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SF PERUSALS

Breath of Spring

A Comdey in Three Acts

Peter Coke

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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BREATH OF SPRING

Produced at the Cambridge Theatre, London, on 26th March, 1958 with the following list of characters:

(*in the order of their appearance*)

Miss Nanette Parry ("Nan")	Hazel Hughes
Brigadier Albert Rayne, C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O.	Michael Shepley
Lily Thompson (the maid)	Joan Syms
Alice, Lady Miller	Mary Merrall
Dame Beatrice Appleby, D.B.E. ("Bee")	Athene Seyler
Miss Elizabeth Hatfield ("Hattie")	Elspeth Duxbury
Pape	Antony Baird
Kemp	David Chivers

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the living-room of Dame Beatrice's flat overlooking the Albert Memorial

ACT I

An evening in Spring

ACT II

Six months later. Early afternoon

ACT III

Six months later. Afternoon

Time—the present

ACT I

SCENE—*The living-room of Dame Beatrice's flat overlooking the Albert Memorial. An evening in spring.*

It is an old-fashioned, second-floor, mansion flat with french windows across the corner up L, *leading to a balcony overlooking the Albert Memorial. Double doors up* C *lead to the entrance hall, across which the front door can be seen, with a corridor beyond giving access to the lift, other flats and staircase. There is a fireplace, with a "cosy-stove" down* R. *A door down* L *leads to Beatrice's bedroom. Originally the drawing-room, it now also houses some of the dining-room furniture. The result is an overcrowded, cheerful, slightly antiquated room, crammed with furniture and mementoes from China and India. There is a desk with a telephone and elbow chairs down* L; *a tub chair* LC; *an oval table up* LC; *and a plant-table in the window. A cupboard for drinks stands* L *of the double doors. There are upright chairs* R *and* L *of the doors,* L *of the drinks cabinet and at the downstage end of the oval table up* LC. *A plinth at the downstage side of the curtains has a secret cupboard in it. A beer crate stands at the downstage end of the plant-table. There is a side-board up* RC, *with a folded screen down* R *of it. In front of it is another table with plants. An ottoman stands* RC *with a small table behind it and a rug with an animal's head on the floor in front of it. There is a small table above the fireplace and a cabinet below it. A fireside stool stands in front of the stove. Down* R *is an armchair with a paper rack below it. At night the room is lit by table-lamps on the desk down* L *and on the table above the fireplace. A small table, with a bowl of ferns stands in the hall.*

When the CURTAIN *rises, it is about half past seven on an April evening. The lamps are lit and the stove is burning, but the window curtains are not yet closed. The double doors up* C *are open.* MISS NANETTE PARRY *is standing by the desk, speaking on the telephone. She is a gaunt, enthusiastic lady who dresses peculiarly and has a deep booming voice.*

NAN (*into the telephone*) Yes; yes . . . But, Henrietta, this is the second time in three weeks that you've cancelled your voice lesson. (*Severely*) You're never going to get rid of your strange vowels that way. (*Sympathetically*) Oh, you poor beast. I understand. (*She sits at the desk and consults her note-book*) Well, can you manage next Monday at the same time? . . . (*Annoyed*) Well, get your book and look. (*She waits*)

(BRIGADIER ALBERT RAYNE, C.B., C.M.G., M.V.O., *enters the hall by the front door. He is a distinguished-looking, white-haired and moustached, elderly gentleman, still with a military bearing, who though frequently short-tempered and dictatorial, has beautiful manners, and is charmingly courteous in an old-fashioned way. He is carrying a foolscap board on which some papers are clipped. He takes off his hat and comes to the double doors*)

BRIGADIER. Oh. (*He is displeased at finding Nan*) Good evening, Miss Parry.

NAN (*displeased at the interruption*) Oh, it's you, Brigadier.

BRIGADIER (*moving* C) Is Beatrice back?

NAN. Not yet.

BRIGADIER (*peeved*) Nuisance; wanted to show her my findings. (*He puts his hat, gloves and umbrella on the left end of the ottoman. Enthusiastically*) I've had a splendid day.

NAN (*not interested*) Oh?

BRIGADIER. I've travelled backwards and forwards between Hyde Park Corner and Hammersmith *eight* times.

NAN. I thought you did that yesterday.

BRIGADIER. I did! But that was on the *seventy-three* bus. Today I was on the *nines*. There's all the difference. As I am very soon going to point out to London Transport headquarters.

NAN. Really.

BRIGADIER (*moving to* R *of Nan*) My plan will completely eliminate this absurd bunching and long gaps. (*He enthusiastically shows her his board*) This is my table of minute by minute timings along the route. Blue for the seventy-threes: red for the nines.

NAN (*into the telephone*) Yes. But hold on a minute.

BRIGADIER. The differentiation of timing is staggering . . .

NAN (*crossly*) Well, I can't be staggered now; I have a pupil on the line.

BRIGADIER (*staggered*) But surely my plan is more important than . . . ?

NAN (*interrupting*) Do you mind?

BRIGADIER (*collecting his hat, gloves and umbrella; very offended*) Well, please report immediately Beatrice returns. (*He moves to the double doors*) *She'll* be interested in my findings. (*In his best military voice*) All right, carry on.

(*The* BRIGADIER *exits by the double doors to* R)

NAN (*into the telephone*) Now, Henrietta . . . Good. And mind you put in some practice before then. Have you been doing your exercises? . . . Let me hear some reduplicated consonants . . . (*She leans back to listen*) Yes, yes. Come along. The "P's" . . . No, no, no. (*She demonstrates*) Hop Poles. Soup Plates. Plump Partridges. Repeat . . . Fair. Now the "D's". Bad Dog. Bigoted

Dotards. Muzzled . . . (*She breaks off suddenly*) I'm giving you a free lesson: I'm mad.

(*The front-door bell rings*)

(*She rises guiltily and lowers her voice*) I must go. Monday, then, at three-fifteen. Knowing Byron's *Lamentation Over Greece*. (*She replaces the receiver and creeps up* L *to* L *of the double doors, then darts to* R *of the doors*)

(LILY THOMPSON *enters the hall from* R. *She is a cheery, down-to-earth, very attractive girl with a slight Cockney accent. Her brusque manner does not conceal her great love for Bee, and to a lesser degree for the others, whom she treats as children*)

LILY (*catching sight of Nan*) Hi! What are you doing in there?

NAN (*evasively*) A telephone call.

LILY (*moving into the room*) You lodgers really are a menace.

NAN. Lily! (*She moves to* R *of Lily*) Dame Beatrice told you not to refer to us as lodgers. We're guests.

LILY. Guests, squatters, lodgers; I don't mind.

(*The bell rings again*)

Oh, don't be so impatient. But what I do mind—is you all flocking in here turning Dame's private quarters into a telephone booth.

NAN (*picking up a textbook from the table behind the ottoman*) Dame Beatrice said we could use the telephone.

LILY. Occasionally. In the mornings. Not buzzing in and out like a whole lot of damn bees in a hive.

NAN (*ominously*) Lily, if I'd spent three years in—(*emphasizing*) you-know-where—I'd be more careful of what I said to people.

LILY. If you'd been three years in clink you'd be even further up the "hop pole".

(NAN *stamps out by the double doors to* R. *As she does so the bell rings again*)

All right, I'm coming as fast as I can. (*She goes leisurely to the front door and opens it*)

(ALICE, LADY MILLER, *enters excitedly by the front door. She is still pretty with the aid of coiffeur and beautician, and elegantly though not expensively dressed. When the front door is open there is the noise of the party from the flat next door*)

ALICE (*as she enters*) Sanctuary, Lily, sanctuary!

LILY (*surprised at seeing her*) Oh, hullo, my lady. (*She closes the front door*)

ALICE (*coming into the room*) Whoever are those ghastly people out there? I had to fight my way out of the lift.

LILY (*moving to* L *of Alice*) They're from the next-door flat, my

lady. (*She takes Alice's hat and coat*) Mr Spanager's giving one of his cocktail do's.

ALICE (*moving below the ottoman*) He must serve stronger drinks than my friends ever do.

LILY. He's a rich stockbroker. (*She puts Alice's hat and coat in the hall*) He's always giving parties. Calls it "ploughing back the profits". (*Eagerly*) How was Le Touquet, my lady? Did you have a gorgeous gamble?

ALICE (*with a gesture of horror; in a whisper*) Shh! Don't mention it, Lily. Where's Dame Beatrice? Don't tell me she's next door sipping profits? (*She sits on the ottoman*)

LILY (*moving to* L *of the ottoman*) No, my lady. She's out at one of her charity committees.

ALICE (*with mock alarm*) Poor darlings, I bet she's giving them hell! How is she?

LILY. Well, she hasn't been up to anything lately. (*She moves to the windows and closes the curtains*) It's worrying. I get fussed when she's quiet. It means something's going to blow up.

ALICE. Don't I know! The first time I met her she was quiet.

(LILY *crosses to the sideboard, collects a tablecloth, cutlery and table-mats and returns to the table up* LC)

Ten minutes later she had me parading between sandwich-boards in front of Buckingham Palace.

LILY (*laughing*) Don't tell me you was a suffragette? (*She commences to lay the table*)

ALICE. All Dame Beatrice's friends had to be suffragettes.

LILY (*convulsed with laughter*) I can just see you all marching along.

ALICE. Don't you laugh too soon. (*Ominously*) Has she given up the idea of adopting children?

LILY (*immediately sobered*) No. We still hear a lot about them.

ALICE. How many now?

LILY. Five. Assorted colours.

ALICE. We must trust to luck they'll blow over. (*She powders her nose*) While I'm waiting, I might as well see the Brigadier. Is he in?

LILY (*warningly*) I wouldn't if I was you. We've got a third lodger since you've been away . . .

ALICE. A third?

LILY. A Miss Hatfield. She mends china. At least, that's what she calls it; the cup she did for me fell straight to pieces again.

ALICE. What has that to do with my not seeing the Brigadier?

LILY. Miss Hatfield doesn't understand the time-table for use of kitchen and bathroom that he's drawn up. She's overstepped her time tonight, and he's livid.

