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Fool's Paradise

A comedy

Peter Coke

Samuel French — London
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FOOL'S PARADISE

Produced at the Apollo Theatre, London, on the 1st April 1959, with the following cast of characters:

Julius Caxton	Guy Deghy
Rose	Eileen Draycott
Susan Dawson	Jennifer Daniel
Catherine Hayling	Nora Swinburne
Jane Hayling	Cicely Courtneidge
Philip Hayling	Ronald Wilson
Fiona Renshaw	Pamela Strong
Brigette Blair	Agnes Lauchlan

Directed by Allan Davis
Setting by Tony Walton

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the dressing-room of the Haylings' house in Westminster

ACT I 4 p.m. on a Monday in May

ACT II A few days later. Seven o'clock in the evening

ACT III The following Wednesday afternoon

Time—the present

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(See also page ii)

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ACT I

SCENE—*The drawing-room of the Haylings' house in Westminster. Four p.m. on a Monday in May.*

Although faded and cluttered with antiques, it is a perfectly proportioned Georgian room, on the first floor, with an only door up L, *leading to a small landing and a curved staircase. A large bay window up* R *has a distant view of part of Buckingham Palace and the Victoria Memorial. There are built-in shelves* R *and a window-seat. A large sofa is* LC *with an oval table in front of it. An ornate desk is* RC *with a chair behind it and a stool in front of it. There is a telephone on the desk. A bureau stands down* R. *There are upright chairs* R, L *and up* C, *and an armchair down* R. *Against the wall down* L *there is a console table with a small round table above it. At night the room is lit by a chandelier pendant* C *and a standard lamp up* R. *The switch for the standard lamp is on the lamp itself, and the switch for the chandelier is below the door up* L. *On the landing there is a pedestal and an upright chair.*

When the CURTAIN *rises,* JULIUS CAXTON *is alone in the room, sitting on the sofa, studying the contents of the room with an appraising eye. He is a fleshy, balding, easily-excited man, wearing thickly-rimmed spectacles and too well-cut clothes. He has an accent which becomes marked when he is upset. After a few moments, he rises, goes to the door, opens it a little, listens a moment, then moves below the door and looks at a flower-painting hanging high on the wall. Being too short to reach it, he spreads his handkerchief on the chair underneath the picture to avoid footmarks, stands on the chair, takes a small torch from his pocket and with its aid, searches for the signature, slightly tilting the picture as he does so.*

ROSE (*off; calling*) All right, I'll tell her to wait.

(CAXTON *gets hastily off the chair, gathers up his handkerchief and sits on the sofa. After a moment, as no-one comes in, he rises, crosses to the heavy ormulu-mounted bureau down* R, *and examines it carefully. To see the state of the back, he moves it slightly away from the wall. As he does so, an ormulu mount on the downstage corner drops to the floor.* CAXTON *is alarmed and tries to replace it, but it will not stick. He finds one of the screws on the floor, but still cannot attach the piece. In desperation he takes off his shoe and hammers with it.* ROSE'S *voice is heard again*)

(*Off*) Come up here, miss, and sit down.

(CAXTON *hastily replaces his shoe and sits in the armchair down* R.
ROSE *enters up* L *and stands in the doorway. She is an ancient parlourmaid with a rusty voice and a firm manner*)

(*Accusingly*) What was that banging?

CAXTON (*innocently*) I didn't hear anything.

ROSE. I've always said this room's haunted.

CAXTON. Haunted?

ROSE. Well, it couldn't have been woodpeckers, could it? (*She turns to the hall and calls*) In here, miss; you'll have to join the queue. (*She stands above the open door*)

(SUSAN DAWSON *enters. She is charming, young, frank, and simply dressed.* CAXTON *rises*)

SUSAN (L *of Rose*) Thank you. Will Mrs Hayling be long?

ROSE. I'd rather guess the weather.

CAXTON (*moving* C; *tetchily*) But my time's money. I've been waiting ten minutes already.

ROSE (*crossing to* L *of Caxton*) Whooh!

(SUSAN *moves above the left end of the sofa and puts down her handbag and gloves*)

When you've lived as long as I have you'll know the unimportance of ten minutes. How old do you think I am?

CAXTON. I didn't come to take part in a quiz programme.

ROSE (*to Susan; cackling*) You, then. What's your guess?

SUSAN. Well—er, I'm a very bad judge of ages.

ROSE (*delightedly*) Getting on for eighty. That's me! Getting on for eighty. (*She notices the crooked picture* L)

CAXTON. Well, now we've happily settled that vital question, what about my appointment?

ROSE. Who was it you wanted to see?

CAXTON (*annoyed*) Is it my tongue or your ears?

(ROSE *crosses above the sofa to the chair* L)

(*Very distinctly*) Mrs Hayling.

SUSAN. I think she means which Mrs Hayling.

CAXTON. Is there more than one? The owner of the house, then.

