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SF PERUSALS

Winter Glory

A Comedy

Peter Coke

Samuel French – London
New York – Sydney – Toronto – Hollywood



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CHARACTERS

Dame Beatrice Appleby DBE ("Bee")
Dolores
Miss Nanette Parry ("Nan")
Miss Elizabeth Hatfield ("Hattie")
Brigadier Albert Rayne CB, CMG, MVO
Mrs Honeywell
Mrs Coyle
Fay Lombard
Sergeant Waller (non-speaking)
Bert (non-speaking)

The action of the play takes place in the sitting-room of Dame Beatrice's flat overlooking the Albert Hall

ACT I Scene 1 A morning in winter
Scene 2 The following Sunday. Early afternoon

ACT II Scene 1 Ten days later. Afternoon
Scene 2 Some weeks later. Afternoon

Time—the present

ACT I

SCENE 1

The delightfully over-crowded and old-fashioned sitting-room of Dame Beatrice's flat overlooking the Albert Hall in London. Morning

Large french windows; a door to the hall; and another door to her bedroom

Dame Beatrice, well advanced in age, but with a bubbling personality and enthusiasm, is sitting having her hair brushed out by Dolores, a lovely extrovert with flamboyant clothes and hair, and a slight cockney accent, aged about twenty-five. The curlers and rest of her apparatus are on a table nearby

The telephone rings

Dolores Shall I?

Bee Uum—no, dear, thank you. I think it may be something a little—difficult. Call Nan, will you? Miss Parry.

Dolores (*going to the hall door; calling*) Miss Parry.

Nan (*off*) What is it?

Nan appears in the doorway. She is elderly, awkward, with a severe hair-style, and a gruff manner which only partly hides her great kindness

(*Crossly*) I'm in the middle of writing a stinker to the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Bee Can he wait? (*She gestures to the phone*)

Nan (*crossing to it*) Of course.

Bee If it's you know who, you know what.

Nan nods, and picks up the phone

Nan (*speaking in a high and refined voice*) Hullo? Who is that? . . . Oh, no, I'm sorry, but Dame Beatrice has gone to Zimbabwe. . . . Zimbabwe! Isn't it a lovely name? Redolent of their jungle and war-cries, don't you think? . . . I really couldn't say; it depends on the weather and the Duchess.

Bee (*in a whisper*) Don't overdo it.

Nan (*on the phone*) The Duchess, her hostess. . . . I'll tell her immediately she gets back from (*dramatically*) Zimbabwe. (*She puts down the phone*) That should put him off for a bit.

Bee Thank you so much, dear. (*To Dolores*) Nan used to be—(*hastily correcting*)—Nan is—one of the most accomplished teachers of elocution in the country. So she's marvellous on the telephone.

Dolores The landlord?

Bee (*nodding*) How clever. He's a dreadful old fusser: we're only a few weeks overdue.
Dolores Fancy knowing a duchess.
Bee I don't. She's a duchess of the imagination, dear. One of the few things we do have a lot of in this house.
Dolores Oh, what a shame!
Nan (*looking at her*) I could do something about your vowels if you'd let me.
Dolores My——?
Bee (*clearly*) Vowels, dear.
Dolores Oh, I get it. (*Good-naturedly, to Nan*) And I could do something about your hair if you'd let me.
Nan (*grimly*) *Touché*. But, in my case, vanity's as short as cash, thank you.

She goes out

Dolores (*brushing again*) She's a one.
Bee Wait till you see the others.
Dolores I met Miss Hatfield: I did her hair.
Bee Of course you did: I get muddled. Then there's only the Brigadier. He won't want his hair done!
Dolores Have they always lived with you?
Bee Well, since my beloved husband died, about twenty years ago. Financially it was sensible for all of us.
Dolores What about the other flat next door with the old girls?
Bee You're very curious this morning?
Dolores Sorry; it's because I usually have to make clients talk so they don't notice if I cut off the wrong bit.
Bee The "old girls" next door are there because—in a rather extraordinary way which I'm not going to tell you, or you could get us all locked up—we made a lot of money. So we rent that flat for four people who deserve nice homes but can't afford them.
Dolores They're very lucky.
Bee We have two dear old sisters who think so. And a very nice new woman we've hardly met. But not a ghastly old horror we wish we never had met——

A tap on the door, and Miss Hatfield hurries in. She is old, small, sweet, and is always very highly strung

Hattie I must come in . . .
Bee Yes, of course, Hattie dear. What is it?
Hattie Something most important. (*She stands with her hand to her mouth*) And I haven't any idea what! (*Tearfully*) Oh, it's awful: it's always happening. I rush to do something: then can't remember what it is. I'm really beginning to wonder about myself.
Bee Nonsense. I do it constantly. So long as it's not—(*numbering them off on her fingers*)—the bath running, something left on the gas, or an article of clothing not put on, there's nothing to worry about.

