tripe! I know it's a rule in the Society that producers can choose the play they want to do, but why Philip picked on this opus I'll never know.

Margaret (*with a shrug of the shoulders*) You know how keen he is on thrillers, and I expect it'll go like a bomb. You know how our audiences love to puzzle their brains over who-dunnits.

Phoebe (*holding out the typescript*) As far as *this* is concerned, the only thing that'll puzzle 'em is *why* we did it. (*Throwing the script down disgustedly*) What a pain in the neck!

Ronnie enters up R

Ronnie (*brightly*) Who's a pain in the neck?

Phoebe (*grinning*) You are usually; but I'm talking about this play.

Ronnie Well, for God's sake, don't! At least not in front of Philip. He's touchy about it enough as it is.

Margaret Where is Philip? Is he coming down?

Ronnie (*moving up to the chairs at the back*) He's just slipped over to . . . (*He pulls up short. Embarrassed*) I don't suppose he'll be long.

Margaret looks quickly at Ronnie, as does Phoebe, who then looks towards Margaret

(*Lamely*) It's only just on half past, anyway. (*Embarrassed*) I'll get the stage set. (*He begins to bring chairs and a couple of tables down, and sets them out in the required position for rehearsal*)

Meanwhile, Margaret has half turned away from the others. She is obviously troubled. She takes a cigarette from her bag, lights it and stands quite still as she smokes. Ronnie and Phoebe are very much "aware" of Margaret. They look towards her and significantly at each other from time to time. After a little "setting", Ronnie moves to the table, picks up Philip's script and consults it

Now let's see. (*Reading*) "Settee by fireplace, Right." (*Looking at the chairs*) Yes. Got that. (*Script again*) "Armchair, Left Centre." (*He adjusts an "armchair" a little*)

Phoebe (*reading from her script*) "Table by armchair, Left Centre."

Ronnie (*grinning*) Know-all!

Phoebe (*lightly*) Only trying to help.

Ronnie You're too kind. (*He puts a whist table* L *of the armchair*)

Margaret suddenly pulls herself together and turns to the others

Margaret I—I—I'll just . . .

Margaret goes quickly off L

The unseen door off L *is heard to open and slam. Again—without speaking—Phoebe and Ronnie look at each other significantly. Then Phoebe sings quietly, but somewhat pointedly, to herself. During this, Ronnie gets a whist table and sets it up by the proscenium* L

Phoebe (*singing*)
"Nobody knows the trouble I see
Nobody knows the trouble I see
Nobody knows the trouble I see
Nobody knows like . . ."

Ronnie (*with a grin*) O.K.! O.K.! You've made your point. Thank God I'm a bachelor. At least . . .

Phoebe He *has* gone across to the pub, I take it?

Ronnie Philip? Yes. (*He brings a chair to behind the table down* L)

Phoebe And she's gone to fetch him out. Oh Lordy, Lordy! That'll please him I *don't* think. He behaved himself quite well during the last show, didn't he?

Ronnie Yes.

Phoebe 'Course he wasn't *producing* that one—just playing in it. Hardly blame him if he does go off the rails a bit now. This play's enough to drive anyone to drink.

Ronnie (*looking round*) Now where did I leave my . . .

Phoebe What? Your aspirin? Better find 'em. You're going to need 'em tonight, comrade.

Ronnie (*absently*) Oh, shut up! My *briefcase*—I had it when I . . . Oh, I know! I took it upstairs with me.

Ronnie exits R

Phoebe sits on a form, almost with her back to the audience and, humming "Nobody knows" to herself, begins turning things out of her basket, obviously searching for something

During this, Smith comes through the auditorium and up on to the stage. Phoebe's back is towards him. Taking no notice of Phoebe, Smith is moving towards up L *when Phoebe happens to notice him*

Phoebe (*with a big start, as she recognizes him*) Oh! (*She rises quickly*)

Smith turns. He too gives a start when he recognizes Phoebe. They just stare at each other for a while

(*In an almost horrified whisper*) Smith!

Smith is silent

(*Quietly but accusingly*) You are—Smith—aren't you?

Smith is silent

(*Putting a hand to her head. She is obviously very distressed*) Oh—*God*!

Smith (*moving forward*) 'Ere! You're not goin' to faint, are you?
Phoebe (*suddenly, flaring*) Keep away from me! (*Quieter*) Don't you dare touch me!
Smith (*halted*) Now—look . . . (*His voice tails away*)
Phoebe (*after a slight pause, with hatred in her voice*) What are you doing here?
Smith (*muttering*) I'm the caretaker; just got the job.

Phoebe can only stare at him for a while

Phoebe (*at last, slowly and in almost a whisper*) Get out of my sight!
Smith (*almost whining*) Look—it was ten years ago now. You're not going to . . .
Phoebe Ten years—twenty years—as long as I live—I'll never forget, Smith. And I've always sworn that if ever I got the chance to do you an injury . . . (*Near to tears*) For God's sake get out of my sight.

Smith after a long look at Phoebe goes off L

Phoebe stands quite still for a moment, then, after dabbing her eyes impatiently with a handkerchief, pulls herself together, and begins turning her bag out again

After quite a long pause Patricia Robins, who has presumably come through the front of the hall, appears at the foot of the steps leading to the stage. She hesitates a moment on the bottom step. Patricia (*Pat*) *is a pretty girl of twenty, quiet but intelligent*

Pat (*in a somewhat subdued voice*) Hello, Phoebe!

Phoebe spins round

Phoebe Who . . . ? (*Then seeing Pat, at once her old cheerful self*) Oh! It's you, Pat. How's life?