ROSE (*enjoying herself*) That's no help. (*She stands on the chair and straightens the picture*)

CAXTON. The widow of Mr Basil Hayling, then.

ROSE (*convulsed*) Neither's that. (*She gets down from the chair*)

CAXTON (*very annoyed*) Why not? They can't both be the widows of Mr Basil Hayling.

SUSAN. I think you'll find they are.

CAXTON (*amazed*) And both now live here—together?

ROSE (*crossing to* L *of Caxton*) They have to. He left the house to the two of them—hoping they'd drive each other mad. (*She cackles*) Sense of humour, that's what Mr Basil had. That's why I'm over eighty; sense of humour and enough salts to cover a sixpence every morning. (*She crosses below Caxton to the bureau and fixes the corner piece*)

SUSAN (*to Caxton*) Perhaps I could help you; I know them both.

ROSE. Mrs Jane's out, anyhow. And Mrs Catherine's writing

her novel, and mustn't be disturbed while she's in the mood.

CAXTON (*acidly*) Is the mood likely to last much longer?

ROSE. She didn't have any lunch, so the clatter of tea-things'll bring her to her senses.

CAXTON (*moving to* L *of Rose*) Couldn't you clatter them now?

ROSE (*flatly*) No, I could not.

CAXTON (*looking at his watch*) I've got a further call in this district; I'd better fit that in. (*He crosses to the door and picks up his bag*)

(ROSE *moves up* C)

(*He returns to* L *of Rose and presses a coin into her hand*) Here; and there'll be another if you brew up in the next half hour.

(CAXTON *crosses and exits.* ROSE *follows to the door and looks after Caxton.* SUSAN *moves down* L *of the door*)

ROSE (*watching from the door*) Think he'll pinch anything?

SUSAN. Oh, surely not.

ROSE (*moving up* R *of Susan*) If so, hope it's that carved ivory thing; awful dust-trap.

SUSAN. Who is he?

ROSE. Haven't the foggiest. For that matter—I don't know who you are.

SUSAN. I'm Susan Dawson, and I've come to . . .

(SUSAN *breaks off as a ball of paper, wrapped round a bunch of keys is thrown from upstairs, whizzes through the door and lands between the sofa and the desk*)

What's that?

ROSE (*moving* C *and picking up the package*) It's all right. I know. It's Mrs Catherine.

(SUSAN *crosses to* L *of Rose*)

She's always throwing messages in. (*She opens the paper, reads it, then crosses to the door and shouts up the stairs*) Yes, he *has* gone.

(SUSAN *moves to* L *of the desk*)

CATHERINE (*off*) Oh, thank goodness. Why didn't you tell me immediately?

(CATHERINE HAYLING *enters and stands just inside the open doorway,* L *of Rose.* CATHERINE *is a tall, dark, good-looking woman who dresses well, but a little eccentrically. She carries her spectacles and a pencil*)

(*Anxiously*) Was he from the worm people?

ROSE. Don't know where he was from.

CATHERINE. Well, did he look like a bailiff?

ROSE. He didn't have an apron on.

SUSAN. He didn't look like one to me.

CATHERINE (*crossing to* L *of Susan*) Mrs Dawson! I'm so sorry, I didn't know you were here.

ROSE. I told you she was five minutes ago.

CATHERINE. You only speak the truth when it causes maximum embarrassment. (*She crosses to* R *of Rose*) Go and get the tea. Give me your hand. (*She takes Rose's hand, and marks it with her pencil*) "T." (*To Susan*) To remind her what she's going for.

(ROSE, *looking at the palm of her hand, exits, leaving the door open*)

(*She crosses to* L *of Susan*) I apologize for this muddle, dear. But the swindling firm who did our wood-worm in the staircase threaten us with the bailiffs. And as we've no idea what bailiffs look like, anyone we don't expect, we suspect.

SUSAN. I won't keep you a moment. It's just that your son told me that you'd let your two upstairs rooms to anyone who'd help in the house.

CATHERINE. You can't want to?

SUSAN. I do.

CATHERINE (*delighted*) Come and sit down, quickly.

(SUSAN *crosses and sits on the sofa.* CATHERINE *moves down*

SUSAN. You see, the lease of my flat's ended, and I'm desperate for somewhere to live.

CATHERINE. And we're desperate for help. Basil left us this enormous house and not a penny to run it. We'd welcome you if you're absolutely sure.

SUSAN. I am, but I expect you want to know . . .

CATHERINE. I don't want to know anything. (*She moves and puts her pencil and spectacles on the desk*) As a writer I can tell immediately, and you look admirable to me. (*She moves* C. *Doubtfully*) The trouble is I'm sure we won't to you.

SUSAN. I think we'll get on very well.

CATHERINE. I'm afraid you may find the rooms rather odd. Jane bought the furniture at an auction, by mistake. The bed's covered in dragons.

SUSAN (*smiling*) I shan't mind; I'm very fond of animals.

