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SF PERUSALS

Autumn Manoeuvres

A Comedy in Two Acts

Peter Coke

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

Dame Beatrice Appleby, DBE (Bee)
Miss Elizabeth Hatfield (Hattie)
Miss Nanette Parry (Nan)
Brigadier Albert Rayne, CB, CMG, MVO
Mrs Ada Marlborough
Miss Blanche Meadows
Mrs Seymour Williams
Mrs Maxine Mayer
Yellow Jim
A Woman

The action takes place in the drawing-room of Dame Beatrice's flat overlooking the Albert Memorial, London

Time—the present

ACT I SCENE 1 Morning
SCENE 2 A month later. Noon

ACT II Two months later. Afternoon

ACT I

SCENE 1

The overcrowded but delightful drawing-room of Dame Beatrice's old-fashioned flat overlooking the Albert Memorial in London. Morning

There are large bay windows, a single door leading to Bee's bedroom, and double doors leading to the hall, across which can be seen the front door. There are chairs, a sofa, a desk, a table and chairs, a small table and a great many interesting articles and objets d'art

As the CURTAIN *rises, cries of "Help!" are heard. Dame Beatrice Appleby, DBE (Bee)—well on in years, but with tremendous vitality and charm—is standing on a high stool at the window. She calls again*

Bee Help! Help! (*She pauses to listen*) Deaf idiots. (*Calling*) Emergency! SOS. Au secours!

There is a light tapping on the double doors, and Miss Hatfield—Hattie—a timid, bird-like little woman, puts her head round the door

Hattie Are you all right, Dame Beatrice?
Bee No, I'm not all right! Come and help me down.
Hattie (*coming in*) I thought I'd heard a sort of shouting for some time, but imagined it was the wireless.
Bee No, me. Suffering from cramp.
Hattie Oh, you poor thing.
Bee I don't want sympathy, I want your arm, come on.
Hattie Oh, yes, of course; I'm so sorry.

She helps her down

Bee That's better; thank you, Hattie. I felt like Nelson on his monument.
Hattie Were you trying to see something?
Bee No; I've at last got a new cleaning woman coming to be interviewed. I was trying to persuade the spiders to suspend work.
Hattie What a shame: I love spiders' webs.
Bee So do I. (*Wistfully*) And I really rather like the bloom of dust. (*Starting to dust*) But any decent daily would think we were stark staring mad. I hear this one's rather glum, but so long as she has strong arms who cares whether she smiles.
Hattie Let me help. (*Picking up a cloth*) I'm a very careful duster.
Bee That'd be most kind, dear. Don't bother to move anything: just a flick and dab job.

They go round dusting

Hattie Actually I'm glad to have a moment alone with you, Dame Beatrice. (*Hesitatingly*) I have something a little—awkward to tell you.

Bee Has the Brigadier been taking all the hot bath water again?

Hattie (*nodding*) And leaving puddles all over the floor. But that wasn't what I was going to say. It's not a complaint; more of a—plea.

Bee You're going to be late with the rent again?

Hattie However did you know? (*In a rush*) I am so sorry; I feel awful when you let me have the room so reasonably, but although I've new specs my china-mending's fallen terribly behind-hand. Still a client's brought me a splendidly broken Dresden dish—scores of pieces—and as soon as she pays, so shall I.

Bee (*patting her*) Don't think any more about it, dear. I know——

A firm knock on the door

Yes?

Nan—Miss Nanette Parry—a gaunt, late middle-aged woman with a deep voice, comes in

Nan I'm sorry to bother you, Dame Beatrice——(*She breaks off in annoyance as she sees Hattie*) Oh!

Bee Yes, Nan?

Nan Well, actually, it was a little business I wanted to discuss (*with a glance at Hattie*) in private.

Hattie Oh, then I'd better——

Bee You'd certainly better not. You're doing a wonderful job. (*To Nan*) If it's the—business I imagine it is, I assure you Hattie will completely sympathize.

Nan Oh, very well. (*Directly*) It's no good beating about the bush: I shall have to be a few days late paying for my room.

Bee Which means I shall have to be late paying the telephone, gas and electric bills.

Nan I realize it's very regrettable——

Bee The point is will the services be put off with just regrets?

Nan It's a great deal their fault. (*Pointing to the TV*) That damn box has ruined the art of speech. (*Accusing the set*) They mumble and slur and mispronounce till I could kick them. (*She kicks the set*) Oh, no harm, I hope. But it's infuriating. The few pupils who still come look on me as an old fogy whose love of beauty of voice is as old-fashioned as my hair-style. (*Very upset*) That's what one of them actually said to me!

Hattie (*putting her arm round her*) How wicked.

Bee (*doing likewise*) You teach and speak beautifully. (*Comfortingly*) None of them will ever have the success you had as an actress.

Nan (*mollified*) I did have one or two very good notices.

Bee Wonderfully versatile, everyone says.

Nan If you could have seen me as Cleopatra!

Bee (*slightly taken aback*) I'm sure we'd have been staggered.

The door opens, and Brigadier Albert Rayne CB, CMG, MVO—well over seventy, but with military bearing and charming manners, when he isn't being irascible—comes in

Brigadier A matter of urgency to discuss with you, if I may, Beatrice.
Bee Dear Mother! Not another?
Brigadier I beg your pardon?
Bee You're going to be late with the rent.
Brigadier Certainly not! Have I ever been late with the rent?
Bee (*nodding*) On more than one occasion.
Brigadier (*after a moment's confusion*) Due to oversight only. And immediately remedied.
Bee So what is it, Bertie?
Hattie (*moving to the door*) Perhaps it'd be better if we——
Brigadier (*interrupting*) No, no. It concerns you two; in a manner of speaking.
Nan (*darkly*) I somehow feel it's a manner we're not going to like.
Brigadier (*showing a letter*) I've just had this letter from an old army pal. Splendid chap, but is being turned out of his little flat, and has absolutely nowhere to go.
Nan Why doesn't he move to another little flat, Brigadier?
Brigadier (*bitterly*) Because, like me, he commuted his pension foolishly, and is now as broke as I am.
Bee So?
Brigadier What I just wondered——
Bee (*interrupting*) Was whether I'd give up my drawing-room to him? The answer is "No".
Brigadier I never for a moment considered that.
Nan (*ominously*) We wait anxiously for what you did consider, Brigadier.
Brigadier Well—(*with much clearing of throat*)—it's only a licked finger held up to the wind—but as you two ladies have very reasonably sized rooms——
Hattie (*strongly*) No!
Nan I think it impudence to suggest it.
Brigadier (*barking*) I haven't suggested it yet!
Nan If there's any room sharing you can do it with your army pal.
Brigadier How can I? As it is I have to close my desk before I can get into bed.
Hattie Privacy is the one luxury left in my life, Brigadier. I'm not brave, but would certainly fight for it.
Nan As would I. With tooth and nail.
Bee In any case, I'm afraid I have my own long list of desperate friends waiting to move in. (*Worriedly*) It's quite awful when one gets old with hardly a penny. Nobody wants one, and what places there are charge quite exorbitantly.
Hattie Oh, I know! I have an old friend who used to be a governess. She now can't afford the rent-rise, and has tried everywhere. I feel quite ill when I think about her.
Nan What about my old pal, Ella? A saint if ever there was one. Devoted her life to others, and now faces being stuck in a geriatric ward.

Bee Poor dear. (*Shaking her head worriedly*) Yes, we really ought to do something. If we who understand the awful difficulties don't help, who is going to? (*Looking round the room*) The trouble is that with the only exit from my bedroom through here——

Brigadier It'd be like Piccadilly Circus. Impossible.