Pat comes up on to the stage

Pat (*smiling, as she looks at things from Phoebe's basket*) Having a good old turn-out, aren't you?
Phoebe I'm searching for my front door key. Damned if I know where it is. (*She continues searching*)
Pat (*smiling*) Probably in your front door.
Phoebe (*with mock drama*) Oh, Gawd! I hope not.
Pat Perhaps when you get home tonight, you'll find a very attractive man sitting in your armchair.
Phoebe If he is, he'll damn' soon get out of it.
Pat You wouldn't like that?
Phoebe I would not. Neither would he by the time I'd finished with him.
Pat Aren't you—scared, living completely on your own?
Phoebe Scared? Why should I be?
Pat *I* should be. Specially just now—with this—"Prowler" fellow loose on the town.

Phoebe (*with a little laugh*) I don't think *I* need worry about *him*. He can't be so desperate that he'd bother to chase an old bird like me. I should say you're more his type. You're the one to be careful, duckie.

Pat I *am*—or rather my mother is; wouldn't let me walk to rehearsal tonight; she made my brother bring me in his car.

Phoebe (*suddenly, with anger*) The bastard!

Pat (*smiling*) You're not referring to my brother, I hope!

Phoebe Don't be stupid. This prowler bloke. I suppose the police *will* get him—eventually. And it might be an awful shock to a lot of folk when they do.

Pat How do you mean, Phoebe?

Phoebe Nobody knows who he is—not yet—do they? He might turn out to be one of the town's most respected citizens. Well—if he did! Or, suppose, it was someone *we* know?

Pat (*smiling*) You're just trying to scare the life out of me, aren't you?

Phoebe (*also smiling*) Am I?

Pat (*changing the subject*) Who—who was the man on the stage just now; the one you were talking to when I came in—(*nodding her head*)—through the front?

Phoebe (*sharply*) Why?

Pat (*surprised*) What?

Phoebe (*almost flustered*) He—he's the new caretaker of this place.

Pat (*after a curious look at Phoebe*) Oh! Thought I hadn't seen him around before. (*Then, after taking the script from her bag*) Isn't it time this rehearsal got on its way? Where is everybody?

Phoebe Here and there; those that *are* here.

Pat (*removing her coat*) Alan—is he . . . ?

Phoebe (*with a look at her, grinning*) Oh, yes; don't worry. Alan's here.

Pat "Worry"? Why should *I* worry?

Phoebe Come off it! I'm not blind, child. You're nuts about him.

Pat (*in dismay*) Oh, Phoebe—does it show as badly as that?

Phoebe (*calmly*) It does.

Pat (*putting her coat down on a chair*) And I don't believe he's really aware of my existence.

Phoebe (*quietly*) No, not at the moment. He has—(*she gives a little cough*)—other—er—fish to fry or thinks he has.

Pat Meaning . . . ?

Phoebe (*with a big false smile*) Sweet damn-all, duckie—as usual.

Pat (*smiling*) You're a wicked old So-and-so.

Ronnie, briefcase in hand, comes in R

Ronnie Hya, Pat!

Pat Oh, Ronnie, I wanted to ask you . . .

Ronnie (*genially, moving to the prompt table*) In a minute, love. Things are a bit hectic at the moment . . .

Pat But . . .

Ronnie (*grinning*) Don't worry, Pat. I love you very much! (*He quickly*

kisses her brow, then speaks to Phoebe) They're not back yet, are they, Phoebe?

Phoebe Ask a silly question and you'll get a silly answer.

Pat Who's not back?

Alan enters up R

(*Seeing him*) Oh!

Phoebe (*answering Pat's question*) Philip and Margaret. They . . . (*Seeing that Pat is not listening. Grinning*) That's right, Phoebe, old girl; talk to yourself.

Pat (*with warmth*) Hello, Alan.

Alan (*vaguely*) 'Lo, Pat. (*He moves unconsciously to the "producer's" chair and sprawls in it, lost in unhappy thought*)

Pat watches him for a moment, then moves to Ronnie at his table

Pat Ronnie . . .

Ronnie (*grinning*) There's no satisfying the woman; sex-starved, that's what's the matter with her! (*He again kisses her on the brow*)

Pat Ronnie do be serious a minute.

Ronnie (*after drawing his hand over his grinning face and revealing a "cod serious" one*) I'm serious.

Pat (*laughing*) You fool! Will you be going straight home tonight after rehearsal?

Ronnie (*somewhat shaken*) Will I . . . ?

Pat It doesn't really matter if you're not, but . . .

Ronnie I shudder to think what's coming!

Pat If you *are*, can I come with you as . . .

Ronnie My God! She wants to seduce me! (*To the others*) You all heard! You're my witnesses!

Pat (*laughing*) Ronnie, I'll clock you one in a minute. It's just that Mum's scared about this "Prowler" fellow, and as you have to pass our house on your way home . . .

Ronnie Oh, that's your excuse, is it? What about our handsome juvenile over there? (*Indicating Alan*) Wouldn't you rather he . . . ?

Alan (*flustered*) I'm sorry, I have to . . .

Pat (*quickly and embarrassed*) Alan lives in the opposite direction, you clot! (*More embarrassed*) Look! It doesn't matter. I—I'll ask Philip if I can leave early; get the last bus.

Ronnie (*slapping her bottom lightly*) Now don't be silly! Or course I'll see you home—and to hell with what happens to my virginity! (*He is moving the "producer's" table as he says this. He now sees Alan in the chair above it. Grinning*) You producing this play?

Alan (*vaguely*) Eh?

Ronnie (*making pretence of swiping Alan*) Git art of it!

Alan rises and moves away up L

Pat (*who is now near Phoebe*) Where's Philip? Isn't he . . .

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