CATHERINE. And the wallpaper's peeling off a bit. (*She moves to the armchair down* R *and sits*) Still, if Jane sells the emeralds for as much as . . . (*She suddenly breaks off*) Did you hear that?

SUSAN. About the emeralds?

CATHERINE. You did! How awful, no-one's supposed to know.

SUSAN. I'll pretend I didn't hear.

CATHERINE. No, I don't want you to think I'm deceitful before you even move in. It's just that the emeralds . . . (*She suddenly breaks off again*) Oh, I might as well tell you all about them—having gone so far. (*She rises, crosses to the door, closes it then stands* L *of the sofa*) Only don't breathe a word, will you?

SUSAN. Of course not.

CATHERINE. It's all terribly exciting. Basil—Jane's and my late husband—had an old sister, and to our great delight she's just died. I don't mean that. We weren't delighted because we didn't know

she'd left us anything. (*She crosses above the sofa to the desk*) I don't mean that, either. What I'm trying to say is—after the poor thing did die, we found she *had* left us something. (*She sits on the stool* L *of the desk*)

SUSAN. No wonder you're excited.

CATHERINE. We hoped she would, because she always felt guilty for not having stopped us marrying her brother.

SUSAN. Should she have?

CATHERINE. It would have been kinder. Basil was the dearest man in the world, of course. The trouble was he was dear to too many of the female part of it at the same time.

SUSAN. I see.

CATHERINE. So Alice left us this incredible spray of Indian emeralds as a form of compensation.

SUSAN. Very rich compensation.

CATHERINE. Yes, and they may be worth quite a lot because she got them from a Maharaja she nursed in—wherever he was Maharaja of—I forget now. She saved him from losing his finger, or his toe, or something he wanted to keep.

SUSAN (*rising and moving to* L *of Catherine*) Do let me see them.

CATHERINE. I can't. (*She rises*) It was far too elaborate for us to wear, so Jane's taken it off to a jeweller who advertises as giving the highest prices. And we're hoping to settle all our debts. (*She moves to the window*)

(SUSAN *moves up* L *of the desk*)

What can have happened to her? Never mind. (*She crosses to the bell-push below the door and presses it*) I'll get Rose to show you the rooms while you're waiting.

SUSAN. Thank you.

CATHERINE (*conspiratorially*) Only whatever you do, don't mention the emeralds to Philip. He knows nothing about them, and would immediately demand half the money to pay his debts. And Jane and I must pay ours first.

SUSAN. I won't mention it to a soul.

CATHERINE. I was mad to let Jane go alone. When she's excited she's quite remarkably unreliable. (*She crosses to the window*) Heaven knows what she may have got up to.

SUSAN (*moving up* L *of the sofa*) I'm sure you've no need to worry. (*She picks up her bag and gloves*)

CATHERINE. My dear, when Jane's about, there's always need to worry.

(ROSE *enters and stands by the door*)

ROSE. You'll kill me if you keep bringing me up those stairs.

(*The telephone rings.* CATHERINE *goes to the desk, lifts the receiver and covers the mouthpiece*)

CATHERINE (*to Rose*) This is Mrs Dawson, Rose. If you're nice she's going to live upstairs and help you at odd times.

ROSE (*to Susan*) You'll regret it, dear. But come on.

(ROSE *and* SUSAN *exit, closing the door behind them*)

CATHERINE (*into the telephone*) Hullo? . . . Which Mrs Hayling—Mrs Jane or Mrs Catherine? . . . Oh. Well, I'm expecting her any time . . .

(*The sound of a door slam is heard off*)

Wait a moment, that's probably her. Who is it speaking? . . . (*Dismayed*) Oh . . . But I'm sure she sent you a cheque months ago . . How odd . . . Well, I'm afraid you'll have to wait because she's gone abroad for several weeks—good-bye. (*She hastily replaces the receiver, moves* R *of the desk and makes a note*)

(JANE HAYLING *enters, closing the door behind her. She is a sparkling, exuberant woman, with so much enthusiasm that she never has time to think. She carries a tall rubber plant in a pot, and three smart carrier bags*)

JANE. Catherine, I've been insulted! What do you think the taxi-man just called me?

CATHERINE. What?

JANE. What Basil often used to call you. (*She moves above the sofa and puts her carrier bags on it*)

CATHERINE. Jane!

JANE. Never mind, I had my revenge. I called him what Basil often used to call me.

CATHERINE (*crossing below the desk to* C) But why all this filthy language?

JANE (*crossing with the plant to* L *of Catherine*) Because this made a little puddle on his back seat.

CATHERINE. What is it?

JANE (*dumping the plant into Catherine's hands*) A present for you.