ALICE. It sounds very alarming.

LILY. It is. (*She moves to* R *of the table up* LC) Life's one long

army manœuvre with the Brigadier. (*Excitedly*) Wait a bit. I think I hear Dame's key. (*She goes into the hall*)

(ALICE *rises and puts her handbag on the table* R.

DAME BEATRICE APPLEBY, D.B.E.—"BEE"—*enters by the front door. She is a woman in late middle age, of tremendous vitality and personality, is a little eccentric in manner and clothes, and has moods that change in a second. At the moment she is very angry*)

BEE (*as she enters; calling*) Lily!

LILY. Evening, Dame dear. Have you had a nice day?

BEE (*coming into the room*) Don't talk to me.

(LILY *follows Bee into the room and takes her hat, coat, gloves and handbag*)

I'm in a filthy temper. Fetch me the medicinal brandy, quickly.

LILY. Dame dear, Lady Miller . . .

BEE. And give me a cushion: I must lie flat on the floor.

LILY. Dame dear . . . (*She gets a cushion from the tub chair* LC *and hands it to Bee*)

BEE (*taking no notice of her*) Thousands of pounds that wretched charity has in the bank. But can I get them to distribute it? (*She waves the cushion*) I might as well try to give the feathers in here back to the birds they came from. (*She puts the cushion on the animal's head of the rug and is about to lie down when she sees Alice*) Alice, my dear! (*To Lily*) Why on earth didn't you tell me?

(ALICE *and* BEE *embrace.*

LILY *shrugs and exits down* L, *taking Bee's hat, coat, gloves and handbag with her*)

(*She draws back from Alice, in horror*) But it can't be you.

ALICE (*apologetically*) It is, darling.

BEE. But you're at Le Touquet making our fortune at roulette.

ALICE. Darling, prepare yourself for a horrible shock.

BEE. Oh, no!

ALICE. Every single penny they got from me.

BEE. All those extra francs I found in my passport, as well?

ALICE. All yours, all mine, and another hundred thousand I raised on my pearls.

(LILY *enters down* L, *crosses to the cabinet up* LC *and takes out a brandy glass.* BEE *lies on the rug with her head on the cushion*)

BEE. Lily, make it a *large* dose of medicinal brandy.

ALICE. Darling, I'm suffering from shock, too. (*She sits on the ottoman at the right end*)

BEE. My dear, I'm so sorry; the disappointment's clouded my brain. Two large doses, Lily.

(LILY *takes a second glass from the cabinet*)

Oh, Alice, I had such schemes for the thousands I was certain you'd win.

ALICE. I'm sure.

BEE. Starting with a party——

(LILY *puts the glasses on the table up* LC *then exits to the hall, closing the doors behind her*)

—where we were going to give our friends little *objets d'art* wrapped up in five-pound notes.

ALICE. If only you'd use that fertile imagination to think of ways of getting money rather than how to give it away.

BEE. But I like giving it away. It's fun. (*She is suddenly gloomy*) Though now I suppose I shall have to dodge even the flag-sellers in the streets on charity days.

ALICE. Rubbish! With all these "lodgers" you must be making a fortune.

BEE. They just enable me to keep abreast of the continual risings in rent. (*She groans, rises and puts the cushion on the ottoman*) But, oh, the misery of being a landlady. The new lodger's already upset Bertie, isn't on speaking terms with Miss Parry, and now wants a new electric stove in her room. (*She crosses to the stove*) While I have to make do with this wretched thing. (*She takes hold of the raker and rattles it furiously in the stove*) What's the matter with it; it's hardly giving out any heat. Wants the sweep, I suppose. Oh, how depressing everything is.

(LILY *enters from the hall carrying a bottle of brandy, which she puts on the table up* LC)

(*Suddenly gay again*) I know what we'll have to cheer us up: champagne!

ALICE. Darling!

BEE (*crossing above the ottoman to* L *of it*) I feel just in the mood for it. Leave that, Lily, and fetch that bottle of champagne I won at the hoop-la.

(LILY *moves to the double doors*)

(*She shivers*) And bring my old fur cape from the hall cupboard.

LILY. Right you are. If I can get it away from the moths.

(LILY *exits to the hall, closing the doors behind her*)

BEE (*gaily*) We must think of some *other* way of making a fortune, Alice.

ALICE (*apprehensively*) Oh, no, don't let's!

BEE. We must have some interest to keep us—(*she flutters her hands*) vibrating. Otherwise, before we know where we are, we shall be in a rut.

ALICE. Darling, you're mad.

BEE. I'm not. These lodgers of mine are a horribly illumi-

nating lesson. (*Going to the cabinet up* LC) They're all dears, really, but because they're in a rut they've become petty and silly, and spend their time quarrelling about nothing. (*She takes two champagne glasses from the cabinet*)

ALICE. It's not so easy to find interests when one's getting towards—the teatime of life.

BEE (*gaily*) Nonsense! (*She shuts the cabinet and moves up* L *of the ottoman*) One can be young at a hundred. (*Angrily*) Not that the nitwits on my committees believe that. Two grey hairs and a wrinkle and one's considered a senile idiot. I'm blessed if the hospital lot didn't suggest that I stop ferrying patients about in my car.

ALICE. It is rather a death-chariot, darling.

BEE (*indignantly*) It's nothing of the sort! It's a dear old car. But the reason they gave was that it was an activity "better left to younger folks". Nincompoops! If I could find the money I'd buy a Jaguar. (*She puts the glasses on the table behind the ottoman*)

ALICE. Pray God you don't!

BEE (*wandering to* L *of the ottoman*) Our experience of life is of immense value, Alice.

ALICE. Of course it is, darling.

BEE (*kneeling on the left end of the ottoman*) We've learnt patience, understanding, tact—(*with a sly smile*) guile—we could do *anything* if we made up our minds! (*Wickedly*) Let's show them by doing something spectacular.

ALICE (*warily*) Such as?

BEE. Be quiet while I think. (*She crosses down* L)

ALICE (*slowly*) I've been thinking while I've been away. (*She looks sideways at Bee*) What about getting married again?

BEE (*after the slightest pause*) You, or me?

ALICE. Well, I was thinking of me, actually.

BEE (*enthusiastically*) A splendid idea! Why didn't *I* ever think of it? (*She crosses and sits* L *of Alice on the ottoman*) I suppose because you've tried it twice before.

(ALICE *glances sharply at Bee*)

But why not a third time? A wonderful idea. We'll have a quiet, gracious wedding at St Peter's, Eaton Square . . .

ALICE (*laughing*) Now, wait a minute, darling. I have to find a husband first.

BEE. Have you any "possibles"?

ALICE. Well—I've been wondering about your lodger?

BEE (*surprised*) Bertie?

ALICE (*nodding*) Bertie.

BEE (*not pleased*) Oh. (*She rises and crosses to the tub chair* LC)

ALICE. Don't you like the idea?

BEE. I don't think he's very suitable—for *you*. (*She sits in the tub chair*)

ALICE. Oh, I know he's become a bit cranky . . .

BEE. A bit? He now has a patent clock with which he "times" everything. It goes "ping" just at the most awkward moments. Maddening.

ALICE (*rising and crossing to* R *of Bee*) But think what fun he was when we all lived on the Riviera.

BEE (*musingly*) Yes; he was indeed.

ALICE. So witty, and smart. I used to think that you were smitten with him, and was overjoyed when you chose Leo and went off to Hong Kong.

BEE (*meaningly*) Bertie's very different nowadays.

ALICE. If he's changed one way, he can change the other. (*More to herself*) I think I could manage it. He was always prone to flattery. That and talk of the old days . . .

(LILY *enters from the hall. She carries a tray with a bottle of Veuve Cliquot, and a napkin, and also has a fur cape rolled up, inside out, and tucked under her arm. She is bottling up her excitement*)

LILY (*closing the doors*) Here's the grape juice. (*She puts the tray on the table behind the ottoman*)

BEE. Thank you, Lily.

LILY (*moving to* R *of Alice*) Er . . . My lady?

ALICE. Yes?

LILY. Dame's had a lovely nylon jumper sent to her by her niece in Washington. It's in the top drawer of the whatnot in her bedroom. Would you like to go and have a look at it?

BEE. What?

ALICE. Are you trying to get rid of me, Lily?

LILY (*coaxingly*) Just for a tiny minute; do you mind?

ALICE (*crossing to the door down* L) I shall be so tormented as to why I've got to go, that I shan't enjoy the nylon in the slightest. I warn you I'm not going to have a long look.

(ALICE *exits down* L)

BEE. Whatever is all this, Lily?

LILY (*moving behind Bee*) I just didn't want her here when I gave you your fur.

BEE. Why ever not?

LILY. I just didn't, that's all. (*She puts the cape around Bee's shoulders*) There you are. (*She moves to the double doors*)

BEE. Thank you. (*She watches Lily then looks down at the fur*) Lily, one moment! This isn't *my* fur.

LILY (*stopping and turning and pretending astonishment*) Isn't it, Dame, dear?

BEE (*examining the fur*) No. It's . . . (*Amazed*) Why, this is quite beautiful. It looks like mink.

LILY (*moving to* L *of Bee*) It is mink. A first quality "Breath of Spring" mink.

BEE (*puzzled*) "Breath of Spring" mink? But I don't possess anything like this.

LILY. You do *now*.

BEE. I don't understand. (*Becoming alarmed*) Where has it come from?

LILY. Never mind *where*, Dame dear. Just be glad it's *come*.

BEE. What on earth do you mean? Wait a moment. I've seen this before somewhere. These tails. I remember wondering whether they were really the tails belonging to the animals. Now where . . . ? (*Horrified*) Good Heavens! This belongs to the stockbroker's wife in the flat next door, doesn't it?

LILY. Well, let's say it did. (*She crosses below Bee on her way to the double doors*) I'll tell you all about it on a nice rainy afternoon.

BEE (*catching Lily by the hand*) You'll tell me all about it this very moment. It's Mrs Spanager's, isn't it?