Hattie No, it's none of those—(*suddenly anxiously feeling over her body*)—I hope . . .

Bee You know Dolores, don't you?

Hattie Yes.

Dolores I'm not suggesting anything, but isn't it time we had another appointment, Miss Hatfield?

Hattie (*awkwardly*) I'm not coming to you again . . .

Dolores I thought I made you look fabuloso.

Hattie You insulted me.

Dolores You're thinking of someone else.

Hattie I'm not: you refused to let me pay. I know I'm only a poor china-restorer, who doesn't get very much restoring nowadays. (*Getting upset*) But I'd have you know I was very good once, and earned a lot. And your action humiliated me. Deeply . . .

She hurries out in tears

Dolores Oh, dear.

Bee Don't worry: she's in one of her states because she's had a nasty letter from the bank. But it does remind me, dear: you must let me pay you a bit more this time.

Dolores You'll have another humiliated in a moment.

Bee I know what other places ask, and it's wrong that you should do it at less than half.

Dolores I've masses of rich clients who I overcharge so it's all the same in the end. (*She starts to pack up*)

The Brigadier marches in. He is as old as the others but still has a military bearing and manner, and treats everyone as if they were recruits. But has such charm that he usually gets away with it. He carries a clip-board which is his constant companion

Brigadier Why aren't we having morning coffee?

Bee Because Mrs Honeywell hasn't brought it yet.

Brigadier Why not: it's due at eleven hundred hours. (*He looks at his watch*) It's now eleven o nine. And thirty seconds.

Bee She has a great deal to do with both flats to run, Bertie.

Brigadier She wouldn't be ten seconds late if she kept to the schedules I've drawn up for her.

Bee If she had time to fathom those she'd always be late. (*Forestalling his anger*) Why don't you let this clever girl have a go at those ducks' tails round the back of your neck, Bertie.

Dolores Like me to snip them off, Brigadier?

Brigadier No, I would not. Thank you.

Dolores I'm used to doing men. My present boy-friend says I'm absolute tops.

Bee Oh, how is he?

Dolores Oh, not the one I told you about last time. I've got Bob now. Much better. Absolutely gorgeous. Has the loveliest nose you've ever seen: sends shivers down me spine. So what about it, Brigadier?

Brigadier A female cutting my hair?
Dolores I'll do it at half what you pay your man. And no tip.
Brigadier Hmm. I'll consider it.

Hattie opens the door, and lets in Mrs Honeywell, who carries a tray of mugs. She is middle-aged and homely. Hattie follows her in

Mrs Honeywell Coffee up, everyone.
Brigadier About time, too.
Mrs Honeywell Oh, am I late?
Brigadier Thirteen minutes fifteen seconds late.
Mrs Honeywell Oh, is that all.
Brigadier All, woman! Don't you realize that means I'll be thirteen minutes fifteen seconds late throughout the day?
Mrs Honeywell (*calmly*) Then you'd better drink your coffee quick. But mind, because it's scalding.

She goes out as Nan comes in and takes a mug of coffee

Hattie (*approaching Dolores with a mug*) I do apologize about just now. All caused by my running out of nerve-tonic.
Dolores I'll drop some in if you give me the name.
Hattie How very kind, but I'll remember, thank you. (*She ties a knot in her handkerchief*) Oh, there's one already: I wonder what that's for? Have some coffee.
Dolores I won't, thanks. (*Finishing packing up*) I'm already late for my next appointment.
Brigadier Lack of planning, probably. I'll draw you up a schedule if you like.
Dolores (*going to the door*) Thanks: we'll have a nice talk about it as I cut your hair. Tra-la all . . .

They reply

Dolores goes out

Brigadier (*as they settle down to their coffee*) Pretty girl. Nice to see someone with a figure again.
Bee Thank you! But she's also a surprisingly good girl: always helping people.
Hattie (*sighing*) If only we still could.
Nan After the last disaster we really couldn't go on.
Bee I don't agree.
Brigadier You've obviously forgotten that that garden-party lost forty-four pounds and forty-nine pence.
Bee Only because the wretched marquee collapsed.
Nan Because we were too old to organize it properly.
Bee Rubbish! We could still do anything. We have imagination, experience, enthusiasm——
Brigadier (*interrupting*) And rheumatism, arthritis, and lack of memory.
Bee (*strongly*) Strengths if we used them properly. Obviously suffering from

those disabilities, and (*touching her cheek*) with the wisdom of age only too obvious, no-one would ever believe it was us if we did something—spectacular.