CATHERINE. I don't want it. (*She returns the plant to Jane*)

JANE. Yes, you do. (*She hands the plant to Catherine*) And enjoy it properly; I paid cash for it. (*She moves to the sofa and takes a wool stole from a carrier bag*) I've bought you another lovely present, too. Something absolutely made for you. (*She crosses and drapes the stole around Catherine*) There. If you look closely you'll see the moths have been at it here and there. But I got it at half price, and as they've eaten less than half it's an absolute bargain.

CATHERINE. Thank you. It's lovely. (*Excitedly*) Do all these presents mean you've sold the emeralds?

JANE (*gaily ignoring the question*) I bought myself a present, too: this wonderfully impractical coat. (*She crosses down* R *and spins around*) What do you think of it?

CATHERINE. Nothing half-price about that. It must have cost a fortune.

JANE. Don't worry; I didn't have to pay for it. (*She moves to* R *of Catherine and slightly lowers her voice*) I had the most amazing luck.

A *new* man served me who didn't know about our little troubles with the account. He was an absolute poppet. He let me have these shoes, as well. (*She limps down* LC) They're absolute agony, but aren't they gorgeous?

CATHERINE. How much did they cost?

JANE. Ten pounds.

CATHERINE (*horrified*) Ten pounds! But we haven't a penny. (*She brightens*) But I suppose we have now. How much did you get for the emeralds?

JANE (*moving to* L *of Catherine*) I had a terrible time even finding the jeweller's shop. You'd think number fifteen would be next to number fourteen, wouldn't you? But, oh, no! Fourteen—then sixteen. And where do you think fifteen was? (*She moves to* L *of the table* LC) Miles away the other side of the road, next to the fish shop. They had the most heavenly lobsters on the slab. I was dying to buy two but I only had fourpence in my bag . . .

CATHERINE (*interrupting*) Never mind the lobsters, what about the emeralds? (*She puts the plant on the table* LC)

JANE (*moving to* L *of Catherine*) Well, when I eventually found the jeweller's, who do you think I met coming out?

CATHERINE (*removing the stole and moving up* C) I don't care who you met coming out. (*She puts the stole on the chair up* C)

JANE. You will when you hear who it was. Brigette Blair.

CATHERINE (*moving to* R *of Jane; delighted*) Brigette! I haven't seen her for ages. How is she?

JANE. As peculiar as ever. Terrified of catching cold. All I could see was a nose sticking out of a pile of shawls.

CATHERINE. Perhaps it's just as well we haven't seen her for ages.

JANE. The ages have come to an end. (*She crosses to the mirror down* L *and removes her hat*) She's having dinner with us next week.

CATHERINE. Oh, Jane, you know we can't afford to have people to dinner.

JANE. She—and her son.

CATHERINE (*making a face*) Oh, not James Blair, too? He's a revolting young man.

JANE (*correcting*) He's an extremely nice young man.

CATHERINE. Since when?

JANE. Since this morning, when I heard he's now a TV producer.

CATHERINE (*incredulously*) James Blair?

JANE (*moving to* L *of Jane; excitedly*) It's quite wonderful. He remembered I was an actress before I married Basil, and said why didn't I make a come-back on the television.

CATHERINE. He said that?

JANE. Well, maybe I put the idea in his head. Anyway, that's why they're coming to dinner. (*She puts her handbag on the stool then puts her hat on the chair up* C)

CATHERINE (*acidly*) Does he know you only played maids? *Silent* maids at that?

JANE. If I could do so much without words, imagine what I'll be like when I have them. Though I'd better polish up my mime and elocution before next week. (*She moves up* L *and declaims with gestures*) "Oh, let no noble eye profane a tear . . ."

CATHERINE (*moving to* R *of Jane*) No, no, not now, Jane. For pity's sake, tell me about the emeralds.

JANE (*joyously*) TV salaries are enormous; we shall be able to pay off all our debts.

CATHERINE (*slowly and loudly*) Have you, or have you not, sold the emeralds?

JANE (*moving below the sofa*) I've brought you another lovely present. (*She takes a bottle of crème de menthe from a carrier*) Your favourite *crème de menthe.*

CATHERINE (*moving above the sofa*) I don't want *crème de menthe.*

JANE. You will! (*Ashamedly*) I haven't sold the emeralds. (*She puts the bottle in Catherine's hands and moves below the desk*)

CATHERINE (*moving* C) Jane! Why not?

JANE. Well, at first glance he said they might be worth two or three thousand pounds . . .

CATHERINE. Two or three thousand!

JANE. Then he took a longer glance, and changed pounds to pence.

CATHERINE. Only pence! But why?

JANE (*moving to* R *of Catherine*) Some idiot's painted the backs of the stones with green varnish. It makes them a wonderful colour they aren't.

CATHERINE. But surely emeralds are valuable whatever's been done to their backs?

JANE. He says they're probably worthless beryls. Evidently Indian court jewellers splashed green paint on to any old stones if they knew they were going to be given away as gifts. (*She removes her coat and puts it on the window-seat*)

CATHERINE. It's terrible. Let me look at them.

JANE. I left them with our Polish watchmaker.