LILY (*making for the double doors*) Gracious, I think I've left something in the oven.

BEE. It can stay there. (*Severely*) Now, Lily, I want a full and truthful explanation.

LILY (*moving to* R *of Bee*) Well—(*in a rush*) it was a moment of temptation I succumbed to. I never thought of the ins and outs; just of how you've always longed for a nice fur.

BEE. You mean . . . ?

LILY (*quickly, holding up her hand*) No, wait till you hear, Dame dear! It was "Providence". As I was taking your old mothy out of the cupboard, one of the boozers from next door rang our bell in mistake for the lift. I sent him off with a flea in his ear. Then I noticed that he'd left the Spanagers' front door open, and there on a chest was that mink—smiling up invitingly.

BEE (*ominously*) Go on.

LILY. Well, I've always *longed* to give you a really smashing present to make up for all you've done for me . . .

BEE. I've told you repeatedly that I don't want presents from you.

LILY (*shouting in her effort to explain*) But I wanted to give you one! Working the fingerprints off my fingers isn't enough for all your goodness. You were the only one who'd give me a break when I came out of Holloway.

BEE. It made no difference to me that—your last post was with Her Majesty.

LILY (*kneeling* R *of Bee*) But it did to me. (*Urgently*) And I've always been determined to repay you. (*Dramatically*) And there, suddenly, on that chest, was the answer to the maid's prayer.

BEE. But you promised me you'd never take anything again.

LILY. You know, the thought of you saying that flashed into my mind as I stooped to pick it up. But then I had a bigger flash.

BEE. Pity it wasn't the word "police".

LILY. I saw, as if he was hanging in front of me, a preacher.

BEE. A "preacher"?

LILY. Heard him in Wales, by mistake. His words came ringing back to me: "Those that have two coats should give unto their neighbour one." (*Triumphantly*) What do you think of that?

BEE. I don't see that it has anything to do with it.

LILY (*rising and moving* R) Of course it has. Old Mrs Spanager's got a whole cupboard full. And you're the neighbour with only old mothy.

BEE (*after a slight pause*) Well—(*she removes the cape*) now you'll go straight back, and return it.

LILY. Don't you like it?

BEE (*severely*) Whether I like it or not has nothing to do with it. As you very well know. (*She tosses the cape to Lily*) Here you are.

LILY (*catching the cape*) Well, I'm horrified! After all my trouble. Anyway, how can I take it back? The party's over. I can't hardly ring the bell and say "Here's the fur I pinched five minutes ago."

BEE. No. You can't actually do that. But . . . (*She stops, not knowing what to say*)

(*There is a tap at the double doors.*

MISS ELIZABETH HATFIELD *enters from the hall. She is small, thin, nervous, untidy and birdlike, and of indeterminate age. She wears a flowered overall heavily smeared with paint marks, and carries a Rockingham teapot covered with strips of brown paper. She is almost in tears of anger*)

HATTIE (*crossing to* L *of Bee*) I'm sorry to disturb you, Dame Beatrice, but I must see you most urgently.

BEE. I'm afraid it isn't very convenient, Miss Hatfield.

LILY (*brightly*) Oh, don't mind me, Dame dear—(*she crosses to Bee*) I was just going, anyhow.

(LILY *quickly puts the cape around Bee's shoulders, and darts out by the double doors*)

BEE. Lily . . . (*She rises to follow Lily*)

(*The* BRIGADIER *enters from the hall. He now wears a butcher's striped apron, and carries his patent pinger.* BEE *resumes her seat in the tub chair*)

HATTIE. The Brigadier's completely ruined one of my client's Rockingham teapots, Dame Beatrice.

BRIGADIER (*moving down* C; *angrily*) I merely turned up the oven to heat through my macaroni cheese.

HATTIE. And made it far too hot for the china I had baking. (*She pokes the teapot at Bee*) Look at the scorches along my joins.

BRIGADIER. Your china-mending shouldn't have been in my oven.

(NAN *enters from the hall, closing the doors behind her*)

The kitchen's mine until nineteen thirty hours. There were still a good ten minutes to go when I came in. (*He shows his pinger*) I set my pinger to ping at nineteen twenty-nine. To give me a minute's warning before my time elapsed. And it hasn't gone off yet.

(*The pinger suddenly emits a loud ping*)

See?

HATTIE. But china-mending is my living, and I do feel . . .

NAN (*moving to* R *of Bee*) If you've quite finished, Miss Hatfield . . .

HATTIE (*turning her head from Nan and moving* L) I'm not on speaking terms with you. (*She sits on the desk chair and puts the teapot on the desk*)

NAN (*to the Brigadier*) May I ask you not to hammer on the door when I'm having my bath in the morning, Brigadier?

BRIGADIER. O-seven-thirty hours is my scheduled bath time. It was o-seven-thirty-four when I tapped.

NAN. Tapped! The whole room shook. I was smothered in a shower of rust from the geyser.

BRIGADIER. As Field-Marshal Montgomery said: "Discipline underlies civil life in the same way that it is the basis of military life."

NAN. I bet the poor beast has a nice soak in his bath without Armageddon breaking out. (*She moves below the table up* L)

(ALICE *enters down* L)

ALICE. Am I allowed back yet?

BEE (*rising and crossing to the fireplace*) Come in, Alice, and join the happy throng. You don't know Miss Hatfield. Lady Miller.

ALICE. How do you do?

HATTIE. How do you do?

ALICE (*crossing to* L *of the Brigadier; cooingly*) And, Bertie! What a lovely surprise. You never come and see me, you bad man.

BRIGADIER (*bowing, and kissing Alice's hand*) My dear, you change hotels so frequently that I never know where you are.

ALICE. Well, take my address now—(*she crosses below the ottoman towards her handbag on the table* R) and we'll arrange . . . (*She breaks off as she sees the fur around Bee's shoulders*) Bee, darling! What a magnificent fur.

BEE (*swallowing*) Yes. Isn't it?

NAN (*moving* L *of the tub chair; suddenly*) Great Scott! It's Mrs Spanager's.

BRIGADIER. Mrs Spanager's? How do you know?

NAN. I've stood next to it in the lift. She explained about the name and colour, and how she'd had the tails made detachable.

BRIGADIER. Are those tails detachable?

(BEE, *in answer, sadly pulls off one of the sets of tails.* HATTIE *rises*)

ALICE. But if it's Mrs Spanager's what are *you* doing with it?

BEE. Well—er—Lily made a sort of mistake. (*She refixes the tails*)

NAN. Mistake? (*Realizing*) Christmas!

ALICE. You mean that Lily's—reverted?

BEE. Just very temporarily.

BRIGADIER (*appalled*) No!

HATTIE. Has she actually . . . ? (*She makes a "removing" gesture*)

(BEE *nods*)

But how terrible!

BRIGADIER. I warned you against employing a jailbird.

BEE (*angrily*) So you've been proved right—how does that help us?

ALICE. But you mustn't just stand there with it, Bee.

NAN. No, they might think one of us had—taken it.

BEE. It would be very awkward for me to return it. You see, about a week ago when I met Mrs Spanager wearing it, I said, "For two pins I'd steal that."

BRIGADIER. Then what are you going to do, Beatrice?

BEE (*putting the fur on the firestool*) Don't be so infuriating; if I knew, I'd be doing it.

NAN (*to Hattie*) Could one of us return it saying it had been taken in error?

HATTIE (*turning her head away, and crossing below Nan to* L *of Alice*) Perhaps you'd ask Miss Parry, Dame Beatrice, what sort of error there could have been when none of us went to the party.

BRIGADIER. No, no. You must summon Lily, and order her to return it.

BEE (*crossing to* R *of the Brigadier*) She wouldn't even answer the bell in the mood she's in. I know her.

NAN. But she must take it back; there are no two ways about it.

BEE. The Spanagers know about her past. Also she called Mrs Spanager something—appropriate, but not very flattering. If they find out, it'll mean jail for her again. (*She wanders up* R)

HATTIE. Oh, we can't allow that.

NAN. No, I suppose not.

BRIGADIER. No.

ALICE. Certainly not. We must think of some sort of *mistake* to explain it away. Now what? (*She sits in the armchair down* R)

BRIGADIER. Exactly; what?

(BEE *moves to the fire-stool, transfers the fur to the ottoman, then sits on the ottoman at the right end. The* BRIGADIER *puts his finger on the table up* L, *then sits on the ottoman at the left end.*

NAN *sits in the tub chair.* HATTIE, *after dithering, sits on the animal head. They think in silence for a moment*)

NAN (*suddenly*) Could we throw it back from the pantry window?

BRIGADIER. Quite impracticable.

NAN. A really good shot ought to be able to get it into their window opposite. I used to be a dab at a coconut shy.

BRIGADIER. This isn't a coconut. It's a cape.

BEE. Besides, that's their kitchen window. If it sailed on to the stove we should be liable for arson as well as theft.

HATTIE (*horrified*) Oh, please don't use the word "theft".

BRIGADIER. It's the word that'll be used if we're discovered in a guilty circle round it.

(HATTIE *rises in horror and moves to the table up* L. BEE *throws the fur on to the fire-stool*)

(*He rises*) We're being weak-minded. (*He crosses to the desk*) There's only one correct line of action; ring up the police.

HATTIE (*very alarmed*) Oh, no, no, no!

NAN } (*together*) No!
BEE }

BRIGADIER. Why not?

HATTIE (*moving to* R *of the Brigadier*) The police would never believe I'd just "forgotten" to get a wireless licence.

NAN. I'd owe a fortune to the income-tax if they found out about my pupils.

BEE (*thoughtfully*) I've never actually declared your rents. No, wiser not to have the police.

ALICE. Unless they arrive on their own.

HATTIE. Oh, don't! (*Agitatedly*) There must be something we can do.

(*There is a pause while they ponder*)

NAN. Got it! Post it back anonymously. I can disguise the address for the label. I could copy any of the girls' handwriting at school.

HATTIE (*turning her head away from Nan*) Perhaps you'd remind Miss Parry, Brigadier, that the post office is closed.

NAN. Curse!