Hattie (*worriedly*) Oh dear, I don't like it when you're in this mood: it always leads to something awful.

Mrs Honeywell opens the door

Mrs Honeywell Sorry, but Mrs Coyle from next door insists on seeing you.

Mrs Coyle pushes in. Mrs Honeywell leaves. Mrs Coyle is a very bad-tempered, odd-looking old woman, carrying a two-handled straw basket with a bit of blanket sticking out. She grumbles rather than talks

Mrs Coyle (*threateningly; indicating the basket*) Have just taken Heloise walkies.

Bee Oh?

Mrs Coyle Thought I'd tell you as I hear there've been nasty complaints. And for the information of the complainer, (*heavily*) or complainers, it's already the second time today.

She stumps out

Bee There's gratitude for spending more than we've got on a flat where she lives practically free.

Brigadier Old witch.

Nan And hardly "walkies" when she hauls the little beast about in that basket.

Hattie Oh, I'm afraid that's my fault. I had two, so I gave her one so that the porters wouldn't see Heloise. She's not supposed to have a dog in the block.

Nan She shouldn't hang on to such a sick old dog anyway. The vet's begged her to have it put down, but she just calls him a fool, and lets it suffer.

Hattie I know; it's cruel. It worries me a lot.

Brigadier (*waving his hand in front of his face*) It's really unpleasant now. Did you notice it when she came in?

Nan Who wouldn't. I met little Mrs Mackintosh in the lift this morning. She said it smelt (*with a strong Scots accent*) worse than the boys coming off the fishing-boats after a week at sea.

Mrs Honeywell opens the door

Mrs Honeywell Mrs Lombard from next door to see you now.

Brigadier It's like a railway station this morning.

Mrs Honeywell shows in Fay Lombard, and exits

Fay's careful make-up, and the remains of great beauty, disguise her considerable age. She still overwhelms with her exuberance and traces of grandeur. She exaggeratedly emphasizes at least one word in every sentence

Fay My darlings, you must forgive me for such a completely unscripted entrance!

Bee Not at all, come in. (*Gazing at her*) But what have you done? You look wonderful.

Brigadier Quite radiant, Mrs Lombard.

Fay "Fay", darlings, please! After your angelic kindness and sweetness in allowing me to live in that adorable flat you must all call me Fay. I beg!

Brigadier We shall consider it an honour, Fay.

Fay Oh, you darling man! I'm as blind as a bat so I wasn't absolutely certain before, but now I have a close-up view you're even more distinguished-looking than I thought.

Brigadier (*delighted*) How very kind.

Fay Though I didn't come to praise, but to boast. (*Ecstatically*) Because something staggeringly wonderful has happened.

Bee Tell us quickly.

Fay Well, you'll never have heard of me of course, but AEONS ago I had quite a little success on the stage.

Hattie But we do know, Mrs Lombard—Fay. When we heard you were coming I dashed off and looked you up in the Public Library.

Fay (*aghast*) Dear God—not my age?

Hattie There was nothing about that.

Fay Heaven is merciful after all.

Nan But a great deal of what a wonderful beauty you were, and a long list of all the plays you'd starred in.

Brigadier I remember—I have to admit a little vaguely now—how thunderstruck I was the once I saw you.

Fay Oh, you are all so sweet! (*Sadly*) But then I had my illness, and everything was quite abysmal and everyone forgot me. (*Cheering up*) At least I thought everyone had forgotten me. And then last week—never say the age of miracles is over—a management rang and wanted to see me.

Nan What an excitement!

Fay Almost too much, darling. But I flew down—after hours with my make-up box—and—believe it or not—(*dramatically*)—I'm going to make a come-back.

Hattie No!

Bee How wonderful.

Brigadier Congratulations.

Fay Not an enormous part of course, and as old as Methuselah's Mother, alas. But a most effective and touching little scene right at the end of the play, and the promise of a ravishing frock.

Brigadier I'm delighted for you, my dear.

Bee The nicest news I've heard for years.

Nan I'm almost jealous.

Hattie (*excitedly*) We shall come to see you even if it's only in the gallery.