CATHERINE. He wouldn't know anything about emeralds.

JANE (*moving to* R *of Catherine*) Not to sell them. To mend the pin. (*Proudly*) I shall wear them for my first appearance on TV.

(CATHERINE *moves to the sofa, puts the carriers over the back of it and sits*)

CATHERINE. You won't be able to appear if you're locked up for debt.

JANE. We shan't be locked up. Have a little faith, Catherine. (*She crosses to the light switch below the door*) Have they cut off the light? (*She switches the chandelier on and off*) The dears! (*She crosses to the desk*) What about the telephone? (*She lifts the receiver and listens*) No, still clicking away quite happily. (*She replaces the receiver*)

CATHERINE. But for how long? And now the emeralds valueless. (*Despairingly*) What are we going to do?

JANE (*picking up her handbag and crossing to* R *of the sofa*) Go out and buy two ridiculous hats that neither of us dare wear.

CATHERINE. We haven't the money to buy a hatpin.

JANE. That's just the time to spend money—when you haven't got it. It makes shopping so exciting.

CATHERINE. You drive me mad with your absurdly optimistic attitude.

JANE. It's the only sensible attitude. (*She sits in the armchair down* R) If things are going to turn out badly, worrying won't help. So why not be hopefully happy in the meantime.

(PHILIP HAYLING *enters. He is a light-hearted young man, attractive in an untidy way. He carries a string of Spanish onions*)

PHILIP (*poking his head round the door*) Anyone not like onions?

CATHERINE. What?

PHILIP (*coming in and closing the door*) Well, whether you do or not, you've got them. (*He crosses to* R *of the sofa and holds out the onions to Catherine*) With all my love, Mother darling.

CATHERINE. Why have you been buying onions?

PHILIP (*putting the onions on the floor behind the sofa*) I wanted to show off my French to the chap selling them at the door. (*He crosses to the desk, takes a cigarette from the box on it, and lights it*)

JANE. He's doing well! He sold me two bunches.

CATHERINE. If you don't both *stop* practising your French we'll have to open a vegetable shop.

PHILIP (*crossing to* C; *a little too casually*) I saw Mrs Dawson as I came in. What do you think of her?

CATHERINE. She's sweet. Jane, that nice Mrs Dawson's taking the rooms upstairs.

JANE. Miracles aren't over.

CATHERINE (*suddenly gloomy*) Though now we'd better set about finding a tenant for the attic.

PHILIP (*worried*) Why? You said things had taken a turn for the better.

JANE. They've whizzed back again.

PHILIP. Don't tell me we're at another financial crisis?

JANE. At and beyond.

CATHERINE. We're practically at the door of the debtors' prison.

PHILIP (*upset*) Oh, no.

JANE. Why?

PHILIP (*guardedly*) I—I wanted to talk to you about something.

CATHERINE. If it concerns money—don't.

PHILIP. But it's something very important to me, Mother. (*He moves to* R *of Catherine. Impatiently*) I think I'd better give up trying to get a degree, find a job and earn some money.

CATHERINE. You'll do nothing of the sort. We've scraped to make you an engineering genius . . .

(JANE *takes out her compact and powders her nose*)

JANE. And that's what you're going to be—even if we only see you on visiting days, through bars.

PHILIP (*moving up* L *of Jane*) But, Jane, by the time I qualify I shall have father's legacy. (*Urgently*) There must be some way of getting that money before I'm thirty.

CATHERINE. Possibly, *if* we had hundreds to toss to the legal sharks.

PHILIP (*looking around the room*) Dare we risk selling something?

JANE. Selling something!

CATHERINE. You know the furniture's tied up even tighter than your legacy.

JANE. It would be madness, anyhow. The reason we go on getting credit is because of all this furniture. (*She waves her hand around*) It impresses the tradesmen. The window-cleaner was only saying the other day how safe it made him feel.

(ROSE *enters*)

ROSE. He's here again.

JANE. Why is it no-one has a name nowadays?

ROSE. Because they mumble.

CATHERINE (*alarmed*) It's the bailiffs.

(PHILIP *moves up* L *of the desk*)

(*She rises and crosses down* R *of Philip*) Philip, go and push him out.

ROSE. It's about some vases.

CATHERINE (*crossing below Philip to* R *of Rose*) Vases?

JANE. Vases? Oh, vases! (*She rises and puts her handbag on the stool*) It must be Mr Caxton. He's going to turn them into an electric blanket. Show him up, Rose.

(ROSE *exits, closing the door behind her*)

PHILIP (*moving to* L *of Jane; slowly*) What? Who? Why? And how?

JANE. Don't be so pernickety. (*She moves to the chair* R, *stands on it and takes two vases from the shelves*)

(PHILIP *moves and assists Jane*)

You remember these ghastly vases Brigette Blair gave us when she had her end-of-the-world phase?

CATHERINE (*moving up* C) I remember she got over it before she gave away anything good.