ALICE. You daren't have it in the flat till the morning.

BEE. We're getting warmer, though. Think hard again, everyone.

(*They all think. The* BRIGADIER *wanders up* C)

NAN. It's a real teaser.

BEE (*suddenly*) I think I have it.

BRIGADIER (*moving to* L *of the ottoman*) How?

BEE. One of us must slip back with it under cover of some sort of "created confusion".

(*The others look puzzled*)

ALICE. Could you be the weeist bit more explicit, darling?

BEE. We must arrange—a set of circumstances, so that we get the Spanagers' front door open, with them occupied somewhere else.

BRIGADIER (*thoughtfully*) Possible, possible. (*Enthusiastically*) But if we're to consider plans, we must draw up a proper tactical appreciation based on the military formula.

HATTIE. Oh, dear, must we?

BRIGADIER (*severely*) Yes. We must.

(HATTIE *moves above the table up* L)

(*He removes his apron*) It ensures that no point is overlooked. Now, Beatrice, have you a large sheet of paper?

BEE (*rising*) What about the back of these cards? (*She takes some invitation cards from the mantelpiece and hands them to the Brigadier*)

BRIGADIER (*enjoying himself*) Capital! (*He crosses to* L, *throws his apron on to the chair below the table up* L, *then sits at the desk*) Now, let me see—what were the approved military headings? (*He mumbles to himself and writes*) "Information", "Intention", er . . .

BEE. How can we get the Spanagers out of their flat for a vital moment?

NAN (*delightedly*) A fire! That's it. Set something alight in the passage, and then shout "Fire!" through their letter-box.

HATTIE (*moving to* R *of Nan*) Oh, surely we needn't have a real fire. Oh! Now I've spoken to you. Well—owing to the emergency I'll suspend my ban.

BEE. Thank heaven!

ALICE (*rising*) The lift! That's the solution.

BRIGADIER. What do you mean, my dear?

ALICE (*crossing excitedly to the Brigadier*) Well, it's prehistoric. What more natural than that it should break down, and one of us be trapped?

HATTIE (*excitedly*) Good, good. Stop it between floors, by opening the gate a bit, and then scream.

NAN. All that would happen is the rude porter would arrive.

BEE (*moving behind the tub chair*) We must dispose of the porter, then.

HATTIE (*horrified*) Dame Beatrice!

BEE. I don't mean "bump him off". (*After a moment's thought*) We could send him on an errand.

BRIGADIER (*delightedly jotting it down*) "To fetch a taxi for Alice." He's done that often.

ALICE. Excellent! They're always impossible to get round here at this time of night.

BEE. Now, who shall be the one . . . ?

BRIGADIER (*interrupting determinedly*) We'll take the points *in order*, if you please. Now—*number of enemy?*

NAN. Mr and Mrs Spanager, and his old mother—Madame Spanager.

HATTIE. Oh, bother. We'll never get her out of the flat.

NAN. No, she's practically gaga.

ALICE. So long as she's too far gone to move from her room, we're all right.

BEE. She's not so far gone that she mightn't ring up the police when she hears the screams.

BRIGADIER (*noting it down*) The telephone must be made unavailable. Beatrice, you will ring her up at the vital time.

BEE. To say what? I hardly know her.

NAN. Pretend you're interested in buying one of those knitting machines she's so potty about.

BEE. I don't know anything about knitting. The bed-jacket I made had to be turned into a hot-water bottle cover.

HATTIE. Wait a moment. I know.

(HATTIE *rushes out by the double doors*)

ALICE. What does she know?

BRIGADIER (*furious*) It's most irregular to leave a conference like that. Number of enemy, then: three. No possible *reinforcements?*

BEE. No. Their daily will have left, and they won't be having the Hungarian who cooks dinners; they'll be eating party leftovers.

(HATTIE *runs back from the hall, closing the doors behind her. She carries a crumpled sheet of the "Radio Times"*)

HATTIE (*moving to* R *of the tub chair*) Here you are, the very thing. A broken china elephant arrived in it. (*She hands the sheet to Bee and points to an advertisement*) That advertisement tells you all about knitting machines.

BEE (*studying the advertisement*) If Madame Spanager understands this she's not as gaga as she makes out.

BRIGADIER (*looking up from his "orders"*) Which of you *screams* the loudest?

BEE. Nan. All that voice production.

NAN (*rising, crossing and standing above the desk*) Yes, I think I can guarantee that the poor beasts will run out when they hear me.

BEE. Mrs Spanager will just dither about, but he's very energetic. He may be down and up the stairs again before we have time to replace the fur.

BRIGADIER. An *obstacle* must be put in his way. What?

(*They all think*)

HATTIE (*suddenly*) Me!

BEE. I doubt whether you'd be a big enough obstacle, dear.

HATTIE. As Mr Spanager passes, I'll faint into his arms. That'd be a nice obstacle, wouldn't it?

BRIGADIER (*writing*) Good. Obstacle: Miss Hatfield. The plan's shaping.

(*There is a sudden knock at the double doors. The planners are paralyzed*)

HATTIE (*panic-stricken*) The Spanagers! (*She crosses to* R, *seizes the fur, dithers, eventually hides it in the armchair down* R *and sits on it*)

(BEE *takes* NAN'S *arm, crosses with her to* R *of the ottoman, then sits on the ottoman and tucks the sheet of the "Radio Times" under the cushion.* NAN *sits on the fire-stool.* ALICE *sits on the chair below the table up* L. *The* BRIGADIER *remains in his chair at the desk*)

BEE (*calling*) Come in.

(LILY *enters from the hall. She carries a bowl of salad*)

. . . so they pulled the strings of their parachutes, and landed in a potato field.

(*After a moment of blankness, they all join in forced comment and laughter.* LILY *puts the salad on the table up* L)

LILY (*moving* C *and clapping her hands and speaking like a barmaid*) Come along, time, please. Time, please. All out. I want to give Dame her dinner.

(*There is a pause as the others all look at Lily*)

BEE. I'm—I'm not very hungry, Lily. Postpone the meal half an hour, will you?

LILY. Right you are. (*She moves up* C, *sees them all looking at her, stops, and exaggeratedly examines her dress*) What's the matter? Is my slip showing?

BEE. They've found out, Lily.

LILY. Oh! I thought I felt something in the air. (*She looks at the Brigadier*) It must be all the "I-told-you-so's" flying about.

HATTIE. It's terrible, Lily.

LILY (*gaily*) No, it's not. You don't have to worry that Mrs Spanager will recognize it, you know. By the time I've finished with it the bloke who made it wouldn't swear to it.

ALICE (*rising and moving to* L *of Lily*) You know about furs?

LILY. What do you think I was in Holloway for?

ALICE (*sitting in the tub chair*) Oh, my dear!

LILY. I worked as a machinist in a place that made fur coats. That's what led to me downfall. (*Professionally*) I'll take off the tails, check identification marks on the skins, remodel the style a little, and put in a new lining.

(*They all gasp*)

Or have you other plans?

(*They all start denying this at once*)

(*She exaggeratedly covers her ears*) No, no, no! Don't tell me. I have an idea it would be a petty falsehood. And if there's one thing that appals me it's a petty falsehood. (*She moves to the double doors and turns*) No. If you have to get round something, tell an absolute whopper, and waltz round in style. (*She moves down* C *and looks around at the others*) Has that penetrated through the soil to the roots? Because it's useful information in case anyone comes round enquiring about—the mantle that's fallen from Heaven. Agree on your whopper, and stick to it. (*She moves to the double doors and opens them*) And if you want to hide it temporarily, for Gawd's sake do it better than that.

(LILY *nods towards the armchair down* R *and exits to the hall closing the doors behind her.* HATTIE *grabs the end of the fur which has been sticking out, and tucks it under her*)

ALICE (*in a low voice, looking at the doors*) If we're not careful there's going to be a large fly in our ointment.

BEE (*rising and crossing to the table up* L) We must get her out of the way.

BRIGADIER. What would be a plausible excuse for sending her out at this time of night?

(*They all ponder*)

HATTIE (*suddenly*) Senna pods?

BRIGADIER (*shocked*) Miss Hatfield! Please!

ALICE (*rising and standing* R *of Bee*) What about that boy-friend of hers? Couldn't you give her the evening off?

BEE (*looking at her watch*) He's just been made fireman on the night ferry. He'll be on duty by now.

ALICE. Can't life be perverse? (*She crosses and sits on the left end of the ottoman*)

BEE (*clapping her hands*) Sleeping pills! Mrs Roberts in the next block has just been abroad and has smuggled in some very potent ones. (*She moves to the desk*) Out of the way, Bertie.

(*The* BRIGADIER *rises*)

(*She sits at the desk, lifts the telephone receiver and dials a number*) I'll give her a ring, and Lily can go and collect them.

NAN (*rising, crossing and standing above the tub chair*) We must be jolly careful she doesn't use the lift when we want it.

BRIGADIER. Yes; the timing of each phase of the attack will be critical. Don't worry, I'm working on it. (*He sits on the chair below the table up* L)

BEE (*into the telephone*) Ivy? . . . Beatrice . . . You know those

sleeping pills? . . . Could I borrow one tonight? . . . Thank you so much, dear. I'll send Lilly straight away . . . Oh, and while she's there do show her that coffee percolator . . . Yes . . . Thank you so much, dear . . . Good-bye. (*She replaces the receiver*) A most complicated paraphernalia. Lily'll be there hours.

BRIGADIER. Splendid! (*He rises*) Then this is the plan I propose. Pay careful attention, please. (*He picks up his pinger and shows it*) I set the pinger, and when it pings, the first wave goes in.

HATTIE (*rising*) Please don't be so military, Brigadier. It conjures up the most frightful visions. (*She resumes her seat*)

BRIGADIER. Two minutes before that, you, Beatrice, will despatch Lily Thompson on pill expedition. (*He puts the pinger on the table up* L)

BEE. She'll be difficult.

BRIGADIER. You must overcome that. On hearing pinger, Alice and Miss Parry will descend in lift. At ground level, the first-mentioned will despatch porter, and then hold herself in readiness to waylay enemy reinforcements.