Fay The gallery! I shall give you a box, of course. And supper at the Savoy afterwards. And lots of other little treats. We'll have enormous fun! But I must flee now: I'm on my way to buy a new coat.

Nan Is there no end to your excitements?

Fay It will be exciting actually, darling. Because I've no money to pay for it. But I can't go on appearing in this ghastly old rag at rehearsals. I'm

getting a quite staggering salary, so I'm sure the shop will be sensible.

Bee My old fur coat's good, if rather unfashionable. You're very welcome to borrow it.

Fay How angelically generous! Oh, you're all so kind and enchanting that it's quite overwhelming. I shall fly before the tears stream from my eyes. Bless you, my darlings!

She goes out

Hattie How terribly exciting.

Bee I'm amazed at the change that's come over her. I hardly recognized her. I thought she was rather a poor old thing. Now she's glamorous.

Nan Because she's involved again. (*Sighing*) Extraordinary the difference it makes.

Bee I find it rather upsetting.

Nan Why?

Bee Well, there she is—a woman of even nearer blowing out the candle than we are—rushing off to give enjoyment. While we sit here vegetating like a lot of old Brussels sprouts.

Mrs Honeywell comes in

Mrs Honeywell It's no good: I can't put up with it! I've bitten my tongue till it's almost off, but I must speak.

Bee What's the matter, Mrs Honeywell?

Mrs Honeywell Mrs Coyle's the matter, Dame dear. And that pathetic little Heloise.

Bee Oh dear, what is it now?

Mrs Honeywell I've told you before I don't like doing her room. In fact I dread it. It always smells. But today—I'm sorry to put it like this: it stinks.

Nan I'll brave her and tell her she's got to keep the window open so long every day.

Mrs Honeywell No, it's not the window, Miss Parry. It's the carpet.

Brigadier But didn't we have new wall-to-wall put down? I remember because the old carpet's still waiting to be taken away.

Mrs Honeywell You won't think it was ever new if you look at it now.

Hattie Heloise?

Mrs Honeywell (*nodding*) Heloise. And I don't like saying it any more than you'll like hearing it but—(*closing her eyes*)—it's not just Number One, but Number Two as well.

Brigadier Good God!

Mrs Honeywell To say nothing of the sick puddles.

Hattie But she takes it for walks.

Mrs Honeywell She never takes it for walks! I've watched her. She takes the miserable creature out of the basket for two minutes, but it's half-blind and can hardly stagger so it just sits there looking lost, and back into the basket she crams it. It never does anything; except on the carpet. It's disgusting. And I'm telling you quite frankly: I like you all, I like my work, and I don't mind being underpaid. But either you make her have it put down as it should be, or—I'm sorry to say it—no ifs and buts, I leave.

She goes out

They all sit rather stunned

Bee (*eventually*) I'm afraid we must make her put it down.
Hattie Oh dear, must we?
Bee Not just because we'd lose Mrs Honeywell. (*Strongly*) But because we can't be so feeble as to let that animal go on suffering.
Hattie Yes, poor little thing. It's always obviously in pain. But Mrs Coyle'll never agree.
Bee Then we must get round her non-agreement.
Nan It'd be difficult: she never lets that basket out of her sight.
Brigadier (*suddenly*) Basket! That's it.
Bee What's it?
Brigadier Didn't you say you had a basket like it, Miss Hatfield?
Hattie That I do my shopping in, yes.
Brigadier Bring it, will you?
Hattie If you want it . . .

She runs out

Bee I think I know what you're at, Bertie.
Nan Take it into our own hands?
Bee (*thinking*) Some sort of a switch.
Brigadier Exactly. (*Thoughtfully*) If we plan it properly it might be quite easy.

Hattie hurries back with the basket

Hattie Your basket, Brigadier.
Brigadier Good. Now . . . (*Writing on his clip-board, as he does on and off during the scene*) We don't want to wear gas-masks, so we'd better get her out of her room. And attack her in here.
Bee She's very greedy; shall we ask her to a meal?
Brigadier Good.
Hattie Won't she be suspicious when we've never had her all these months?
Nan We can say it's some sort of a celebration.
Bee And ask Fay, too, as camouflage.
Nan Have to be on a Sunday, then.
Brigadier Why?
Nan Otherwise she'll be at rehearsals.
Brigadier (*writing it down*) Good thinking. The plan's maturing.
Hattie (*plaintively*) Could someone explain exactly what we're planning?
Bee To get Mrs Coyle in here with Heloise in the basket. Then, Brigadier?
Brigadier Then . . . ? I've no idea. Could some of the rest of the Think-Tank think.
Nan (*thinking it out*) We have this second basket—which we must make look like the first basket . . .
Brigadier Can you undertake that, Miss Hatfield?
Hattie You mean—an old piece of blanket sticking out like she's got, and then something heavyish inside it. Books?