Hattie Oh dear, you make me feel selfishly guilty. (*A little piteously*) There's really no real reason I shouldn't share my room——

Bee That's sweet of you, Hattie, but you'd also have to share a bath. And with only the four of us the water's never more than lukewarm.

Brigadier Yes, you're right, Beatrice: the flat's too small for more. (*Thoughtfully*) But all this has given me an idea. Only an idea, mark you——

Nan Oh dear, not another licked finger?

Brigadier (*ignoring her*) Is there something in the thought of an – annexe, so to speak?

Bee Explain, Bertie?

Brigadier Well, what – very vaguely – entered my head, is the flats that are about to become vacant in this block.

Hattie (*excitedly*) The one underneath this is marvellous!

Brigadier But enormous. What I had more in mind is – (*pointing*) – that foreign woman's next door.

Nan Mrs Spanager?

Brigadier Spanager, that's it. She's going to sell the remainder of her lease.

Bee Don't I know. She's always trying to get me to buy rubbish she doesn't want to pack. She left a Chinese coat thing here only yesterday.

Hattie Hers is a very nice flat.

Nan (*enthusiastically*) And as our friends wouldn't need a drawing or dining-room there'd be five bedrooms.

Hattie (*thrilled*) Think! We could take in five of the most deserving cases.

Bee Can you also think where the money's coming from to buy the flat?

As they all look dismayed, the front doorbell rings

Oh, dear Mother, that'll be Mrs Marlborough.

Brigadier Who?

Bee Mrs Marlborough, the new possible daily. Quickly, she mustn't see all the cleaning things . . .

They bustle about hiding them

Hattie Where shall I——

Bee Anywhere. The bucket, Bertie: behind the curtain. There I think that's all right.

The bell goes again

Nan We'd better skidaddle.

Bee No, no, she's reported to be difficult, stay and help. Bertie, be a dear: let her in so she gets a good first impression.

Brigadier (*delightedly going into the hall to the front door*) Certainly, certainly.

Bee Settle, and look as if we didn't know what a duster was.

They all sit nonchalantly. The Brigadier opens the front door

Brigadier Good-morning. Go straight in, will you?

Mrs Marlborough marches in. She is a forbidding, untidy woman

Mrs Marlborough (*having looked round. Flatly*) Oh. (*Then shaking her head firmly*) No. (*She turns to go*)

Bee One moment, Mrs Marlborough. Why exactly "No"?

Mrs Marlborough I've never cleaned in a museum. And I'm not starting now.

Bee There's really not as much as it looks. Do sit down and let's discuss it.

Mrs Marlborough I'd rather stand, thanks. So I can see surfaces. (*Drawing in her breath through her teeth as she peers*) No, no, no. Just this room would take 'ours.

Bee The last lady found it quite easy once she got into a routine.

Mrs Marlborough (*nastily*) She didn't clean the copper or brass, I see.

Bee It'll be lovely if you can.

Mrs Marlborough (*quietly challenging*) And what else would you expect?

Bee Well, there's this room, my small bedroom, the hall and the kitchen.

Mrs Marlborough Oh, this lot don't live 'ere, then?

Brigadier This lot do live here, but look after their own rooms.

Mrs Marlborough But have six large feet tramping in and out with dirt on them. What about a bathroom? I suppose you 'ave one. Am I to clean the grime-rim and toothpaste splatters?

Bee You are.

Mrs Marlborough (*grimly*) I see. And there's lots of rubbish to be 'umped down to some old yard, I expect?

Bee Yes.

Mrs Marlborough (*echoing*) Yes. And you'd like the silver given a rub now and then?

Bee Yes.

Mrs Marlborough (*echoing again*) Yes. And some veg peeled and left ready?

Bee Yes.

Mrs Marlborough Yes. And perhaps a few smalls to be rinsed through?

Bee Yes.

Mrs Marlborough Yes. (*Heavily sarcastic*) And what were you thinking of paying for these little duties?

Bee What do you suggest?

Mrs Marlborough (*nastily*) Plenty! Because I don't like being conned.

Bee Conned?

Mrs Marlborough Called in to look after a place what obviously 'asn't 'ad a good clean for months. Your "last lady"! You 'aven't 'ad one for years; any fool can see. And now 'ope I'll get it spotless so you can give me the sack and let it rot again till you call in the next dope. Well, you find 'er dear, because she's not Mrs Ada Marlborough.

Bee (*calmly*) I see. Well, Mrs Ada Marlborough, although we are rather well into the autumn of life, it does not mean that we're helpless, or fools, or prepared to be insulted by someone equally autumnal——

Mrs Marlborough 'Ere! You be careful what you say.
Bee I am. Otherwise I'd put it very differently.
Mrs Marlborough (*strongly*) Queen Victoria's dead, you know. People have *clear* rooms now, easy to clean. And even they can't get no-one. I've 'alf a dozen I can start with tomorrow. Including a TV star! Begging for a few 'ours she is.
Nan If I were you, I'd give in.
Mrs Marlborough (*furiously*) I'm not staying 'ere to be given advice by the lodgers.
Brigadier (*standing in her way*) You are, you know. You're staying here as long as we choose.
Mrs Marlborough (*suddenly slightly uncertain*) What the 'ell do you mean?
Brigadier (*forcefully*) What the hell I say! Sit down, woman. Immediately!

Nonplussed by his military tone, she sits. They gather round her

Now you listen to us for a change.
Mrs Marlborough 'Ere, half a mo——
Hattie No, no mos at all. Tell us first; what do you do with your dog when you're out working?
Mrs Marlborough 'Ow d'you know I've a dog?
Hattie Leave him alone and tied up all day, I expect.
Mrs Marlborough Well, I can 'ardly take him with me, can I?
Hattie (*jotting on a pad*) I'll get my friend in the RSPCA to look into it.
Mrs Marlborough Don't you dare send no-one like that to my place.
Nan What about his licence?
Mrs Marlborough What about it?
Nan (*jotting down*) My department is stepping up action against licence-dodgers.
Brigadier I fancy my department will be interested in seeing your television licence, too.
Mrs Marlborough (*too quickly*) I've got one, I've got one.
Brigadier Well, they'll soon check up.
Nan You declare your wages to the Inland Revenue, I'm sure?
Mrs Marlborough (*after hectic thought*) Mr Marlborough does all that.
Nan Your friend Milly in the Tax Office could soon verify, Dame Beatrice?
Bee Sure. (*Moving to the phone*) I'll give her a ring.
Mrs Marlborough No! Don't do that (*swallowing*) Madam. We may not be absolutely up to date.
Bee (*approaching her*) What a sweet little brooch you're wearing, Mrs Marlborough. Real diamonds?
Mrs Marlborough (*quickly covering it with her hand*) I've no idea.
Bee I have. I'm sure they're very good diamonds.
Mrs Marlborough (*after frantic thought*) A present from a lady I was with for years.
Bee (*ominously*) I'd like a brooch like that. I must ring round your employers, and find out where that lady bought it.

Mrs Marlborough looks at them as they stand grimly round her

Mrs Marlborough (*sulkily*) All right: you win. I'll come for two hours a day at what you paid the other, plus my fares.

Bee (*shaking her head*) You won't, Mrs Marlborough. You'll go. Immediately. And when you're next interviewed it might be as well to remember that white hair doesn't necessarily mean an addled head underneath. Goodbye!