ALICE. If anyone comes I'll drop pennies about. I did it once when I *had* to get on a bus and there was a long queue. It worked wonders.

BRIGADIER. Miss Parry will in the meantime *ascend* in lift, and take the planned action at a suitable elevation.

NAN. Open the gate, and scream. Yes. (*She moves above the ottoman*)

BRIGADIER (*moving to* R *of Bee*) Up here, Beatrice will engage Madame Spanager on the telephone.

BEE. If she lands me with one of those knitting machines, you'll pay for it.

BRIGADIER (*crossing below the ottoman*) On hearing screams, Miss Hatfield will leave base, proceed to Spanager door, and cause general alarm.

HATTIE. But I thought I was to . . .

BRIGADIER (*fiercely*) No interruptions, if you please. She will then retreat to lift, and prepare to ambush Mr Spanager. Understood?

HATTIE. I think so.

BRIGADIER (*severely*) Not good enough; you must be sure.

HATTIE. Oh, dear! Then I'm as sure as I'll ever be.

BRIGADIER. I suppose we shall have to be satisfied with that. (*He moves above the tub chair*) *I* shall be holding myself in readiness, and under cover of resulting confusion, shall infiltrate into stronghold and *replace object.*

ALICE (*rising and moving to* R *of the Brigadier*) Wonderful, Bertie! I'd no idea you were such a brilliant planner. Seeing you standing there so confidently reminds me . . .

BEE (*interrupting firmly, rising and moving to* L *of the Brigadier*) Let's have your reminiscences later, Alice. (*To the Brigadier;*

winningly) Though I must say, Bertie—it's a miracle of a plan.

NAN. Can't fail. Touch wood. (*She touches the table above the ottoman*)

BRIGADIER (*delighted*) Thank you, thank you. Now, any questions?

BEE. How exactly are we to know when the battle is over?

NAN. Yes. We ought to have a signal when it's safe to pull up stumps.

HATTIE (*rising and rushing out of the double doors*) I know!

(HATTIE *exits to the hall.* NAN *moves up* RC)

BRIGADIER (*annoyed*) I fear Miss Hatfield little understands the word "discipline".

BEE (*crossing to the table above the ottoman*) It's only nerves, Bertie. I don't feel so calm myself. (*She indicates the champagne*) Could the troops partake of a little something before going over the top?

BRIGADIER. In moderation, an excellent idea. (*He crosses to* L *of Bee, picks up the champagne bottle and opens it*)

(BEE *goes to the cabinet up* LC, *collects three champagne glasses and puts them on the table behind the ottoman.*

HATTIE *enters up* C, *blowing a whistle which has a white tape attached. She closes the doors*)

(*Annoyed*) Miss Hatfield! (*He crosses to Hattie*)

HATTIE. Here we are. The whistle I keep by my bedside in case of burglars. (*She puts he whistle around the Brigadier's neck*)

ALICE. My dear, how wise. (*To the Brigadier*) Give a long blast when it's safe to relax.

BRIGADIER. Agreed. (*He goes to the table and gives the bottle of champagne to Bee*) And in case of emergency I'll give a series of short, sharp blasts.

NAN. What do we do, then?

BRIGADIER (*after a moment's hesitation*) Act spontaneously. Now, any final questions?

BEE (*pouring the champagne*) There can't be, I'm issuing the rum ration. Help yourselves, everyone.

(*The* BRIGADIER *picks up two glasses and holds one out to Hattie*)

HATTIE. Oh, my goodness, not for me. (*She takes the glass and passes it to Alice*)

NAN (*moving above the left end of the ottoman*) Don't be a juggins; it'll do you good. (*She takes a glass for herself*)

HATTIE. I'd be sick. (*She crosses and sits in the tub chair*) Unfortunately, I've run out of my nerve tonic, or I'd have a good spoon of that.

BRIGADIER (*starting a speech*) Before we embark on this—I must admit—precarious adventure, I feel it both my duty and my honour . . .

BEE (*picking up her glass*) No, no, not now, Bertie. When we're safely back in camp. (*She raises her glass*) Good luck to us all.

(BEE, NAN, *the* BRIGADIER *and* ALICE *clink their glasses together with murmured salutations, drink, then put their glasses on the table behind the ottoman*)

BRIGADIER. I'll wind the pinger. (*He crosses to the table up* L *and winds the pinger*)

(ALICE *crosses to* R *of the Brigadier*)

Now, is everyone ready?

HATTIE. One moment! (*She rises*) I don't think I am. (*She rushes to the double doors*)

BEE (*intercepting Hattie*) Yes, yes, you are. (*In a low voice*) It's only going to take five minutes.

HATTIE (L *of Bee; doubtfully*) Oh. All right.

BRIGADIER. Then—(*he sets the pinger on the table up* L) we're off. I've set it two minutes to starting time. Beatrice—Lily Thompson.

BEE. Mercy on me! (*She crosses bravely and presses the bell-push above the fireplace*)

(*The others turn and stare expectantly at the double doors*)

Don't all be staring. Behave naturally. (*She sits on the right arm of the ottoman and takes some embroidery from her workbag*)

(ALICE *crosses and sits on the left end of the ottoman. The* BRIGADIER, HATTIE *and* NAN *make for the tub chair and collide.* NAN *sits in the tub chair. The* BRIGADIER *crosses down* R, *takes a paper from the newspaper rack and stands reading by the stove.* HATTIE *goes to the window, picks up a watering-can and crosses to the plant-table below the screen. There is a pause*)

HATTIE. Why doesn't she come?

(NAN *rises, crosses down* R, *picks up the fur and drapes it over Bee's shoulders*)

NAN. Better drape yourself in the mink to put her off the scent. (*She sits in the armchair down* R)

BRIGADIER. First-class smoke screen.

(*They wait*)

HATTIE. What on earth's she doing? She'll ruin the whole thing, (*She hastens to the double doors, opens them and calls*) *Li-ly!*

(LILY *enters almost immediately from the hall*)

LILY. *Ye-es?*

(HATTIE *darts away to the window and replaces the watering-can*)

(*She looks around*) Hullo, hullo! Still chewing the cud?

BEE. Lily, dear—(*she swallows*) I want you to fetch some sleeping pills from Mrs Roberts. I've rung her, and she's waiting. Will you do that?

(LILY *gazes at them for a moment*)

LILY (*cheerfully*) Right you are—won't be two shakes of a lamb's tail.

(LILY *smiles at them and exits immediately to the hall, closing the doors behind her. The others are suitably amazed*)

NAN. There must be something the matter with the poor beast.

BEE. It's a splendid omen. (*She removes the fur and puts it* R *of her on the ottoman*)

ALICE. Or alarmingly suspicious.

(*The telephone rings. They all gasp, especially* HATTIE)

BEE. But we never planned for anyone to ring *us* up. What shall I do?

ALICE. Don't answer.

HATTIE. If it's a talker you'll never get on to Madame Spanager.

BEE. But—oh, I don't know what to do. Bertie?

(*The telephone stops ringing*)

Heaven be praised!

HATTIE. I hope it wasn't something important.

(*The pinger rings loudly*)

(*She screams sharply*) Aah!

NAN. What the blazes, Hattie! I'm the screamer.

HATTIE. I'm so sorry. (*She crosses above the ottoman to* R *of it*) Oh, my heart's beating as if I'd run the hundred yards.

BRIGADIER (*crossing to the table up* L) Come along—come along! No dilly-dallying. (*Ordering*) The *first wave.*

(*No-one reacts*)

(*He shouts*) The first wave.

ALICE (*rising*) That's us. Come on, Miss Parry.

(ALICE *exits to the hall and collects her coat.* NAN *rises, crosses towards the hall and stops* C)

NAN (*holding her throat*) My throat's gone dry. I shan't get out a sound.

BEE (*rising*) Yes, you will. Good luck. Good luck.

(NAN *goes into the hall, and exits by the front door.*
During this, HATTIE, *unseen by the audience, slips the fur out of sight behind the coal scuttle.*
ALICE *enters from the hall*)

ALICE. Oh, my dear, how exciting! I feel like a toreador about to tackle his first bull. *Olé!*

(ALICE *waves her coat, taps her heels on the floor, and goes into the hall and exits by the front door*)

BRIGADIER (*consulting his "orders"*) Next? You, Beatrice.

BEE (*in a panic*) No, no, I'm not ready. (*She snatches up the sheet of the "Radio Times"*) I haven't studied the machine yet. Wait a minute.

BRIGADIER (*shouting*) Impossible! You'll upset the whole schedule. Begin!

BEE (*frantically reading as she crosses to the desk*) "Pair of men's socks knitted in forty-five minutes." (*She stands at the desk and lifts the telephone receiver*) Forty-five minutes? (*She dials a number*)

BRIGADIER (*looking at his watch and "orders"*) Miss Hatfield, take up your position in hall.

HATTIE (*without moving*) It's no good. I can't go through with it. I'm too nervous.

BRIGADIER. Think how much more nervous you'd be at the Central Criminal Court.

(HATTIE, *with a gasp of horror, rushes below the ottoman into the hall*)

BEE. Why doesn't she answer? (*She reads*) "Rustless, stitch sinker." What on earth can that be? (*Into the telephone*) Hullo—Madame Spanager? . . .

BRIGADIER (*in a whisper*) Courage.

BEE (*into the telephone*) This is Beatrice Appleby . . . How are you? . . . Not venturing out in this cold weather, I hope? . . . Good . . . (*She nods encouragingly at the Brigadier*)

(*The* BRIGADIER *goes to the front door and peers down the corridor*)

Now, I want the benefit of your experience. I'm thinking of buying an—(*she reads*) "automatic, high-speed, Quiknit home-knitting machine". Would you advise that? . . .