Brigadier (*surprised*) Excellent, Miss Hatfield.
Hattie Oh, thank you, Brigadier.
Nan So now we have the two baskets——
Brigadier I shall refer to them in orders as "H" and "B".
Hattie You mean "A" and "B".
Brigadier (*provoked*) I do not mean "A" and "B", Miss Hatfield! I mean "H" and "B". "H" for Heloise, "B" for books. Is not that simpler?
Hattie Oh, yes, I suppose so. (*Murmuring to herself*) "H" for Heloise, "B" for books.
Brigadier Then we get "H" away from her, and substitute it with "B".
Nan (*nodding*) So she won't miss it.
Bee Next we have to get "H" out of the room.
Hattie Why?
Brigadier Well, we can't do it in front of her, can we?
Hattie What?
Brigadier (*exasperated*) Miss Hatfield, why are we forging this elaborate plan?
Hattie I'm sorry, but I really have very little idea.
Nan (*kindly to her*) We've got to get Heloise's basket out of the room, dear, so that the deed can be performed.
Hattie You mean we're actually going to——(*She pauses in horror*)
Brigadier (*firmly*) Yes.
Hattie Oh dear, do we really have to?
Nan It's a kindness, Hattie, you know it is.
Hattie Yes, I do, deep down. (*Convincing herself*) It really is only being merciful; it must suffer terribly. All right. (*Hastily*) So long as I have nothing to do with doing it.
Bee How are we going to do it by the way?

Pause while they all think

Nan The bath?
Hattie Oh, no: that'd be too ghastly.
Brigadier (*acidly*) Then what do you suggest, Miss Hatfield?
Hattie Well something more humane. And quick. Couldn't it be something instant?
Nan Overdose of pills of some sort?
Brigadier (*thoughtfully*) Instant pills . . . ? (*Suddenly jumping to his feet*) By Jove! I think I've got it . . .

He rushes out of the room

Hattie Oh, heavens! What's he got?
Nan (*slowly*) I have a horrid idea it's going to be his revolver.
Hattie Oh, no!
Bee No, we can't have shots being fired in the bathroom.
Nan If she hears bangs Mrs Coyle's going to know something's up.
Hattie Anyhow somebody might be shot! His hand's very shaky. The bullet might go into any of us.

Bee He'll be the only one there, dear. If he shoots himself in the foot—what am I saying? We must stop him at all costs.

The Brigadier comes back with his hands behind his back

Brigadier We're in luck: it's the very thing.
Hattie (*agitatedly*) It isn't, Brigadier! You're not to do it. We've all agreed.
Brigadier Now calm down, Miss Hatfield. You've no idea what I've got because I didn't know myself; I'd forgotten.
Nan It isn't a revolver, then?
Brigadier I threw my revolver from Waterloo Bridge to prevent my shooting Tony Benn.
Bee Then what is it, Bertie?
Brigadier For a time in the War I was Escape Officer. This meant I had possession of all escape devices. Such as tiny compasses hidden in shirt studs, files in pencils et cetera. (*Emphasizing*) It also meant I had the means to prevent anyone with highly classified knowledge from being taken alive.
Bee Oh, my goodness! Poison?
Brigadier Exactly. Instant working pills. Forgotten in the false bottom of my kit-bag all these years.

He shows a small tin of pills. Hattie draws back in alarm

Bee How d'you know they'll still work?
Nan Seeds from Tutankhamun's tomb sprouted after hundreds of years.
Brigadier What the hell's that got to do with it. Oh, yes, I see. Of course they'll work. (*Shuffling through his notes*) Now, where had we got to?
Nan Trying to find a way to get basket "H" out of the room.
Bee Difficult if she's watching.
Hattie How were we getting "B" into the room?

The Brigadier hectically searches his clip-board

Brigadier We seem to have missed that out.
Nan Damn.
Bee (*thinking*) The baskets must be hidden in something we can carry in and out. Wait a moment: I've got an idea . . .