The others stand back as Mrs Marlborough gets up truculently, and marches furiously towards the door

Slam that door as you go out, and the Post Office, Inland Revenue and RSPCA will all be on your door-step in the morning.

Mrs Marlborough very carefully opens the front door, and goes out closing it with extreme caution

Marvellous! Thank you so much, my dears. You supported me wonderfully.

Nan (*enthusiastically*) I enjoyed every moment.

Hattie We really showed her, didn't we?

Bee How did you guess about her dog, Hattie?

Hattie Hairs all down one side of her coat.

Bee Clever old Hattie.

Nan Spiffing how one idea seemed to lead to another.

Bee Yes, you were all very ingenious. (*Thoughtfully*) It's surprising what a banding-together like that can accomplish. Even if we are slightly more than twenty-one.

Brigadier I think that's rather the point, Beatrice. The young couldn't have dealt with her like that. She wouldn't have accepted it from them.

Nan Yes, you have something there, Brigadier. Although we senior citizens are not respected as we used to be, we're still regarded with a certain awe.

Bee I think because we've lived through so much.

Brigadier (*nodding*) Heard and seen so much—have such a fund of experience to draw on.

Bee (*thoughtfully*) Could remember back, and deal with any situation.

Brigadier Yes. (*Thoughtfully*) With any physical short-comings compensated by the authority and insight of rather a lot of years.

Hattie But doing what?

They all ponder on this

Brigadier (*quietly*) Doing something which means a great deal to all of us.

Hattie (*breathlessly*) What, Brigadier?

Brigadier (*slowly*) Getting hold of the flat next door for our friends.

Bee Oh, yes!

Hattie If only we could.

Nan It would be super.

Bee It certainly would.

They ponder again

Let's all sit down again, and put on our thinking caps.

Brigadier Wait a moment! (*Taking an envelope out of his pocket*) I'll jot down notes, and later assemble them under correct headings.

Nan We're not about to launch a bombardment, Brigadier.

Brigadier My first heading is "Object". Which is quite clear, isn't it? To annex the flat next door——

Nan (*nodding*) As an annexe.

Brigadier Now: "Method?"

They all sit blankly

Ideas please.

Bee I wasn't trained at the military academy but it seems perfectly clear that the only way to get the flat is to pay for it.

Brigadier Has anyone an alternative scheme?

Nan No.

Hattie No.

Brigadier Then I'll list suggestions of how we're to raise the money. (*Looking round*) First one?

There is no reply

Come along, come along, for goodness sake.

Nan It's a puzzle, isn't it?

Bee Well, we've called on our friends so often for other charities that it's no good going to them again.

Brigadier (*jotting down*) Then we must attack unknown persons.

Nan Unknown *rich* persons.

Brigadier Correct. Now who are the very wealthy nowadays?

Bee Judging from Harrods' sale there're still an astonishing amount of people with real money. Property tycoons for instance.

The Brigadier writes down each suggestion

Nan Pop stars, certainly.

Hattie House agents who sell expensive houses.

Brigadier Rolls-Royce owners. Yacht owners.

Bee Nobel prize-winners.

Nan Harley Street specialists.

Bee Dentists.

Hattie Undertakers?

Bee Not them, Hattie dear. Some of us are rather too near being customers.

Brigadier But the rest are a nice start. Now: how to get in touch with them?

Nan And make sure, of course, that they're really rich. A mink coat can go home to beans on toast.

Brigadier Yes, we have to penetrate their homes and businesses, and find out the real facts. How?

Hattie Impossible.

Brigadier I can't think Wellington's generals ever used that word to him, Miss Hatfield.

Nan I don't suppose the poor beasts would have gone into battle at all against such odds.
Hattie (*pondering*) How to get in touch with the rich.

They all think

Brigadier Any suggestions?

He looks at them in turn. They each shake their heads. But Bee suddenly turns her shake into a frantic nod

Bee Yes, I have it, I have it! Mrs Ada Marlborough.
Brigadier Who the hell's she?
Bee The daily we put to flight.
Hattie She wouldn't have any money!
Bee But she's our solution. (*Slowly*) Bad and rude as she obviously is, she could get work in any home, or shop, or anywhere that's dusty.
Nan Everywhere in fact! Of course!
Hattie (*excitedly*) Oh, yes.
Brigadier I don't see the connection.
Hattie I do! To find out about rich persons we get into their houses by going as chars.
Nan Spiffing, Dame Beatrice!
Brigadier I am certainly not going out as a char!
Bee No, you'll have to be a butler or footman.
Brigadier (*indignantly*) I will do nothing of the sort!
Bee Do you want your army friend turned out on the street?
Brigadier No, poor chap. (*Thoughtfully*) I suppose I might possibly pass in an embassy or the like.
Bee Perfect. You'd be surrounded by exactly the – donors we're looking for.
Hattie I'm not absolutely clear, once we've found them, how we get them to – donate?
Bee We can't think of everything at once. We'll have to sort of – fit the action to the circumstances as we find them out.
Brigadier But we must be guided by proved military procedure. . . .

The telephone rings

Bee No, we mustn't. (*Going to the phone*) You've got to forget gunpowder, and think nuclear, Bertie. (*Into the phone*) Hullo? Oh, hullo, Mrs Spanager. . . . Yes. . . . Oh, really. Oh! Wait a moment, will you. (*Covering the receiver*) Get that Chinese coat which is on my bed will you?

Hattie flies out to the bedroom

(*Into the phone*) I beg your pardon, Mrs Spanager: I thought I smelt gas.

Hattie flies back with the coat

Oh, wait another moment. (*In a whisper to the others*) What do you think of it?
Hattie Lovely.

Nan Spectacular.
Brigadier Very good. A Chinese Mandarin's coat.
Bee How do you know?
Brigadier These dragons and flaming pearls. Saw masses of them when I served out East.
Bee Splendid. (*Into the phone*) So sorry to keep you waiting: not gas—just a bit of forgotten Stilton cheese. Now: I've got a better idea. You're far too—nice: he'll make rings round you. Let him look at your other things, then send him round here—not saying what about—and we'll deal with him for you. (*She listens*) Not at all: we'll enjoy it. Goodbye. (*She puts down the phone*) Mrs Spanager's got a dealer coming to buy things she's not taking. (*Excitedly*) A marvellous opportunity to test our powers by getting her a top price for this coat.
Nan Spiffing!
Brigadier No, no, you're jumping the gun, Beatrice.
Nan When's this man coming?
Bee He's due with her any moment.
Hattie (*panicking*) That doesn't give us time . . .
Brigadier We must have a plan.
Bee Get it down, then: "Operation Mandarin".
Nan Have you any idea what to ask?
Bee She took it to Sotheby's last year, and they said between fifty and eighty pounds.
Hattie As much as that?
Brigadier More, I guess. The dragon has five toes: it's probably royal.
Bee Bertie, you're marvellous. So marvellous you can be the one who's wearing it.
Brigadier Don't be absurd! Why on earth should I wear a thing like that in the middle of the morning?
Nan Why should any of us be wearing it at this time of the morning?
Hattie (*excitedly*) He doesn't know we're early risers: we could be one of those women who get up very late.
Bee Excellent, Hattie. You come in wearing it——
Hattie (*horrified*) Oh, I didn't mean I wanted to be the one! And what would I come in for?
Bee You can think of that. Then I mention buying it so that he knows it's for sale.
Nan Isn't that what he's coming for?
Bee No, I told her not to tell him. He'll be much keener if he thinks he's discovered something we hadn't thought of selling. (*Thinking it out*) We must start with another object . . .
Hattie (*looking round*) What about your clock?
Bee I couldn't possibly let him have that! My darling husband gave it to me. Besides, the little man who cleans it says it's worth a hundred pounds.
Nan Spiffing! Just what we want. He comes in, and you offer it to him——
Bee (*interrupting*) I do not!
Nan Half a jiff. You hint that you'll let it go cheaply——
Bee I won't.