(NAN *is heard off, screaming loud and long.* HATTIE *clasps her hands together in prayer; and the* BRIGADIER *gestures to her.*

HATTIE *exits by the front door. The* BRIGADIER *takes up a position, peering out of the three-quarter closed front door*)

(*She anxiously watches the Brigadier, forgetting the telephone, then suddenly realizes. Into the telephone*) I'm so sorry—I had my attention distracted . . . Tell me, is it true that—(*she reads*) "on sixteen garments I could save seven hundred and fifty-six knitting hours"? . .

HATTIE (*off; calling*) Help, Mr Spanager, help!

BEE (*into the telephone*) Fancy! And is the "steel-reinforced needle-bed" really unbreakable? . . . (*She only half listens as she watches the Brigadier*)

(*The* BRIGADIER *pops his head in and out of the front door. Confused noise and voices are heard. The* BRIGADIER *rushes into the room and looks wildly around*)

BRIGADIER (R *of the tub chair*) Where is it?
BEE (*to the Brigadier*) Where's what?
BRIGADIER (*frantically*) The mink, of course.
BEE. Haven't you got it?
BRIGADIER. No, *you* had it.
BEE. No, I didn't.
BRIGADIER. Of course you did.

(*The* BRIGADIER, *in complete disorder, looks under the armchair down* R, *and behind the ottoman, dashes up* L, *searches behind the curtains and then looks in other unlikely places*)

(*Into the telephone and also searching wildly*) How interesting. And do you find the "lightning latch-opener" satisfactory? . . . (*To the Brigadier*) It must be somewhere. (*She puts the sheet of the "Radio Times" on the tub chair and crawls around, as far as the telephone wire permits, searching for the fur*)

BRIGADIER (*searching frantically*) This is terrible!

BEE. Hattie must have put it out of sight. (*Into the telephone*) Madame Spanager, shall I be able to knit circular articles and curved yokes? . . . (*She spots the fur. To the Brigadier*) There! There, by the coal scuttle.

(*The* BRIGADIER *grabs the fur, rolls it up, puts it under his coat with one end hanging out behind, and rushes out by the front door*)

(*She moves to the desk; into the telephone*) No, no, I'm still here . . . Shall I be able to understand the profusely illustrated brochure? . . . And I must know whether I can do my favourite patterns such as "Fair Isle" and "Fisherman's Rib". Especially "Fisherman's Rib"? . . .

(*The* BRIGADIER *enters by the front door and comes into the room, panting heavily*)

(*To the Brigadier*) Thank goodness! Blow your whistle.

(*The* BRIGADIER *blows the whistle with a dying breath, and collapses, exhausted, on to the ottoman*)

(*Into the telephone*) Get suction-type rubber feet? . . . Oh, yes, I will. But I must go now—my—my bath's running over. (*She hastily replaces the receiver and crosses to the Brigadier*) All well?

BRIGADIER (*mopping his brow and hardly able to speak*) As far as I could see, it went without a hitch. But, oh, my heart! Thumping like a battering ram.

BEE (*pouring a brandy*) A drop of medicinal will steady you. Where did you put it?

BRIGADIER (*rising*) I tucked it between the wall and the chest.

(*He takes the drink from Bee*) With just a tuft sticking out. (*He crosses and sits on the chair below the table up* L)

BEE. Ideal! Clever man!

BRIGADIER. And you, my dear. You might have invented the knitting machine.

(NAN *enters backwards by the front door, supporting the collapsed* HATTIE, *and speaking over her body to the unseen helpers*)

NAN. Quite all right now, thank you. No, don't bother, please. I can manage—she's still a little faint, poor beast. But I can cope. Good night. (*She kicks the front door shut*)

(*The limp* HATTIE *immediately revives. She and* NAN *hurry into the room*)

HATTIE (*standing above the ottoman*) Is it back?

BEE. Beautifully back. And all's safe. That was a magnificent scream, Nan. (*She crosses to* LC)

NAN (*moving to* R *of Bee*) Did you hear it? (*Enthusiastically*) What fun, wasn't it? It all went like clockwork.

BEE (*to the Brigadier; admiringly*) The result of the superb planning.

HATTIE (*to Nan; enthusiastically*) I could have sworn you were really terrified in the lift. Splendid, you were.

NAN (*delighted*) Thank you, dear! (*She puts her arm around Hattie*) But your faint was the highlight. Wonderfully convincing.

HATTIE (*thrilled*) Oh, thank you, Nan. And did you see the Brigadier? He skipped down the passage like a young lamb.

(*There is a sudden ring at the front door. They are all paralyzed for a moment. The ring is repeated*)

NAN (*hurrying to the front door*) It's all right—Lady Miller.

(HATTIE *sits on the ottoman, facing up stage*)

BRIGADIER. Of course—Alice.

(NAN *opens the front door.*
ALICE *enters by the front door and goes to* L *of Bee*)

ALICE (*out of breath*) Successful?

(NAN *closes the front door, comes into the room and closes the double doors*)

BRIGADIER (*rising and crossing to* C) Remarkably successful.

ALICE (*admiringly*) I knew it would be with your wonderful plan.

BEE (*moving quickly and purposefully between Alice and the Brigadier; to Alice*) Did your part go all right?

ALICE. My dear, the porter's still not back. I demanded an *elderly, safe* cabman.

BEE. Inspiration!

NAN. It was all a triumph. I feel quite exhilarated. (*She crosses down* L, *doing a little dance*) Toll-der-roll-oll.

HATTIE (*rising and moving* R) I haven't *ever* done anything so exciting.

BEE (*moving to the table above the ottoman*) We must celebrate. (*She pours out the remainder of the champagne*) Even you, Hattie. (*She hands a glass to Hattie*)

HATTIE (*crossing with the glass to Nan*) Oh, no, thank you. (*She hands the glass to Nan*)

(ALICE, BEE *and the* BRIGADIER *take their glasses*)

But I'll make a cup of tea when I've calmed down. Oh, bother, it's not my time for the kitchen.

BRIGADIER (*moving to* R *of Hattie; good-humouredly*) We might make an exception this once, dear.

BEE (*moving to* R *of the ottoman*) Let us drink to our victory. To the return of—"The Breath of Spring".

(*They raise their glasses, repeat "The Breath of Spring" and drink*)

ALICE. "The Breath of Spring." It might have blown round me. I feel five years younger.

BEE. I feel ten years younger.

(ALICE *glances sharply at Bee*)

BRIGADIER (*raising his glass*) I drink to the magnificent way you all behaved "under fire", so to speak.

ALICE (*raising her glass to the Brigadier*) We couldn't have done it without your inspiring leadership, Bertie.

BEE (*moving quickly between the Brigadier and Alice*) I felt invulnerable with such an able commander. (*She holds up her glass to the Brigadier*)

ALICE (*to Bee; acidly*) That's what I said, darling.

BRIGADIER (*moving between Alice and Bee; delighted*) You're both very kind.

(NAN *drains her glass and crosses behind the ottoman*)

NAN. Thank you. Very refreshing. (*She puts her glass on the table behind the ottoman, then moves to the double doors. Slowly*) Well, I must go and get out practice lists of rising and falling inflections. What a bore.

(*They are all dispirited.* ALICE *puts her glass on the table behind the ottoman, then crosses to the table* R *and collects her gloves and bag. The* BRIGADIER *puts his glass on the table up* L)

ALICE. I'm late for dinner already. Oh dear, my hotel's going to seem duller than ever tonight.

HATTIE (*collecting her teapot from the desk*) I don't feel at all like my blessed china mending.

BRIGADIER (*collecting his apron and pinger*) I think I'll toddle off to early bed. Our *coup's* rather taken it out of me.

HATTIE (*wistfully*) But what fun it was. (*Eagerly*) I wouldn't mind doing it all over again.

(*They all cheer up again and speak with growing excitement*)

ALICE. Neither would I. It gave me shivers down my back for the first time for ages.

NAN (*moving slightly in from the door*) It was amazing how smoothly it went.

ALICE (*nodding*) We might have "operated" together for years.

BEE (*moving down stage a little, and smiling happily at the memory*) Yes—we prove to be a most accomplished "gang", don't we?

BRIGADIER. Yes, indeed!

BEE. You, Bertie, the planner . . .

BRIGADIER. Miss Parry for simulated voices and dramatic impersonations.

ALICE. You, Bee, with your fertile mind, for ideas . . .

NAN. Hattie, neat-fingered and quick . . .

BEE. And all of us considered beyond even raiding a larder! (*She moves down stage two steps. After the slightest pause*) You know, we must think more about this.

HATTIE (*breathlessly*) What do you mean, Dame Beatrice?

BEE. Well—(*slowly*) surely it's a shameful waste of our talents to use them only for *replacing* furs?

The others gaze at Bee with dawning wonder and excitement, and move towards her as—

the CURTAIN *falls*

ACT II

SCENE—*The same. Six months later. Early afternoon.*

The furniture has been rearranged. The tub chair has been removed, and the table from up L *is now down* LC, *and there are three upright chairs above it, an upright chair* R *of it and the desk chair* L *of it. Each place is set with notebooks with pencils attached, and copies of reports; the Brigadier's clip-board with "orders", a brass handbell, a water carafe and glass are also on the table. The fire-stool is below the table. The screen up* R *is opened, and the ottoman is set more angled to the fireplace. There are bowls and vases of autumn flowers everywhere.*

When the CURTAIN *rises, it is about two o'clock. The stove is lit, and the balcony window is open. The* BRIGADIER, BEE, HATTIE, NAN *and* ALICE *are sitting formally round the table.* NAN *is* L *of it;* BEE *is* R *of Nan; the* BRIGADIER *is* R *of Bee;* ALICE *is* R *of the Brigadier and* HATTIE *is* R *of the table. A great change is immediately obvious. Not only are they all jovial and happy, but they look younger, and are gaily dressed. The* BRIGADIER *is especially spruce and energetic. The* BRIGADIER *rises. The others applaud.*

BRIGADIER. Thank you, thank you. (*With great panache*) As chairman, I should like to open this meeting with a few words concerning this auspicious day which marks our *first half-year in business.*

(*The others applaud gaily*)

In those six months, we have carried out two large-scale, and seven smaller-scale, transactions concerning furs.