She hurries off into her bedroom

Hattie (*faintly*) What are we going to do with the—corpse?
Brigadier Dispose of it.
Hattie How?
Nan Easy. You and I take the basket—well weighed down with a rock——
Hattie Where do we get a rock in a flat?
Nan (*annoyed*) Well, not necessarily a rock; something weighty. That old flat-iron I prop my door open with.
Brigadier (*jotting it down*) Flat-iron provided by Parry.
Nan Then we go down to the Serpentine, and fling it in where it's nice and deep.
Hattie But suppose someone sees!

Nan (*after a moment's thought*) Look! (*She points up, and shouts excitedly*) Look!

The Brigadier and Hattie look anxiously to where she's pointing

Hattie What is it?
Nan A UFO.
Brigadier A what?
Nan A saucer. A flying saucer. Look at it—streaking across the sky.
Hattie I don't see anything.
Nan (*crossly*) Because you're not looking. While everybody else does, you sink the basket.
Hattie Oh, I see!
Brigadier Good thinking. (*He jots it down*)

Bee returns

Bee Can't find the damn thing. But I've got an even better idea if someone'll come and help me.
Hattie (*proudly*) We've got rid of the corpse.
Bee We don't want to get rid of the corpse.
Brigadier Of course we want to get rid of the corpse.
Bee We don't! If we do she'll know we've done it. She's got to find it in the basket. Then she won't be so upset as she'll think it happened naturally because of old age.
Nan I'm afraid that's perfectly right. Damn.
Brigadier Yes, it's messed up my orders. (*Crossly crossing out*) No flat-iron. No flying saucer.
Bee (*shaking her head incomprehensibly*) Come on, Nan . . .

Nan follows her into the bedroom

Brigadier Perhaps it's not going to be quite as easy as I thought.
Hattie I'm sure it isn't. Should we cancel the whole thing?
Brigadier (*staring at her in amazement*) Suppose General Montgomery had cancelled his whole battle-plan on the eve of El Alamein?

Hattie looks mystified

See what I mean?

Before she has to answer Bee and Nan come on carrying a small tub chair

Nan Splendid idea, Dame Beatrice. Just the job, I'd say.
Brigadier Then perhaps you'll kindly say it to us, so that we can discuss it before I put it in orders and mess them all up again?
Bee It's simplicity itself, Bertie. At the luncheon we leave one place without anything to sit on. We suddenly "notice", and bring on this chair.
Hattie Beautifully clear so far.
Bee In the chair—covered by a cushion or a rug or something—is the false basket.
Brigadier Refer to it as basket "A", please.
Hattie (*puzzled*) Which is basket "A"?

Brigadier (*crossly*) The one with the books in. Oh, no, that's "B" for books, of course. (*Even more cross at his mistake*) Well, "B" or "A" or "A" or "B" or "B" and "H", it really doesn't matter.

Nan It does matter, Brigadier. We've got to get it clear or there'll be a muddle.

Bee (*hastily trying to pour oil on this troubled water*) It's all perfectly clear really. We bring in "B" basket, which is "a" basket, after all, which is what Bertie meant when he called it "A" basket, though of course it's really "B" basket. (*Despairingly*) Or is it "H" basket: I wish I'd never started this.

Nan (*taking control*) We bring "B" basket in, with a cushion over it. Then while someone causes a kerfuffle——

Brigadier (*correcting*) A diversion.

Bee I'll get on to the subject of what we're eating, and give her the recipe. Or in emergency spill wine.

Nan Perfect. Then while she's busy mopping, we snatch up the basket with the dog in . . .

Brigadier Basket "H".

Nan Put it in the chair . . .

Hattie And put the one already in the chair—basket "B" . . . ?

Brigadier Correct.

Hattie Then put that one down on the floor to take the place of the other.

Nan Precisely. Does that make sense, Brigadier?

Brigadier (*grudgingly*) Can't see any actual snags. (*Writing*) I'll get it down.

Bee Then it's quite easy to get the chair out again. We suddenly remember it's got a gammy leg, and remove it back to the bedroom.

Nan The Brigadier'll have to do that.

Brigadier Why me?

Nan Because you're the one who's actually got to—do the deed.

Brigadier Couldn't one of you do it?

They all say "No" together, very firmly

(*Resignedly writing*) Self: Administrator of Pill.

Hattie Will you know how to make her take it?

Brigadier I'm not half-witted, Miss Hatfield.

Hattie No, of course, but it's very difficult to give dogs pills. You have to stroke their throats to make sure they've swallowed it properly.

Brigadier This is not a pill for tape-worms, Miss Hatfield. It's deadly. One taste, and you're gone.

Bee Then the best thing would be to put it in a lump of raw meat.