Nan —Hattie arrives with the Chinese robe, and we divert attention to that. He buys it at a good price: (*emphasizing*) to please us so we'll sell him the clock. Then we get out of selling him the clock.
Brigadier How?
Nan (*crossly*) By thinking instead of asking subversive questions.

There is a long ring at the front door

Brigadier My God, it's him!
Hattie Oh, no! I've only the vaguest idea of my part.
Bee (*to the Brigadier*) You and Hattie'd better listen outside the door so you'll hear what's happening.
Hattie (*frantically*) How do I know when to come in?
Bee I'll ring this little hand-bell. First time for you, Hattie. Second for you, Bertie.
Brigadier What do I do?

The front doorbell rings again

Bee Not be found here for a start.
Brigadier Thank God for that.

He hurries out

Hattie (*also hurrying out*) Oh dear. Talk about wishing the earth would swallow you . . .
Bee Here! You'll swallow the whole enterprise without this.
Hattie (*grabbing the robe*) Oh, yes. Oh dear, oh dear . . .

She exits

Nan I'd better let him in.
Bee Yes. (*Rushing to get a duster*) I'll be dusting to put him off the tack.
Nan Why should it do that?
Bee No idea. But it'll stop him seeing my hands trembling.

She dusts furiously as Nan opens the front door

Blanche Meadows comes in. She has dyed hair, odd clothes, and an ingratiatingly confidential manner that doesn't completely hide her sharpness

Bee and Nan both stare at her

Blanche (*in her soft cooing voice*) Good-morning.
Bee Good-morning. Are you him?
Blanche I beg your pardon, dear?
Bee No, I beg yours. We were expecting – someone else. What can I do for you?
Blanche Mrs Spanager suggested I popped in.
Nan So you are him.
Blanche I beg?
Bee Take no notice: we're a little disturbed. My friend just fell off a ladder. (*To Nan*) Go and sit down, dear. You'll feel all right in a moment.
Nan (*limping to a chair and sitting*) Yes, if nothing's broken.

Blanche I've obviously come at a bad moment. (*Starting to leave*) I'll return some other time.

Bee (*almost grabbing her*) No, no, no. She's making a lot of fuss about nothing; it was only off the first rung. Come and sit down, Mrs –?

Blanche Miss Meadows. But everyone calls me Blanche.

Bee I'm happy to meet you, Miss Blanche.

They both sit

What exactly did Mrs Spanager say?

Blanche That you might have something you wished to dispose of.

Bee (*very surprised*) Really? I don't remember telling her anything like that.

Blanche (*rising*) She must have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. (*Going to the door*) So sorry to have disturbed you.

Bee watches speechless

Nan Your memory's worse than mine, Dame Beatrice. That clock that loses time. That's what you said you were going to get rid of.

Bee Yes, of course: how silly of me. But I don't suppose an old clock would interest you, Miss Blanche.

Blanche (*trying to hide her interest*) Well, it's not really my line. But you never know, dear. Mind if I take a peep?

Bee You peep as much as you like.

Blanche carefully examines the clock while the other two look at each other anxiously

Blanche Yes. Quite nice, dear. Bits of damage, of course. (*Sadly shaking her head*) But it's really only big clocks that sell.

Bee Oh. (*She stretches out her hand to the bell*)

Blanche Mark you, all clocks are worth something.

Bee withdraws her hand

Everyone's got to know the time, haven't they? What sort of money had you in mind?

Bee I really don't know.

Blanche Well, I'll risk being able to get rid of it, and offer you – fifty pounds?

Bee Absurd; it's insured for a hundred.

Blanche (*coyly stern*) So you do have an idea what it's worth. Naughty! But d'you also know the insurance value is based on twice the market value? Still, I don't want to seem stingy. We'll split the difference: seventy-five.

Bee Well – let's have a cup of tea while we think about it . . . (*She rings the hand-bell*)

Blanche Oh, I haven't time for a cuppa, dear. Pardon me . . . (*She turns her back on them*) With all this mugging I keep my money pinned high.

Hattie comes in wearing the too-long Chinese robe

Bee (*pretending not to see her*) Bring tea, will you, Doris?

Hattie (*completely nonplussed*) Doris? Tea?

Bee Oh, it's not Doris! It's you, Miss Hatfield.

Hattie Yes, it is. Have I overslept?
Bee No, no; it's only about twelve.
Hattie Twelve? Oh, what a sleepy-head I am.

They look at Blanche waiting for her to comment. When she doesn't:

Bee But a very smart sleepy-head.

She looks at Blanche who continues counting notes

Nan (*emphasizing*) A really dazzling sleepy-head.

Blanche concentrates on her counting. Hattie yawns, and eventually in despair, starts to leave

Hattie Well – I suppose I'd better go.
Bee (*alarmed*) Where to?
Hattie (*at a loss*) Back to bed, I suppose. (*She walks towards the door*)
Bee Don't forget you promised me that old dressing-gown for my bazaar.
Hattie Oh, did I?
Bee You know you did.
Hattie Yes, of course I know I did! I'm still half asleep.

Blanche suddenly becomes alert

Blanche (*going to Hattie*) You're going to sell this?
Hattie No! I mean, yes. I mean – oh, I don't know what I mean. I'm so sleepy; I must go back to bed. (*Realizing*) Oh, but I can't, can I! (*With relieved inspiration*) Yes, I can – because I'm so hot. Feverish. I can't bear this old thing. (*She throws off the coat*) I'm going back to bed: I'm sure I've got sleepy sickness.

She flees in her night-dress

Bee (*to Blanche*) You must excuse her: I'm afraid she's a little too fond of the bottle.
Nan (*limping and picking up the coat*) But it's a colourful coat; you should do well out of it, Beatrice.
Bee Yes, I've one or two people interested already.
Blanche (*over-casually*) I might be interested actually. (*Examining it*) The thread's pulled here and there, but it's quite nice.
Bee Very nice. We've had expert advice.
Blanche As to price as well?
Bee Yes. (*Challengingly*) A hundred and fifty pounds.
Blanche (*pretending dismay*) Oh, surely not, dear? This is the sort of thing I do know about. I'd say a hundred'd be overdoing it.
Nan Ah, but charity buyers always pay a little more than it's worth.
Blanche (*after a moment*) So how much more would you consider?
Bee I suppose if you offered a hundred and forty . . .
Blanche Well, as I'm buying the clock as well, what about a hundred and twenty-five?
Bee (*accusingly*) It's for charity, Miss Blanche! A hundred and thirty or no sale.

Blanche Oh, very well. (*Counting out notes*) I'll hardly make a penny, but it's a nice bit of stock. (*Offering the notes*) There you are: one hundred and twenty.

Nan is scribbling on a piece of paper in her notepad

Bee One hundred and thirty.
Blanche Oh, is that what we agreed? Silly me!