JANE (*putting the vases on the desk*) Well, when I was in this man's antique shop, he said how difficult it was to get stock.

(PHILIP *moves to* R *of Catherine*)

And I thought how difficult it was to keep warm in bed. (*She points triumphantly to the vases and makes a conjurer's "pass"*) So! Cold vases into warm sheets! Do you think he might give us thirty bob for them?

CATHERINE. Not unless he's blind.

JANE. Well, a pound, anyhow. Then if I put it on a horse at five to one I can buy an electric blanket.

(ROSE *enters and stands above the doorway*)

ROSE (*announcing*) Mr Caxton.

(CAXTON *enters, carrying his bag.*
ROSE *exits, closing the door behind her*)

CAXTON (*beaming*) Quite a reception committee, now, eh?

JANE (*crossing to Caxton*) Good afternoon, Mr Caxton. How nice of you to come. (*She looks at his bag*) Are you staying the night?

CAXTON. Just a bag for the goods.

JANE. Oh, good. This is Catherine Hayling, and her son Philip.

(CAXTON *puts his bag down* L, *then crosses below Jane to Catherine and shakes hands with her.* JANE *stands above the sofa*)

CAXTON. Pleased to meet you, dear—(*he hastily corrects himself*) Mrs Hayling. (*To Philip*) And you.

PHILIP. Thank you.

CAXTON (*moving down* C *and looking around*) I must congratulate you on your belongings. (*He crosses down* L) Some very good stuff you've got in here.

CATHERINE. How nice of you.

CAXTON. I hope you don't let your domestic bang about when she cleans?

CATHERINE. She hardly ever does.

CAXTON (*touching the beautifully carved mirror on the wall down* L) This, for instance: it could be ruined.

CATHERINE (*warningly*) Careful!

JANE. The wire's a bit rusty.

CAXTON. I suppose you know it's valuable?

JANE. My husband gave it to me in Venice. (*To Catherine*) When I found out about that Contessa.

(CAXTON *crosses to* L *of the table* LC *and looks closely at it*)

(*She moves to* L *of Caxton*) That came from Paris, for almost the same reason.

CAXTON. Very nice, too. (*Hastily*) Though when I say nice or valuable, don't let it raise your hopes. (*He crosses to the bureau down* R) They wouldn't fetch anything in a sale-room.

PHILIP. How lucky they're not going to a sale-room, then.

CAXTON. But your stuff certainly makes my professional saliva run.

JANE (*sotto voce*) Disgusting!

CAXTON (*moving to the standard lamp and switching it on*) Still, first things first, eh? (*He turns to the desk*) Are those the vases?

JANE (*crossing to* L *of Caxton*) Oh, yes. Those are the vases. (*Airily*) We were just discussing whether they were Ming or Tang.

CAXTON (*sitting in the desk chair*) I hope you're not going to be

pricey because I want to make a deal. (*He examines the vases*) Oh, I don't know. Not up to much, are they? (*He takes a magnifying glass from his pocket and examines the bottom of a vase*)

JANE (*pointing it out*) That little anchor makes them very valuable, I'm sure.

CAXTON. No, no, it just means they were made for an admiral. (*He rings the vases with the handle of his magnifying glass to test whether they are cracked*)

JANE (*pointing to the shelves*) I'll get down those two; then we can play *Auld Lang Syne*.

CAXTON. How much do you want, dear—Mrs Hayling?

JANE. Well . . .

PHILIP. You're the buyer; you name the price.

CAXTON. Well, I want to be absolutely honest with you. Give me an idea what you're expecting.

JANE. Well—we're expecting . . .

PHILIP. If you don't want to make an offer, let's cancel the whole transaction.

CAXTON (*rising and moving* R *of the desk*) No, no, we don't want to do that.

JANE (*moving above the desk*) No, we don't want to do that.

CAXTON. At a rough guess I would say they're worth about—(*hopefully*) twenty pounds?

JANE (*sitting in the desk chair; staggered*) Twenty pounds!

CAXTON (*thinking Jane is surprised at the smallness of the offer*) Twenty-two, at the most.

JANE (*almost speechless*) Twenty-two, at the most. (*She rises and is about to offer the vases to Caxton*)

PHILIP (*quickly realizing the vases are valuable*) If that's your best we must certainly cancel the transaction. (*He picks up the vases*)

CAXTON. No, no, we don't want to do that.

JANE (*taking the vases from Philip and putting them on the right end of the desk near Caxton*) No, no, we don't want to do that. (*She sits in the desk chair*)

CAXTON. Maybe that's a slight undervaluation now I come to look at them again. Tell me what you want.

PHILIP. At least fifty pounds.

CAXTON. Fifty pounds! I'd sooner put it in the collection plate.

JANE (*imitating Caxton*) No, no, we don't want to do that.

PHILIP. It's your turn, then.

CAXTON. I'm a sentimental fool, and I'll lose by it, but I'll go as far as thirty.