Hattie Heloise hasn't got any teeth: she might never get to it.

Bee We'll mince it, then.

Brigadier In which case we'd better grind a pill into powder; then it'll mix in properly. (*Writing*) I'm putting down pestle and mortar.

Bee Then cross it out again: we haven't got one.

Nan A bottle, that's all that's needed. That's how I crunch up breadcrumbs.

Brigadier (*writing*) Bottle for Parry. Then I think we've got it all wrapped up.

Bee We haven't got the corpse back to her feet yet.
Brigadier Oh, my God, neither we have.
Hattie We can't bring it back in a chair we've already said is broken.
Nan No reason not to bring another chair, though.
Bee Yes: there's still a place without one.
Nan My TV chair's not a thing of beauty but deep enough to hide in. Shall I fetch it?
Bee No, we know you've got it.
Brigadier Though, wait a sec. It might be a wheeze to have it. Then we could rapidly do a dry-run of the whole operation, so that I can see we've not forgotten anything for Orders.
Nan Top-hole idea.

She hurries out

Hattie (*agitated*) We're going to go through it now?
Bee Just a sort of rehearsal, dear.
Hattie I really don't think I could manage it after two days of no nerve-tonic.
Brigadier Balderdash. You've really got nothing to do except dither about.
Hattie I shall manage that all right.

Nan comes back with her chair

Nan You may find a few toffee-papers. But I'll give it a good brush before the day.
Bee (*going to pick up her chair*) This'd better go back in my room.

Hattie rushes to help her

Brigadier Wait a sec! Wait a sec. We don't want everyone rushing about like hens turned off their nests. If we're to have success we must use a strict military procedure. Line up there where I can see you.
Hattie Can't you see us here, Brigadier?
Brigadier I want you where I can keep an eye on each of you all the time.

With sighs of resignation they line up

That's better. Now: Appleby and Hatfield place chairs in bedroom. Move!

Bee and Hattie, with two tub chairs, go into the bedroom

In the meantime you and I, Parry, place table in luncheon position. Move!

They take the table: pull up the flaps, and place it near the centre of the room

Hattie and Bee come back, and the three stand in line again

Now. Each place a chair in eating position. Move!

They each place a chair

Bee That only makes four. How many of us will there be?
Nan Us four, Mrs Coyle and Fay. Six.

Brigadier Two more chairs then.
Bee One more chair then. Remember we're bringing in one.
Brigadier (*crossly*) Exactly what I meant. One; then we're bringing in one: two.
Nan (*placing the fifth chair*) We'll put Mrs Coyle nearest the door so that there won't be so far to carry.
Brigadier Good thinking.
Bee (*moving the chair*) So the space must be next to her.
Brigadier Correct. Places!

The three line up again

Now: Equipment. (*Studying Orders*) The two baskets.
Hattie We've only one.
Bee Shall we use the waste-paper basket for Mrs Coyle's for now?
Brigadier Good. "B" basket to first chair, Hattie.

After moments of indecision Hattie seizes the basket and rushes off

"Flat-iron". No, we cancelled the flat-iron. "Poison meat": we can take that as already being in the bathroom.
Bee (*picking up the pills*) But we mustn't leave these lying about. (*Moving to the grandfather clock*) I'll put them where I hide the gin from Mrs Honeywell. (*She does so*)

Hattie comes back

Brigadier That seems to be about all. So we'll go ahead with Action. Wait! "H" basket had better be where Mrs Coyle'll have it. At her feet.
Nan (*placing the waste-paper basket*) About there?
Bee Yes, I should think that'd be all right. Shall we start from where we're all about to sit?
Brigadier Yes, no need for all the rubbishy social preamble. Luncheon places everyone. Move!
Bee (*gesturing; speaking in her "hostess" voice*) I think if you'll sit there, Fay dear. And I feel you'll be most comfortable there, Mrs Coyle. That's right: put little Heloise near you so that she'll be as happy as we all are.
Nan (*slightly falsely*) Oh, how silly!
Hattie What?
Nan We're one seat short.
Bee So we are! Perhaps you could find one from from my bedroom, dear?
Nan Of course.

She goes into the bedroom

Bee (*to the empty chair*) I do hope you're going to enjoy this first course. I got the recipe from a woman who knew a woman whose son knew a woman ... (*Shaking her head*) I'll work it out before the day.

Nan comes back with the first tub chair

Nan Would this one be all right, Dame Beatrice?
Bee Perfectly. Put it there would you, dear?