She gives Bee the money who puts it in one of her pockets

Nan (*handing her the paper on which she's been scribbling*) And if you'd be so kind?
Blanche What is it, dear?
Nan A receipt. (*Giving her the pen*) Just sign there, if you will.
Blanche (*reluctantly*) I don't really like signing things. I pass articles on so quickly and with so little profit I can't afford VAT and all that on top.
Bee It's only for our fussy charity accountant.
Blanche Oh, all right, dear. (*She scribbles on it, and puts it in Bee's pocket*) There; you can feel safe.
Bee Thank you so much.
Blanche Now let's settle the clock equally easily, dear. Seventy we agreed, didn't we?
Bee Seventy-five. But thinking it over——
Blanche (*interrupting*) Oh, seventy-five: what a silly I am this morning. Seventy-five it shall be then . . .

She starts counting out the money. They watch in alarm. Bee frantically rings the hand-bell

Bee Where on earth is that wretched Doris?
Blanche (*holding out notes*) Here you are, dear.

As Bee stands helpless the Brigadier bursts in

Brigadier Splendid news, Beatrice.
Bee It needs to be. What is it?
Brigadier (*handing her a cheque*) A cheque for a hundred and fifty pounds.
Bee A hundred and fifty pounds! For what?
Brigadier Your clock, of course. You told me to sell it. I have.
Nan Brilliant, Brigadier.
Bee Oh, Bertie, how clever!
Blanche One moment, dears. Is that the clock I'm buying?
Bee I'm so sorry; I'm afraid there's no question of that now.
Brigadier Yes, yes, he's written the cheque. It's the property of my (*emphasizing*) High Court Judge now.
Blanche But I only gave over the odds for the Chinese coat as I thought I was going to make a little bit on the clock——

Nan interrupts her with a loud groan

Bee Your leg hurting?
Nan No, something far worse.

Brigadier What?
Nan It's twelve o'clock! The monster will be here any moment.
Blanche The man who's bought the clock?
Nan No, no, no. Worse. From the Inland Revenue. To inspect my accounts.
Blanche (*horrified*) The VAT people?
Nan (*nodding*) A man like a hawk with eyes like screwdrivers.
Blanche (*very nervous*) He mustn't see me. He just might question me about my book-keeping. I have answers of course, but he mightn't completely understand. I think I'd better be off. (*Looking at the robe*) But I don't know I really want this now——
Bee (*pushing it at her*) Of course you do: it's royal. It'll be snapped up. (*Pretending to listen*) Is that the lift stopping at this floor?
Blanche I'll nip down the stairs. But it's all most unsatisfactory. (*Hurrying to the door*) I don't do business like this; I'll come in some other time. If he asks about me, you've never seen me before: I just came in selling poppies.

She scurries out of the front door

Nan A triumph! A veritable triumph.
Bee Well, there were one or two awkward moments, but you were wonderfully inventive, Nan. And you, Bertie.
Brigadier Lucky she didn't look at the cheque: it was one of mine.
Nan I thought we'd better get a receipt in case she tried to back out.
Bee (*taking the receipt from her pocket*) A brainwave, Nan. (*Looking at it*) Even if it mightn't hold up in a court of law.
Nan Why not?
Bee She's signed "Marie Antoinette"!

The door opens and Hattie puts her head round, still in her night-dress with a dressing-gown

Hattie Safe?
Bee Come in, Hattie dear, come in. You played your part wonderfully, too.
Hattie I didn't play anything. I was so frightened I really did feel ill. I'm still unusually hot.
Bee (*taking the notes from her pocket and waving them*) Let the sight of our gains cool you.
Nan Fifty more than Mrs Spanager's top hopes.
Hattie No! Miraculous.
Bee And far more important: wonderful proof that we're perfectly capable of carrying out a scheme if we really set our minds to it.
Hattie We are; we really are, aren't we?
Brigadier I have to admit it came off far better than I'd dared hope.
Hattie (*breathlessly*) So do we start going out as chars, and finding donors?
Bee (*nodding*) Providing they're very wealthy. Then all we'll be doing is manœuvring them into giving what they can very well afford, to those who very urgently need it.
Nan A spiffing way of looking at it! Ella will be over the moon when I tell her we can give her a room.
Brigadier My army pal must have the one nearest the bathroom: he has troubles.

Hattie (*anxiously*) My old governess friend will be seriously considered, won't she?
Bee (*nodding*) We'll draw up a list of possibles, and choose the most urgent.
Hattie I'll pop in every morning and evening to do little jobs for them.
Nan I'll always help out with shopping. And in the afternoons——
Brigadier Wait a minute, wait a minute! You're galloping away again before the flag.
Bee Yes. Let's get it quite clear first. We all agree we can, and must, have the annexe?
Hattie Oh, yes!
Brigadier If the greatest precautions are taken.
Nan We've got to: full stop.
Bee Then let's take the first irrevocable step!
Nan I agree.
Hattie The sooner the better.
Brigadier (*suspiciously*) What step, Beatrice?
Bee If we dither any longer we'll be put off by the cold. (*Moving to the phone and dialling*) Let's plunge.
Nan Into what?
Hattie Let's, whatever it is.
Nan Here, here.
Brigadier (*urgently*) No, no, you must liaise with us before taking action, Beatrice.
Nan Liaising with you takes so long, Brigadier.
Bee (*silencing them with a frantic wave. On the phone*) Mrs Spanager? Beatrice Appleby. I have good news. We've sold your Chinese coat for one hundred and thirty pounds. (*She listens*) I thought you would be. But wait a minute! I've even better news. (*Slowly and distinctly*) We've also sold your flat for you!

The CURTAIN *falls on their expressions of alarm and elation*

SCENE 2

The same. A month later. Noon

When the CURTAIN *rises, the Brigadier is placing four chairs round the table. He adds a carafe of water, four glasses, and a pile of papers and files. Then sitting centre, puts his pocket-watch on the table, takes a gavel from his pocket, and bangs*

Brigadier (*calling to the bedroom door*) Come along, Beatrice, come along. The meeting was scheduled for noon. It's now twelve-o-five.
Bee (*off*) Coming, Bertie.

She opens the bedroom door, and appears with an apron over her dress, with her hair done up in a gaudy handkerchief, a cigarette hanging from her mouth, and carrying dusters and polish

(*With an accent*) I want to 'oover so get your be'ind off of that chair.

Brigadier What on earth are you doing dressed up like that?

Bee (*dropping the accent and removing the handkerchief and apron*) Just trying it out. I mustn't become "known", so I thought I'd stop being Mrs Andrews, and become Mrs Lillywhite next job.

Brigadier But you can't leave your present family. Or have you found out enough already?

Bee No, no. But I'm considering taking an afternoon job as well.

Brigadier You'll do nothing of the sort; you'll wear yourself out.

Bee No, I shan't. Rich people's houses are extraordinary. I'm fascinated.

Brigadier You're not there to enjoy yourself, Beatrice; you're there to gather information. Anyhow, all this should only be discussed before the others. That's why we have these regular meetings. Where the hell are they? It's twelve-o-eight now.

Bee We dailies have to work elastic hours, Bertie. It's no good trying to control us with railway timetabling. (*She opens the bedroom door and throws in her "daily" bits and pieces*)

Brigadier (*huffily*) It's nothing to do with the railways. It's accepted military procedure.

Bee The military don't move their troops by underground, and the practically non-existent seventy-three bus.

Nan hurries in wearing a hat and coat

Nan Sorry to be a jiffy late. My poor beasts had a dinner-party for eight last night.

Bee Oh, poor Nan.

Nan They're so thoughtless. The washing-up's never stacked properly; just piled higgledy-piggledy so the first half-hour's spent disentangling.

Brigadier Why are you wearing that funny hat?

Nan (*crossly*) What's funny about it?