JANE. I think we should . . .

PHILIP (*picking up the vases and moving towards the shelves*) Put them away again. I agree.

(CAXTON *takes the vases from Philip and replaces them on the desk*)

CAXTON (*very excited*) No, no, no! Not that I'd as much as look at them if stock wasn't so hard to get. I'll give you my final offer.

Thirty-two. And a mangle won't get any more out of me.

JANE (*rising; to Philip*) A mangle won't get any more out of him.

PHILIP. Then we'd better accept.

JANE (*to Caxton*) But our terms are strictly C.O.D. And there's no D. until I have the C.

(ROSE *enters carrying a tray of tea-things.*

SUSAN *follows her on, carrying a cake-stand.* ROSE *puts the tray on the table* LC. SUSAN *puts the cake-stand* R *of the table* LC. CATHERINE *sits* C *of the sofa.* PHILIP *moves up* C)

ROSE (*to Susan*) Thank you, my dear. It's very kind of you.

JANE (*moving to* L *of the desk*) Ah, Mrs—er—we've got you, I hear.

SUSAN. If you're both quite sure you want me.

JANE. Want you? (*She gestures with the cake knife*) If you don't come I'll commit hara-kiri.

(CAXTON *crosses to* L *and picks up his bag*)

CATHERINE. You're a blessing in an unusually pleasant disguise.

ROSE. Hear, hear! One can do with a bit of help when one's well over eighty.

(CAXTON *crosses down* R, *puts down his bag, opens it, takes out some rag and starts to pack the vases*)

JANE (*to Susan*) Will you be bringing a TV set, by any chance?

SUSAN. I'm afraid not.

JANE. Pity. We haven't one, either, and I ought to watch how the others do it. (*She helps Caxton to pack the vases*)

CAXTON. You very easily could have one.

(CATHERINE *picks up the rubber plant and hands it to Rose*)

There are several things here I wouldn't mind giving you a very fair price on.

CATHERINE (*to change the subject; to Rose*) You've only brought three cups, Rose. We're five.

SUSAN (*moving* R *of the sofa*) Rose is kindly going to give me a cup from her pot.

PHILIP (*moving to* R *of Susan*) Mr Caxton can have mine. (*He unthinkingly puts his arm around Susan*)

(CATHERINE *stares at Philip's arm*)

I want to make sure Mrs Dawson realizes—(*he sees Catherine looking at his arm and disengages. Lamely*) realizes what she's letting herself in for. I'll have a cup with Rose, too.

ROSE. I might as well open a cafe, and have done with it.

(ROSE *stalks out, leaving the door open*)

JANE (*to Susan*) Take no notice, dear. You've caught us on an odd day. We're the most normal household really. (*She picks up her handbag*

(PHILIP *picks up the onions and crosses to the door*)

SUSAN (*following Philip to the door*) If that's true, I shall be most disappointed.

(CAXTON *completes his packing, takes out his wallet and counts some notes.* JANE *stands anxiously beside him, with her open handbag*)

CATHERINE. When you can escape from Rose, come back and we'll make all arrangements.

SUSAN. Thank you.

(PHILIP *and* SUSAN *exit, closing the door behind them.* CAXTON *replaces the notes in the wallet, puts the wallet in his pocket, bends over and examines the desk.* JANE *tosses her handbag on the stool*)

JANE (*declaiming*)

"Oh, let no noble . . ."

CATHERINE. Tea, Jane.

JANE. No, not for a minute—I must practise. (*She declaims*)

"Oh, let no noble eye profane a tear,
If I be gored by Mowbray's spear . . ."

(*She unintentionally smacks Caxton on his seat*)

(CAXTON *straightens and turns*)

Oh, Mr Caxton! I'm so sorry, I'd slightly forgotten you. Come and have a cup of tea. (*She transfers her handbag from the stool to the desk, crosses and sits* R *of Catherine on the sofa*)

(CAXTON *picks up the stool, sets it* R *of the table* LC *and sits*)

CAXTON. Ta. Just a quick one, dear—Mrs Hayling. (*He takes out his wallet and extracts thirty pounds in notes*) You'll excuse cash, eh? (*He winks*) No tax.

JANE. We prefer it. We pay everything in notes.

CATHERINE. When we have any.

JANE. The bank's so curious.

CAXTON. You're ladies after my own heart. There you are. (*He slaps the notes down on the table*) Thirty smackers.

CATHERINE. Thirty?

CAXTON (*blandly*) That's right.

JANE. I thought we'd gone higher than thirty smackers.

CAXTON. Oh, come now, dear—Mrs Hayling. You've got enough out of me without squeezing me. (*He rises quickly and moves to the desk*) It's thirty or I take it back.

JANE. Take it back! (*She quickly hides the notes in the muffin dish*)

CAXTON. And don't forget I pay top prices if you have anything else you want to get rid of.