Nan places it, and sits next to it

(*Continuing to the empty chair*) You simply must try this recipe. Here's a piece of paper and a pencil. (*In her ordinary voice to the Brigadier*) Paper and pencil on list, Bertie.

Hattie I thought we were going to spill wine?

Bee We haven't got it yet, dear. (*To the Brigadier*) In fact that can be your excuse for going out, Bertie.

Brigadier (*jotting*) Bottle of wine.

Bee (*to the empty chair*) Now, dear. (*Giving a significant nod to Nan*) Four eggs, eight ounces or so of cream—double if you can afford it—an eight-ounce tin of salmon—and don't get the Russian: it's very nasty—a spoon of mayonnaise—home-made, of course, and the usual pepper and salt.

During this Nan has nimbly switched baskets and now stands up

Nan Good gracious!

Brigadier What is it?

Nan I've just noticed this chair is all wobbly. I'll change it.

Bee Do: we don't want an accident.

Brigadier Bless my soul: I've forgotten the wine. I'll give you a hand, Miss Parry, on the way.

They go out carrying the chair in which they've put the basket

Bee (*calling to them*) Come straight back for now: there's no point in us just chatting as there are only the two of us.

Nan comes back with the basket in the second chair. Followed by the Brigadier with a vase

Brigadier This'll have to do for the wine for now.

Nan (*placing the chair*) There: that's safer.

Brigadier I do hope you'll enjoy this wine, Mrs Coyle. Not very old, but has a most unusual bouquet.

Hattie I think it's delicious.

Brigadier (*crossly*) You haven't got any yet. (*To the empty chair*) Oh, I do apologize. I've spilt a drop or two on your dress.

Bee Oh, Bertie, how careless. Never mind, dear. If I sponge it with my napkin dipped in a little water—(*rubbing vigorously in the air*)—it shouldn't leave the slightest stain.

During this Nan has again deftly switched baskets

Nan (*getting up*) Oh, dear! Some of it's splashed on this lovely chair. I'll deal with it straight away: we don't want the velvet marked. (*She whisks the chair to the door, but leaves it there*) Operation completed!

Brigadier Bravo, everyone. A very commendable first attempt. If we go through it a few more times to iron out any——(*He breaks off as . . .*)

Mrs Honeywell comes in

Mrs Honeywell Getting the table ready a bit early, aren't you?

Bee We—we just thought we'd help you.
Mrs Honeywell I didn't mean you had to help me, Dame dear. I'm not work-shy. It's just that I cannot, and will not, put up with filth.
Bee We have got that message, Mrs Honeywell.
Mrs Honeywell So you'll do something about it?
Bee We will.
Mrs Honeywell And soon?
Bee And soon. In fact: next Sunday.

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

The same, the following Sunday. Early afternoon

The table is laid for luncheon, with the chairs placed except for two. On one of these Nan sits astride with an open script in her hand. Fay lies on the sofa

Fay "... and what, may I ask, is this?"
Nan (*in a man's voice*) "Your pudding, Mother."
Fay "My pudding. I, who should be tempted with sliced nectarines floating in a pool of crushed raspberries and pomegranate seeds, am given: sago."
Nan (*in a man's voice*) "You want building up, Mother."
Fay "I'll tell you what I want." (*She pauses*) "I'll tell you what I want——" It's no good, darling, you'll have to tell me what I want.
Nan Sewage farm.
Fay Oh yes. "I want you——" uum—what's his name, darling?
Nan Sebastian.
Fay "I want you, Sebastian, and you——" now I can't remember his damn wife's name.
Nan Ghislaine.
Fay Ridiculous name. No wonder I can't remember it. I've asked them to change it to Marie or Jeanne or something simple but, no, it's got to be—what is it?
Nan Ghislaine.
Fay Ghislaine. Because it reflects her character! In which case they shouldn't have cast a girl who looks like a pancake with two currant eyes.
Nan "I want you Sebastian, and you Ghislaine ..."
Fay Oh, yes. "I want you Sebastian and you Ghislaine—(*acidly*) immediately you've finished this delicious sago—to pack your bags and drive off to your dreary little stucco villa near the sewage farm. (*Very firmly*) And stay there."
Nan (*with a French accent*) "You are cruelle, Madame. Sebastian, you must not let 'er speak to me like that." (*In a man's voice*) "No, you must not speak to us like that, Mother!"
Fay "For the first and only time I shall grant your wish (*through her teeth*) Ghislaine."
Nan (*French*) "What is it you mean, Madame?"

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