Brigadier I meant – it's funny seeing you wearing a hat.

Nan (*taking off her hat and revealing a turbaned head, and an apron beneath her coat*) How else do I get past the porter without him suspecting?

Bee What a good idea, Nan. I take a selection of good and bad scarves, and change in the bus. But I get some very odd looks.

Hattie taps and comes in, very distressed

Hattie I do apologize for being so late. But I've had a mishap.

Bee Oh, Hattie dear. Nothing serious?

Hattie Yes. (*She pauses*)

Brigadier Well, what, Miss Hatfield?

Hattie (*almost in tears*) I've got the sack!

Nan Oh, you poor beast.

Hattie Their horrid little child pinched me on my – where he shouldn't. I completely lost control, and slapped him.

Bee Probably did him a lot of good.

Hattie (*wailing*) But that I should do it! I who am such a strong voice against capital punishment.

Bee I'm sure I'd have done exactly the same. Only harder.

Brigadier (*nodding agreement*) Half the trouble with the world nowadays is that people like your rich film-magnate spoil their children so much. You've probably nipped a future mugger in the bud.

Nan It's also nipped our lovely free cinema tickets in the bud.

Bee So what? I haven't been able to enjoy my bath since that awful film where rats came up the plug-hole.

Brigadier (*impatiently*) Our scheduled meeting is eleven minutes late. Will you kindly take your places, ladies?

The ladies go to their chairs

Hattie (*as she sits*) I'm relieved not to go back in a way. They had mustard with everything: it's so difficult to wash off plates.

Nan Egg's my bugbear. Sticks like glue.

Bee Wait till you get bran! My lot have it with their breakfast cereal. Not only does it stick——

Brigadier (*banging his gavel*) Ladies, please! This is a Planning and Report Committee, not a Domestic Hints and Tips Bureau. (*Shuffling papers*) Now. Up to date our rather lin. ed operations have brought in only moderate financial gains. But they have been enormously valuable in the lessons we have learned. So let me stress that we must apply these lessons in the next two major schemes we are about to carry out.

Hattie I feel jellified to think of them.

Brigadier Quite unnecessary. Firstly—due to good scouting by Miss Parry——

Nan (*interrupting*) Oh, I can't accept all the praise. If it hadn't been for Dame Beatrice taking on that cleaning job at the showroom in Berkeley Square we'd never have had the list of Rolls-Royce owners to start us off.

Brigadier I agree; very commendable.

Hattie Oh, yes.

Bee (*shaking her head*) I should have stayed till I got more. But that marble floor and my knees——

Brigadier (*over-ridingly*) Firstly, then, we have "Operation Pop Star". By the way, Miss Parry, what do we call him to his face?

Nan Yellow Jim, of course.

Brigadier Hasn't he got a proper name?

Nan Alfie Tank. But he doesn't like it remembered. Now it's "Yellow Jim and His Junkies".

Brigadier Good God!

Hattie I caught a bit of him on television last night. I think he's marvellous. That sort of hysterical voice. I can't tell you what it does to me.

Brigadier I can tell you——

Bee (*interrupting*) I thought this was supposed to be a Planning Meeting?

Brigadier Yes, yes, you're quite right, Beatrice. (*To Nan*) You're completely satisfied this fellow can afford to—donate?

Nan Crippen, yes. The last bill for servicing his Rolls—just tightening the bolts or whatever they do—was fifteen hundred pounds. And he never queried it.

Brigadier (*making note*) He can afford to donate. Good. So "Operation Pop Star" at fifteen hundred hours next Wednesday the twenty-fourth.

Hattie Our first really big operation! I feel swimmy. (*Firmly correcting*) No, I don't! I feel ice-cool with brain aflame.

Bee (*with raised eyebrows*) Good. Because it must be a success. It's over a month since we said we'd buy the flat, and Mrs Spanager hasn't even had a penny of the deposit.

Nan We've given her very good excuses. (*Innocently*) Anyone can make a mistake dating a cheque.

Bee But how much longer are such "mistakes" going to put her off? When I ran across her in Marks and Spencer's yesterday her smile was decidedly deep-freeze.

Brigadier (*crossly*) All the more reason to stick to the business in hand. (*Looking at papers*) Our second scheme—exact date and time yet to be decided—is Hattie's "Operation Beetle".

Hattie (*holding up her hand*) Is it in order to decide it now?

Brigadier Why?

Hattie I probably haven't stressed it enough before, but Mr Andropolous is very ancient. We don't want him popping off before we operate.

Bee We certainly don't.

Brigadier Then I'll pencil it for the following Wednesday, the first. Tomorrow I'll go over the route again with my stop-watch, and check timings. (*He makes a note*) Then we have our two semi-planned schemes: "Operation Centre Court" and "Operation Sleeping Beauty".

Nan (*demandingly*) What about my "Operation Racing Car"?

Bee We agreed it was too dangerous, Nan.

Nan I didn't agree.

Brigadier (*over-ridingly*) Even without "Operation Racing Car" we have a very nice little reserve of ideas. But as it's absolutely essential that neither we, nor the flat, can ever be traced and so investigated——

Nan Using each scheme only once surely there's no possible danger?

Brigadier (*witheringly*) Exactly the point I was trying to make, Miss Parry. But covering our tracks in so many different ways, so that there's no pattern to be followed, means ideas are used up rapidly. Therefore it is of paramount importance——

Bee (*interrupting*) To come to the crux of the matter without too much speechifying.

Brigadier (*huffily*) I am only trying to give the meeting a formal basis so that it doesn't disintegrate into—(*pointedly*)—unproductive washing-up waffle.

Nan (*irritated*) You'll please remember you're talking to the people who do the actual work, Brigadier.

Brigadier And I'll ask you to remember that it's not my fault I can't get jobs as easily as you do, Miss Parry.

Nan It's hardly anyone else's fault that at your first one you poured bread-sauce all over the chief guest.

Bee (*hastily*) That's all water under the bridge. What is it that's of "paramount importance", Bertie?

Brigadier (*heavily ironic*) That I stop "speechifying" obviously. I therefore hand over to the "workers". Perhaps in turn you'll give your ideas concerning any possible new benefactors, and any new possible schemes for persuading them to donate. (*He sits*)

Bee (*tactfully*) Put beautifully succinctly, Bertie. I shall try to copy you in my report. (*Standing*) Well, there's no doubt that my Lebanese family are "possibles". Mr Habib has just given each of his lady friends a most expensive small new car.

Brigadier Good God!

Nan I thought you said there was a Mrs Habib.

Bee There is: a sweet woman.

Hattie Poor creature.

Bee Not at all. Her one passion is her stables. She knows that every new mistress means a new horse so she couldn't be happier. Therefore I propose "Operation Lebanon" for the future, and will submit details when fully gathered. (*She sits down*)

Brigadier (*who has taken notes*) Operation accepted. Next, Miss Parry. Your report, please.

Nan (*standing*) Well, I'm enjoying being with my interior decorator off Bond Street no end. For one thing they have the most stupendous hoover. It simply whizzes across the carpets——

Bee (*warningly*) Nan! (*With a glance at the Brigadier*) I don't want you to be ruled out of order.

Nan Thanks. But I think I'm wasting my time: all the really expensive jobs we're undertaking are in the country. And as our only transport is Mr Ashmore——

Bee Oh yes! Do forgive me for interrupting, Nan, but I must bring up Mr Ashmore before I forget. It's so convenient him living downstairs, and he's so ready to drive us at any time of day or night, that I think perhaps we're exploiting him a bit. Should we consider giving him a little something more than just his petrol money?