(*There are murmurs of appreciation*)

We have seen the great strength that lies in our unusual methods of operation; and where our organization has its weaknesses. (*His eyes rest on Hattie*)

HATTIE (*pushing her chair back*) Oh, I don't think that's fair. It was due to sheer bad luck that I missed that silver fox.

BRIGADIER. Dear Hattie, I assure you I was speaking quite generally. (*He continues his speech*) I fear that business interests have somewhat interfered with your usual occupations . . .

HATTIE (*interrupting*) Oh, I don't mind at all. Yesterday I broke the tail off a Dresden cow, and I didn't feel a qualm.

BEE. I haven't enjoyed myself so much since Leo and I were in Delhi. And I'm so well. My doctor's furious. (*She smiles at the Brigadier*) You look wonderfully well, too, Bertie.

ALICE (*smiling at the Brigadier*) Doesn't he? A picture of health.
BEE. Years younger, too!

(*The* BRIGADIER, *delighted, brushes his moustache as he turns to each.* ALICE *looks at Bee with growing worry, and is determined not to be outbid*)

ALICE. And so full of energy!
BEE (*after an amused glance at her*) Yes, and so handsome!
ALICE (*after glancing at Bee*) And you make the points so clearly in your splendid voice!
BEE. Quite the most admirable chairman!
BRIGADIER (*ringing his bell*) Order, please, order. I conclude this brief peroration by paying tribute to the loyal and ungrudging service given by you all. Continue in the same devoted way, and we may face the future with growing confidence, and sober optimism. (*He resumes his seat*)

(*The others applaud*)

I now call upon our treasurer, Miss Nanette Parry, to review, briefly, the financial events of the half-year.

(NAN *rises and stands above her chair*)

NAN. It won't take a jiffy. From the figures you have in front of you, you'll see that, compared with the quantity of stuff we've dealt with, our receipts are measly.
HATTIE (*looking at her copy of the report*) But there's a nice little sum in the kitty.
NAN. It should be very much more. For instance—it was wicked only getting twenty pounds for that Persian lamb. I saw an identical one in Bond Street priced at three hundred guineas.
ALICE (*shaking her hand*) Our "disposal" arrangements are very unsatisfactory.
HATTIE. Yes, Josh Limes is a rotten fence. He diddles us quite shamefully.
NAN (*thoughtfully*) Lily was inside owing to furs. She'd probably know a better fence.
BEE (*firmly*) No! We must continue to keep Lily in complete ignorance of our—organization.
BRIGADIER. Yes, we agreed on that. Don't worry—(*he makes a note*) I think I can find a new fence through an ex-batman of mine. Any further financial points, Miss Parry?
NAN (*ominously*) One more. We agreed that—as we don't take a penny of profits for ourselves—we should be allowed reasonable expenses such as buses, occasional taxis, light meals while on duty, et cetera, et cetera. But the operative word was "reasonable". (*Severely*) Some items on some expense sheets are becoming decidedly questionable.

BEE. Don't look at me—(*she indicates the room*) I don't even charge office or boardroom rent.

HATTIE. You may think my bottles of nerve-tonic illegitimate. But I only needed one a year before.

NAN. No, they're permissible. Just as much as the Brigadier's occasional double whiskies.

(*The* BRIGADIER *reacts*)

I'm not criticizing; just saying don't let's overdo it. That's all. (*She resumes her seat*)

(*There is short and very unenthusiastic applause*)

BRIGADIER. Dame Beatrice, will you report on "Distribution of Profits"?

BEE (*rising*) I am very happy to announce that yesterday we posted off our *thirty-eighth* parcel of pound notes.

(*The others applaud and comment*)

ALICE. How right they were to make you a Dame for collecting large sums for charity.

BEE. As we have to remain anonymous, it is seldom that we hear of the relief and joy caused by our parcels of money. But in two cases my observations seem to prove the success of our work. Case three—(*they all find it on their lists*) Mr and Mrs "S". They added our money to their tiny savings, and have just come back from ten days in Italy. They look so different; I wish you could see them. They still have sad and difficult days ahead of them, but that holiday, I'm sure, literally saved their lives. Case seventeen—Major "W". He *didn't* buy the winter overcoat as we intended. Instead he hired a television set. But he entertains all the other lonely old things in his boarding-house with it, and now of course doesn't need an overcoat as he never goes out.

HATTIE. Such cases are really very encouraging.

BEE. A special word of thanks is due to Alice, who in her moves from hotel to hotel, in South Kensington and Bayswater, has been so successful in finding the majority of our deserving cases.

ALICE. How kind.

BEE. Finally, please let me have your list of those in want—all sorts—in good time for my next "Distribution" sub-committee. Thank you. (*She resumes her seat*)

(*The others applaud*)

BRIGADIER. Next—"Complaints". Two this time. (*He rises*) First—from Beatrice. She feels that we're not being sufficiently careful about taking *only from those perfectly able to afford it.*

ALICE. It's horribly difficult; people are so deceitful about how much money they've got.

BEE. I don't want to find we've been "unfair" to anybody.

BRIGADIER. Please all bear the point strongly in mind. Next complaint—from Hattie. She's not happy about doing so much "trailing". (*He resumes his seat*)

ALICE (*to Hattie*) It is exhausting. But we've had such useful information by following a good coat, and listening to it in shops.

HATTIE. But hanging about—especially in Piccadilly at dusk—I've had most unpleasant experiences.

NAN. Funny. I never have.

BEE. Then the solution's obvious; Hattie must do the earlier hours, and Nan the later.

(NAN *takes a moment to realize the implication, then reacts*)

BRIGADIER (*making a note*) I'll bear it in mind when drawing up the duty rosters. Now—"Suggestions". Miss Hatfield?

HATTIE (*rising*) Just one, from Nan. She asks us to sanction the purchase of a Vespa. (*She resumes her seat*)

BEE. . Vespa?

NAN. One of those little, low motor-bikes. It would be an invaluable time-saver when reconnoitring.

BEE (*rising*) I've never heard such madness.

NAN. Why?

BEE (*severely*) One of our most important rules is to behave like quiet and ordinary citizens. That does not include scorching about on motor-bicycles. (*She resumes her seat*)

NAN (*rising*) Mr Chairman, I insist on a vote being taken. (*She resumes her seat*)

BRIGADIER. Very well; we will vote by the usual show of hands. Those in favour?

(NAN *urgently holds up her hand*)

Those against?

(HATTIE, ALICE *and* BEE *hold up their hands*)

No motor-bicycle.

NAN (*rising, throwing down her book and moving down* L) I resign.

(HATTIE, ALICE *and* BEE *rise and cross to Nan, murmuring apologies*)

BRIGADIER (*ringing his bell*) Order, order, ladies.

ALICE (*coaxingly*) Bring it up at the next meeting.

NAN. Oh, all right.

(*They resume their seats*)

BRIGADIER. That brings us to the most important item—"Methods and Social Contacts". Lady Miller.

ALICE (*rising*) Mr Chairman—(*she gazes entranced at the Brigadier*)

(BEE *coughs*)

—Ladies. I simply must have new ideas for future operations. When we've used up (*with a loving glance at him*) Bertie's brilliant scheme on the great coup planned for tomorrow, the cupboard is bare.

BEE. You have my "dentist's waiting-room" idea.

ALICE. We can't do anything about that until we get the chloroform.

(*The* BRIGADIER *makes a note*)

The situation's very serious. So, please always be on the look-out. Examine the social, obituary and agony columns even more carefully; look about even more intently when meeting boat trains and aeroplanes; and bear in mind the urgent need for ideas wherever you go. (*She resumes her seat*)

(*The others applaud*)

BRIGADIER. I'm sure Alice won't mind if I add that you should be ready at all times to seize *unexpected* chances; what I might call "Targets of Fleeting Opportunity".

(*The others murmur "Fleeting Opportunity" uncomprehendingly*)

(*He rises*) Well, your reports represent a most commendable picture. If we complete tomorrow's important project satisfactorily . . .

BEE (*interrupting excitedly*) What about the plans? Have you got them ready?

BRIGADIER. To the last detail.

ALICE (*eagerly*) Oh, do let's hear them.

BRIGADIER. There are one or two more pieces of business upon the agenda.

BEE. Let them wait. The plans are much more exciting.

HATTIE. Oh, yes.

ALICE } (*together*) Yes, yes.
NAN }

BRIGADIER (*pleased*) Very well. If you insist. (*He picks up his clip-board, crosses to* L *and takes a knitting needle from the wool-basket below the desk*) They are rather neat.

(*The* BRIGADIER *releases a catch on the picture over the desk, and the picture swings open on a hinge, revealing a map of an area in South Kensington, covered with cellophane, on which there are markings in coloured pencil. For details see Plan "A"*)

BEE (*patting Hattie on the back; in a whisper*) A lovely piece of carpentry. Clever Hattie.

BRIGADIER (*ordering*) Gather round for briefing.

(ALICE, *rises, moves to the stool and sits on it.* NAN *rises, turns her*

chair to face L *and resumes her seat.* BEE *rises, moves and stands above Alice.* HATTIE *rises, crosses and stands behind Bee*)

Pay close attention, please. (*He reads headings from his "orders"*) "Operation Ermine. *Information.* The enemy guard an ermine coat, value seven hundred and fifty pounds, in cold storage of fur department of store at 'X'. (*He points out the locations on the map with the knitting needle*) *Enemy Strength.* One: Mrs MacNaughton—head of fur department. Two: her half-witted assistant, name unknown. Three: Lily Thompson."

HATTIE. Oh, I don't think it's nice to call Lily "enemy".

BRIGADIER (*severely*) That is her category. Her effectiveness, however, is neutralized by the fact that tomorrow is her day off. During the period of the operation she will be at the cinematograph with her young man. (*He reads*) *Information own Troops.* That's us. Concentrated here, in flat, at "Y". *Intention.* Remove coat from "X" to "Y".

ALICE. Beautifully neat.

BEE. A model of compactness.

HATTIE. If only everything could be as clear as that.