CATHERINE. We haven't.

CAXTON. You're a bit crowded in here. How about nice summer dresses instead of, say—(*he points to the desk*) that?

JANE. We'd go about without dresses before we'd sell that.

CAXTON. I'll give you more than you expect.

CATHERINE (*firmly*) Nothing here is for sale, Mr Caxton.

CAXTON. Any old junk in the attic?

JANE. It all went as wedding presents, years ago. Tea, Mr Caxton?

(CAXTON *moves to the stool, sits and takes the cup of tea from Jane*)

Sugar?

CAXTON. Ta. (*He takes four lumps of sugar*)

JANE. Have another.

CAXTON. Ta. (*He takes another lump of sugar*) I'm interested in all types of stuff: furniture, pictures, papier mâché, glass, china, jewellery . . .

JANE (*to Catherine*) Pity I left the emeralds with the Pole.

CAXTON (*quickly*) Emeralds?

JANE. Left to us as a reward for what we endured as our husband's wives.

CATHERINE. They'd be of no interest to you.

CAXTON (*craftily*) You never know. Let me have a squint at them, eh?

JANE. Not even a sideway glance; we haven't got them here. Sandwich or chocolate biscuit?

CAXTON. Now, come on, don't give me that.

JANE (*handing cake to Caxton*) You'd prefer cake?

CAXTON. I'd prefer to have a look at your emeralds.

CATHERINE. There's no point, Mr Caxton. We're not thinking of disposing of them now.

CAXTON (*pouncing*) Now, eh? That means you were thinking of disposing of them?

JANE. When we thought they were worth two or three thousand pounds.

CAXTON (*trying not to be impressed*) Two or three thousand, eh?

CATHERINE. But we've had them valued, and it seems they're not.

CAXTON. Some people might say they were worthless hoping to get them at less than their price. You've seen what good money I pay for worthless rubbish: I pay corresponding for the real stuff.

CATHERINE. Rubbish or real, they're not for sale.

(CAXTON *sips his tea, and thinks, while gazing slyly round the room*)

CAXTON. I don't want to seem persistent, but if you ever do want to get rid of them—(*wheedlingly*) let me have first chance, eh?

CATHERINE. You're wasting your time.

CAXTON (*accusingly*) You mean you don't trust me, eh?

JANE. Don't be silly, Mr Caxton.

CAXTON (*accusingly*) You'd rather take them to one of those posh Bond Street places. Don't imagine they're beyond a little hanky-panky. You'd be far safer off with me who you know. (*He reaches over for the teapot and helps himself to tea*)

JANE. You whom we're beginning to know. (*She moves the sugar out of Caxton's reach*)

CAXTON. I can afford to give better prices: I haven't their overheads. Go on, say you'll give me first refusal, eh?

CATHERINE. A refusal to discuss it any more is what we give.

CAXTON. Ah! (*He waves his teaspoon at Jane*) You don't trust me, I can see.

JANE (*relieving Caxton of his teaspoon*) Don't be silly, Mr Caxton.

CAXTON. Now, I want to be absolutely honest with you, so I'll tell you what I'll do.

JANE (*to Catherine; conversationally*) Catherine, remind me to tell you about the extraordinary dog I saw in Sloane Street . . .

(CAXTON *takes out his wallet and counts out one hundred pounds in notes*)

(*She rises. To Caxton*) Don't you understand short, simple phrases? (*Distinctly*) The emeralds are not for sale. *Les bijoux ne sont pas à vendre.*

CAXTON. You may change your minds.

JANE. *Jamais!* (*She resumes her seat*)

CAXTON. You have once already; therefore, it's on the cards you will again. If you do, I mean to be the buyer. And so that you'll feel safe: there you are. (*He presses the notes into Jane's hand*)

JANE. What's this?

CAXTON. A little present. To do with as you like. But which can come off the purchase price later if you want.

JANE. But the emeralds may not be worth even as much as that.

CAXTON. Then I'm the silly sausage, aren't I? (*He looks at his watch*) Christopher! It's later than I thought. (*He rises, takes his business card from his wallet and puts it on the table*) If I don't rush I'll miss a Minton dinner service. (*He picks up his bag*)

JANE. No, don't rush yet, Mr Caxton.

CAXTON (*moving up* R *of the sofa*) On that card is my telephone number. When you want more crisp notes instead of old-fashioned gems, give me a blow. (*He crosses to the door*)

CATHERINE. But this money, Mr Caxton . . .

CAXTON. Is yours to have a lovely splash about with.

JANE (*rising and moving* C) But, Mr Caxton . . .

CAXTON (*bowing*) Ladies.

(CAXTON *beams at them and exits, closing the door behind him.* JANE *gazes at the money*)

CATHERINE. How much is it?

JANE (*handing half the notes to Catherine*) Count. (*She sits* R *of Catherine on the sofa*)

(*They count frantically*)

Fifty!

CATHERINE. Fifty!

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