Brigadier I thought you said he was perfectly happy with the pound of your home-made fudge every week?

Nan His complete discretion is vital to us.

Bee Oh, there's no doubt about that; he's even more excited about the annexe than we are.

Brigadier Still, perhaps we'd better be on the safe side. Increase the fudge-ration to a pound and a half. I'll note it.

Bee I'd much rather you helped me stir the wretched stuff.

Brigadier (*hastily*) So you think you'd better move to another job, Miss Parry?

Nan (*nodding*) I've already prepared the ground by telling them my husband is carrying on with a blonde——

Hattie Your husband!

Nan (*defensively*) Perfectly possible.

Bee (*placatingly*) Oh, very possible.

Nan So I think tomorrow I'll give in my notice saying I've ousted the blonde, so need time off to go on a second honeymoon.

Hattie You're marvellous, Nan.
Nan Thank you. Then I suggest moving to a Canadian family that my bus-stop friend Lil told me about. In furs, with three cars. (*She sits*)
Brigadier (*noting it down*) I think we'd certainly approve the move.
Hattie Hear, hear.
Bee (*nodding*) Very promising.
Brigadier Next.

They all stare at Hattie who is smiling happily to herself

Next!
Hattie (*jumping to her feet*) Oh, I'm so sorry. I was just having a vision of myself swathed in mink.
Brigadier (*severely*) Any Canadian furs would be put towards the annexe, Miss Hatfield, not on your back.
Hattie Oh, I know, I know. I'm so sorry. But it was a vision. It came to me: I couldn't help it.
Brigadier Your report.
Hattie Well, as you know, I mostly have only failure to report——
Bee Nonsense. Mr Andropolous and his beetle collection is going to be wonderfully profitable.
Nan God, and the Russians, willing.
Hattie But that awful film family were so beastly I'm afraid I concentrated on self-preservation rather than information.
Brigadier We can't expect to spot a winner every time. (*Consulting a list*) I think we'll send you to perfume. A wealthy French lady who is one of the top importers.
Hattie Oh, good. I love a rich smell! But wait a moment. What I wanted to say was that next door to the beastlies lives a real "possible".
Brigadier (*pen poised*) Details?
Hattie She's a Mrs Seymour Williams: a widow with a house stuffed with treasures who's so rich she has a TV in every room including the loos.
Bee How on earth do you know?
Hattie She has a sweet daily called Mary who's always asking me in when the old girl's out. We drink Earl Grey tea and eat hand-made biscuits from Fortnum and Mason's.
Nan Lucky beast. We only have stale ginger-nuts from the Co-op.

Bee, with a glance at the Brigadier, clears her throat

Hattie Oh, yes. Well, I think the way to get Mrs Seymour Williams to help us with the annexe is through her dogs.
Brigadier What on earth have dogs——?
Bee You may hear if you listen, Bertie.
Hattie She has two she simply adores. They're quite revolting – not their fault, poor dears, they're fed all day on chocolates and sponge-fingers – but I think can lead us to a small share of the Seymour Williams fortune.
Nan Spiffing.
Brigadier How?
Hattie Anyone who loves dogs like that is very vulnerable——

The telephone rings

Brigadier Damn! Let it ring.

Bee (*getting up*) Certainly not: might be something exciting. (*Into the phone*) Hullo? (*Her face falling*) Oh, hullo, Mrs Spanager. . . . Figures and writing on my second cheque don't agree? Oh, how silly of me! . . . Don't be ridiculous! It's my carelessness, nothing to do with fate! . . . You haven't!! But you've no right to! Mrs Spanager? (*Putting down the phone*) Damn woman's hung up on me.

Nan What, what?

Bee Says two bounced cheques means we're not fated to have the flat, so she's rung the agents and put it on the market.

Hattie No!

Brigadier The witch.

Nan Make it a "b", Brigadier.

Hattie (*frantically*) She mustn't be allowed to! We've got to have it for our friends. We've got to. They'll be destitute otherwise.

Bee What can we do? She's put it up for sale.

Nan (*firmly*) We must stop it somehow.

Hattie (*miserably*) You can't stop what's already been done.

Nan Then it'll have to be undone. (*Thinking*) How much do the agents know about her?

Bee Little, I'd guess. I've lived here thirty-five years, and they still look at me as if I'd just come off the Ark.

Nan Splendid. (*Crossing to the phone. To Bee*) You have the agents' number?

Bee On that letter in red. Their final demand for service charges.

Nan (*dialling*) You trust me?

Brigadier (*grudgingly*) Can't think of any alternative.

Nan (*into the phone, with a German accent*) 'Ullo? Put me bitte to flats for the sale, ya? (*Covering the receiver*) What's the number of Mrs Spanager's flat?

Bee Twenty-four.

Nan (*into the phone*) 'Ullo? Flats for the sale, ya? Frau Spanager has give to you her flat twenty-four for the sale, ya? . . . Ya. This here vas her dear daughter——(*covering the receiver and speaking in a frantic whisper*) German Christian name?

Bee Brunhilda.

Brigadier No, no, too fancy.

Nan (*into the phone*) 'Ullo? Vat a bat line. This vas Frau Spanager's dear daughter Hilda. Ve hov just arrive from Berchesgarten to stay mit lieber Mutter. And vill not hear of her to leave flat. (*Vehemently*) Nein, nein, nein! Ve vill pay all expenses, so please to cancel sale of flat. Ya? . . . Danke schoen. Auf Wiedershein. (*She puts down the phone*) Accent a bit ropey, I fear.

Bee But content vunderbar!

Brigadier Yes, well done, Miss Parry.

Hattie Yes, but will it stop her ringing them when no-one arrives to view?

Nan What about cutting her telephone wires?

Brigadier It'd mean taking the planks up in the corridor. Too dangerous.

(*Worriedly*) We've got an explosive situation. We must take the offensive quickly. Get down to the office, make an offer for the flat——

Hattie Nan's told them it isn't for sale!

Bee We can get round that by saying Hilda's potty. Will they ring Mrs Spanager back and confirm?

Brigadier Then we sign a provisional agreement then and there——

Bee (*flatly*) And haven't enough deposit to back it up.

Nan Curses!

They sit in despair for a moment

Hattie With all this money coming in from charring I have quite a nice little bit saved. I could spare nearly fifty pounds.

Bee That's sweet of you, Hattie. But if it's not to be suspicious we'll have to pay the whole amount. It is only the deposit.

They consider again in silence

Nan We're going to lose our flat you know.

Hattie But our poor friends! We simply must get somewhere for them.

Bee (*thoughtfully*) Are we being blind-folded by the thought of not getting the money till next Wednesday?

Brigadier Clarify, Beatrice.

Bee Mightn't it be possible to get the deposit money before then?

Nan Yes! Why shouldn't we do one of the other schemes straight away?

Brigadier Because they're not fully planned.

Bee Hattie's beetle scheme is all but planned.

Hattie Oh, heavens!

Brigadier (*sternly*) All but planned doesn't guarantee success.

Bee It's no good having a lovely guaranteed success when the flat's sold to someone else.

Nan And you've researched it so thoroughly, Brigadier. Any slight hitches can be overcome with natural invention.

Brigadier I wouldn't be at all happy——

Bee (*interrupting*) I would. Because it's our only possible chance. We'll vote. Those in favour of immediate action?

She shoots up her hand, as does Nan. Hattie timidly follows after they both stare at her

Bee Passed! Dig out the plans, Bertie.