BRIGADIER (*reading*) *Method.* An attack will be mounted tomorrow morning—at an "H" hour to be fixed. *Raiding party* will consist of *Appleby* and *Hatfield.* They will depart here at "H" minus six minutes, in Beatrice's death chariot.

(BEE *looks furious but dare not interrupt*)

Parry, up here, will create a diversion to deflect attention of hall porter from embussment.

HATTIE (*whispering*) "Embussment?"

BEE (*whispering*) Getting into the car.

BRIGADIER (*horribly patient*) Is something the matter, Miss Hatfield?

HATTIE (*scared*) No, no!

BRIGADIER (*thundering*) Then kindly pay attention. Raiding party will proceed—via Red Route—to parking place "P", at rear of store, arriving at "H" minus one.

BEE. Suppose there's a traffic block?

BRIGADIER (*furious at the interruption*) A margin of one minute has been allowed. Hatfield will *remain* in transport. Appleby will proceed on foot to store, arriving at main entrance at "H" hour exactly. To the other map, please. (*He crosses to the screen up* R)

(BEE *crosses and sits on the right end of the ottoman.* NAN *rises, crosses and sits on the left end of the ottoman, facing upstage.* ALICE *rises, crosses and stands by the fireplace.* HATTIE *remains* L, *staring at Plan "A"*)

(*He shouts*) Hatfield!

HATTIE *swings round nervously and sits on the chair* R *of the*

table LC. *The* BRIGADIER *lets down a folding flap on the screen revealing an enlarged plan of the interior of store. For details see Plan "B"*)

Ground floor of store. Appleby will enter, and proceed—via Blue route—to the objective at "F", arriving there "H" plus two. At "H" plus one, Parry—(*pointing*) from that desk there—will engage Mrs MacNaughton in telephonic communication in curtained booth at rear of department. Appleby will render up forged cold-storage ticket to half-wit, taking coat in exchange. She will then proceed—via yellow route . . .

BEE. Yellow? It looks orange to me.

BRIGADIER (*shouting*) Yellow or orange, it's called "yellow". She will then proceed—via yellow route—to side entrance of store "S", and will embuss in waiting taxi. This will have been commandeered from rank "O" by Hatfield.

HATTIE. I feel dizzy when I think of it. You see, I . . .

BRIGADIER (*cutting in; loudly*) *Administration. Supplies.* These only consist of the eggs and oranges.

HATTIE (*rising*) Oh, yes, you've forgotten that part.

BRIGADIER (*horribly calmly*) I have not.

(HATTIE *resumes her seat*)

If Appleby has not reached taxi within two minutes of expected time . . .

HATTIE. I rush to the department——

BEE. —without appearing to hurry——

HATTIE. —and cause my "distraction".

ALICE (*nodding*) Firmly drop the shopping net on the floor.

HATTIE. Say the eggs don't break?

BRIGADIER (*annoyed*) They will! Anyhow, the oranges will roll about.

HATTIE. Then I faint?

BRIGADIER. *If* the situation demands it. *Medical and Veterinary.* Not applicable. *Dress.* Hatfield will camouflage herself as inconspicuously as possible. Appleby, on the other hand, will parade in outstanding piece of millinery.

BEE. I've prepared a lovely hat.

BRIGADIER. This important clue to identity will be destroyed immediately on completion of mission.

BEE. Shame.

BRIGADIER. *Intercommunication.* By hand-signal from window. *Questions.* Any?

BEE. None—it's wonderfully comprehensive.

ALICE. A gem.

BRIGADIER. Parry?

NAN (*rising and moving up* C) No questions, sir.

BRIGADIER. Hatfield?

HATTIE. Not for the moment, anyhow.

BRIGADIER. Good. Order Group, dismiss. (*He closes the map on the screen, then crosses and closes the picture*)

ALICE (*to Bee*) I do envy you having all that exciting part.

BEE. Well, you had all the fun during *Operation Kolinsky*.

BRIGADIER (*ringing his bell*) We'll close the board meeting, if you please.

BEE. Oh, there's nothing else important, is there?

NAN. We haven't discussed the question of overseas visitors, yet.

BEE. Oh, yes. We *must* amend the rules on that point. I don't think—(*she shakes her head distressfully*) it's fair to take from foreigners.

HATTIE. I think we should rule out wedding receptions, too.

(*There is a loud knock on the double doors*)

NAN. Lily!

BEE (*rising*) But it's silver-cleaning afternoon.

BRIGADIER. *Clearing action.* Part *A.* (*He hands his clip-board to Bee*)

(BEE *goes to the stool.* HATTIE *rises, collects the notebooks from the table and goes to the animal's head.* ALICE *collects the bell and goes to the cabinet down* R. NAN *collects the remaining papers, rolls them up and goes to the tusk above the fireplace*)

LILY (*off; calling*) I can't get in. What's happened?

BEE (*calling*) One moment, Lily.

BRIGADIER (*pointing to Bee*) Number one.

(BEE *puts the board in the concealed pocket under the stool seat. They all work slickly and very efficiently*)

(*He points to Hattie*) Number two.

(HATTIE *puts the notebooks inside the animal's head*)

(*He points to Alice*) Number three.

(ALICE *hides the bell in an ornament on the cabinet*)

(*He points to Nan*) Number four.

(NAN *puts the papers inside the tusk*)

Part *B.*

(HATTIE *rapidly replaces two upright chairs* R *and* L *of the double doors.* BEE *turns the desk chair to the desk.* NAN *and* ALICE *move to table to its Act I position.* BEE *places the other two upright chairs* R *and* L *of the table.* NAN *transfers the vase of flowers from the table behind the ottoman to the table up* L. *They then wait at attention*)

BEE (*reporting*) All correct.

BRIGADIER. Operation Relaxation.

(BEE *crosses and takes a book from the sideboard.* NAN *lolls on the ottoman, facing up stage.* ALICE *takes a magazine from the paper-rack and sits in the armchair down* R. HATTIE *gets a chessboard from the desk drawer, puts it on the table up* L, *then sits* L *of the table. The* BRIGADIER *gets four chessman from a jug on the cabinet up* LC, *puts them on the chessboard, then sits* R *of the table.* BEE *unlocks the door.*

LILY *enters from the hall, wearing her hat and coat and carrying her bag and gloves. She comes to* R *of Bee*)

(*He moves a chessman*) Check.

LILY. What on earth are you doing with the door locked?

BEE. We were . . . (*She suddenly breaks off*) What on earth are *you* doing in your outdoor things?

LILY. That's what I came to tell you. I'm just off.

BEE. Just off? Just off where?

LILY. To the pictures with Bill.

BEE. To the pictures with Bill? (*With dawning horror*) But today's *Wednesday*. You go to the pictures with Bill *Thursdays*.

LILY. We had to change it to *today* this week, Dame dear.

HATTIE (*rising*) What!

(*The* BRIGADIER *glares at* HATTIE *who resumes her seat*)

BEE. But that means you'll be here tomorrow afternoon.

LILY (*nodding*) Doing the work I should be doing *this* afternoon. So it's just the same.

NAN (*rising and moving to Lily*) It's not all the same.

BRIGADIER (*rising*) You always go on Thursdays.

LILY. Now, don't you all start. I *have* to go today. Bill's mate's getting married tomorrow, so Bill's swopped turns with him.

BEE. No, no, he can't do that.

LILY. He has!

BEE. Well, he's to swop back again. And do the turn the station-master gave him. And take you out tomorrow afternoon, as usual.

LILY. Too late, Dame dear. Bill's mate's on the train by now. And Bill's in the foyer of the *Odeon* at Twickenham. I must fly. 'Bye.

BRIGADIER. No, wait.

(LILY *runs out, slamming the door behind her. A moment later the front door is heard to slam*)

NAN. Damnation.

HATTIE (*rising and moving to* L *of the Brigadier; agitatedly*) But we can't carry out "Operation Ermine" if she's here.

ALICE (*rising and moving below the ottoman*) What in heaven's name are we going to do?

BRIGADIER. Perhaps we can persuade her to go out with someone else tomorrow.

BEE. Not a hope—she's far too devoted to Bill.

HATTIE (*sitting* L *of the table*) Oh, what a disaster!

NAN. Could we lock her in her room tomorrow!

ALICE. What more suspicious?

NAN (*sitting on the ottoman and facing up stage*) True—oh, King!

(BEE, *after a moment's thought, moves down* C)

BEE. Why shouldn't we do the job this afternoon?

HATTIE (*rising*) No! No!

BRIGADIER (*thinking*) Everything's ready.

HATTIE (*agitatedly*) I'm not. I couldn't possibly carry out my part without going over it in my head the night before.

BEE. Of course you can.

BRIGADIER. We must make a snap decision. Immediate action or postponement?

NAN (*rising*) We *can't* postpone. The assistant who booked the coat is due back from hospital on Friday. She'd recognize Bee as not being the owner.

BEE. That settles it, then. It's this afternoon.

BRIGADIER. Very well—this afternoon. There's no time to be lost. *Prepare for Operation.* (*He looks at his watch*) *Assembly* here in—two minutes. I'll fetch my binoculars.

(*The* BRIGADIER *exits hurriedly to the hall*)

BEE. This dress will do. I'll get the special hat.

(BEE *exits quickly down* L. ALICE *crosses to the screen and opens the map.* NAN *puts the chessboard and chessmen on the desk, then opens the plan behind the picture*)

HATTIE. Oh, dear! I hate a rush. I'm sure something will go wrong. I only have the vaguest idea of what "H" minus anything means.

NAN. Rely on common sense.

HATTIE. I must rush and change my shoes in case I have to run.

(HATTIE *rushes out to the hall*)

ALICE. This would happen when it's our most important operation.

NAN. But it's a very quick one, and we've never had such a spanking scheme.

ALICE. Yes, it *must* be all right.

NAN. Touch wood! (*She touches the table*) Touch wood!

(BEE *hurries in down* L, *wearing an elaborately trimmed hat. She carries a piece of veiling, some hairpins, her handbag and her gloves. She crosses and sits on the left end of the ottoman*)

BEE (*to Alice; as she crosses*) Help me fix this wretched veil, will you?

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