The Brigadier sorts out papers on the table

Get Mr Andropolous on the phone, Hattie.

Hattie Now?

Bee Of course.

Hattie (*horror-stricken*) But I'd never have voted "yes" if I'd known I had to perform without a go-through first.

Nan (*comfortingly*) We will go through it while we wait for him to arrive. You can't let down our homeless friends.

Hattie (*after a moment*) You're right, I can't. I'd never forgive myself. All right. Give me the details, Brigadier, before my eyes go squinty.

Nan (*taking a paper from the Brigadier*) I'll dial the number for you. (*She does so*)

Hattie No, no, I must have time to think!

Brigadier (*giving her a paper*) There's nothing to think about: you have all the data there.

Nan No answer.

Hattie Thank goodness!

Bee But I thought you said he never went out?

Hattie He doesn't. But with any luck he has.

Nan He's answering! Quick! (*She pushes the receiver into Hattie's hands*)

Hattie Mr Andropolous? This is Mrs Hardcastle . . . Amy Hardcastle. Who cleaned for you a little while ago, and had to leave because of her gall-stones. . . . Oh, they've melted, thank you. I'm ringing because the lady I told you about is most interested in the idea of exhibiting your beetle collection. She has a passion for beetles, and this large house in the country, and would love to discuss turning part of it into the Andropolous Museum. . . . I thought you might be. She wonders if you could come round and discuss any little financial arrangement? Only it'd have to be immediately as she's had a sudden tempting offer to turn the house into a health farm. (*She listens. Then covers the receiver, and speaks in a frantic whisper*) He's having his lunch.

Bee Then after lunch.

Hattie (*into the phone*) Then when you've finished your pudding. (*She listens. Then to the others*) Has to have his rest.

Brigadier Then after his damn rest.

Hattie (*into the phone*) When you wake up perhaps? . . . But if you wrapped up warmly. . . . Oh. Five-eight-nine six-two-two-two. (*She puts down the receiver*) He's snuffily, but will ring you when he's better.

Nan Curses!

Bee Fussy old idiot. Just the sort that gets the aged a bad name.

Hattie I'm really quite disappointed; I was so keyed up I could have done anything.

Nan We were all keyed up: it's damnable.

Bee (*after a moment*) No, it's not! As we're all emotionally geared, let's try again.

Brigadier Now be careful, Beatrice; I feel you're going to venture into a mine-field.

Bee Probably. We must just weave between the mines.

Brigadier Oh, my God!

Bee We have another operation ready, haven't we?

Hattie "Pop Star"?

Bee Exactly. Why don't we bring it forward?

Nan All this week Yellow Jim's in Copenhagen doing a gig. (*Answering their puzzlement*) What they call a concert.

Bee Damnation.

Brigadier (*consulting his notes*) "Sleeping Beauty"'s not being danced again

until the twentieth. And "Centre Court" has to wait for the tennis championships.

Nan What about Hattie's other idea?

Hattie (*nervously*) What idea?

Nan Mrs Double-barrelled name.

Hattie Mrs Seymour Williams. (*Protesting*) But it was only a whiff of an idea.

Brigadier (*firing the question*) You said she was very wealthy?

Hattie Yes, rolling, but I——

Nan (*also attacking*) How did you think of persuading her?

Hattie I hadn't thought properly!

Brigadier You said something about dogs.

Hattie Yes, but I hadn't completely incorporated them.

Nan Tell us about them.

Hattie Oh, it's unfair! You're persecuting me!

Bee No, no, Hattie dear: just very interested in an idea that might save our bacon.

Hattie It won't! It could get us all frizzled.

Nan Tell us the facts, and see if we can't cook them up.

Hattie Well—Mrs Seymour Williams is very acquisitive. So I thought we wouldn't have too much trouble getting her here by pretending we had something she could add to her treasures——

Nan What sort of thing?

Hattie What she's most proud of is her collection of card-cases.

Brigadier Card-cases?

Bee I know. Those lovely flat cases we used to put our visiting cards in in the good old days.

Hattie (*nodding*) Some of them are evidently worth hundreds nowadays, and she'd go to Timbuctoo to get a rare one.

Brigadier Sounds promising. But when she arrives, and we haven't got anything?

Nan Easy. They belong to a friend who's bringing them round, and never arrives.

Brigadier Then how do we get her money?

Hattie I told you she's silly about dogs. Silly enough I think (*slowly*) to help me pay ransom if I arrive and say my little dog's been kidnapped.

They all look doubtful

Bee Well, I suppose she might.

Hattie (*urgently*) I know you were once bitten by one, Dame Beatrice. But for some people dogs take the place of children. Perhaps even love them more because they're dumb.

Nan (*pensively*) D'you know I'm not sure it's not rather a spiffing idea.

Hattie (*encouraged*) I'd pay up to save somebody's dog. And it's not cruel because there wouldn't be a real dog.

Bee (*thoughtfully*) It's very good in a way because we wouldn't have to cover our tracks at all.

Nan (*enthusiastically*) Let's try it! (*To Hattie*) Have you got her number?

Hattie (*nodding and taking out a notebook*) She lives just round the corner, but don't you think——

Brigadier Now, wait a minute, wait a minute——

Bee If we wait all the minutes you want, Bertie, we'll have the Middle East next door with strange smells and worse noises.

Brigadier God forbid!

Bee It's up to us, not him. Dial her, Hattie.

Hattie (*doing so*) I couldn't possibly speak! It'll be all I can do to carry out the second part.

Nan I don't mind talking to her. In fact would rather enjoy it. I shall be an Italian Countess.

Brigadier For God's sake why?

Nan I was very good as one in a play once.

Hattie (*gasping*) She's answering!

Nan (*taking the receiver*) Pronto? Signora Seymour Villiams? Ah, bon giorno, Signora. I am Contessa Francesca Ribolini. (*Listening and then repeating syllable by syllable*) Francesca Rosanna Ri-bo-li-ni.

Bee (*sotto voce*) Careful, Eleanor Duse!

Nan I shall sell soon my collection of card-cases. Is possibel you might like? . . . Variosa, Signora. Ma buonissima! . . . But naturentemente, Signora. I am this moment take them to my cara amica Dame Beatrice Appleby who also like.

Bee (*horrified*) I don't!

Nan Albert 'all Mansions, Signora: the portiere will direct you. But aspeto, Signora. I have to have part English cash because all my money is Italian lire. . . . Bene. Grazie. Grazie, Signora. Arriverderci, cara Signora. (*She puts down the phone*) She's on her way.

Hattie Oh, no!

Bee Dear Mother! You shouldn't have said I like them: I know absolutely nothing about card-cases.

Nan Then you're interested because you have an American friend who's asked you to find them for her. It's shaping beautifully. I shall be terribly grand, and appear totally disinterested in money.

Brigadier You don't appear at all: that's the point.

Nan Damn, neither I do. What a swizz.

Bee Hattie's the dog owner, what are you, Bertie? We want to impress her. Could you be the butler?

Brigadier No, I could not!

Nan You have all the clothes: from the bread-sauce party.

Bee (*hastily*) We agreed to forget that.

Nan I know! I'll be a French au pair girl instead.

Brigadier (*acidly*) The French part might pass: the rest certainly wouldn't.

Bee (*hastily*) Yes, I don't think that's exactly what's wanted.

Brigadier To stop even odder ideas I agree to be the butler.

Bee Splendid. One who's been with the family for years so that it won't look odd if you join in in emergency.

Hattie Emergency!

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