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The Day's Mischief

Lesley Storm

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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ISBN 978-0-573-01089-7

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THE DAY'S MISCHIEF

Produced at The Duke of York's Theatre, London, on December 11th,
1951, with the following cast of characters:

(in the order of their appearance)

STEPHEN BARLOW

Ian Hunter

LAURA VINING

Muriel Pavlow

GRACE BARLOW

Catherine Lacey

MRS USHER

Marjorie Manning

HENRY VINING

Walter Fitzgerald

EVELYN VINING

Beatrix Lehmann

VI VINING

Nuna Davey

SALLY

Betty Blackler

PHOEBE

Barbara Fletcher

MISS FABER

Mavis Walker

The Play produced by NORMAN MARSHALL

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

SCENE 1 The sitting-room of the Barlows' house. Evening

SCENE 2 The same. Two hours later

SCENE 3 The living-room of the Vinings' house. Three days later

ACT II

SCENE 1 The sitting-room of the Barlows' house. Ten minutes later

SCENE 2 The living-room of the Vinings' house. Three hours later

THE DAY'S MISCHIEF

ACT I

SCENE I

SCENE.—*The sitting-room of the BARLOWS' house in Rudford, a provincial English town.*

The room reflects the taste of a man of considerable scholarship on a salary of about one thousand pounds a year. There are rows of books on either side of the door, which is in the back wall, and some good pieces of antique furniture, well cared for—notably a desk which fills the bay window on the L., a settee near the fireplace, R., with a small table behind it, an easy chair down R. with a small table and reading lamp near it, and a console table down L. with a telephone. MRS BARLOW collects Bristol glass and china, and there is evidence of this among the ornaments. One or two good pictures and etchings of Oxford hang on the walls.

(See the Ground Plan at the end of the Play.)

When the CURTAIN rises, a folding card table stands down L.C., and sitting opposite to each other, on light folding chairs, are STEPHEN BARLOW, R. of the table, and LAURA VINING, L. of it. There is a book on the floor by LAURA'S left foot, also her school satchel. Each has an open exercise book, a pencil and some slim school books on the table. STEPHEN is a good-looking and attractive man in his early forties; an Oxford graduate, he is classics master at the new large mixed County School, which is Rudford's pride. LAURA is a shy, sensitive and attractive young girl of seventeen. The vases are filled with spring flowers from the garden. STEPHEN closes a text-book with an air of finality and, picking up all but the exercise books, rises.

STEPHEN. Well, there we are. I should say you've had about enough for one evening.

LAURA (*softly*). It's hopeless. I'm so sorry.

STEPHEN. Not exactly hopeless—difficult. You may get through with luck. If you can spare a few evenings next week we'll see what we can do.

LAURA. It's very kind of you to trouble.

STEPHEN. Not at all. You work well, you deserve to pass. If you don't you'll have another chance in the autumn.

LAURA. I'm getting so old.

STEPHEN (*crossing to the desk*). You'll probably find several

other old ladies of seventeen in the same predicament. (*He puts down the books.*)

(*LAURA picks up the book from the floor and the exercise books on the table and packs her satchel.*)

Your grounding has been bad. You must have been going on for years without knowing the rudiments. One's knowledge has to be built from the foundations. I don't think you know the grammar.

LAURA. No, I don't.

STEPHEN. It's a serious reflection on this super-school of ours. (*He crosses to the fireplace.*)

LAURA. It wasn't the school—it was my father.

STEPHEN. Did he teach you in the beginning?

LAURA. Yes—but he didn't bother much about the grammar. He taught me by crossword puzzles.

STEPHEN (*turning at the fireplace*). Latin crossword puzzles?

LAURA. Yes. He made them up himself.

STEPHEN (*moving below the settee to c.*). What does he do, your father?

LAURA. He's a reporter.

STEPHEN. Here in Rudford?

LAURA. He's on the *Rudford News*. He writes political columns too. He's "Excursus" on the *Kettering Star*, "Audax" on the *Leicester Gazette* and "Scrutator" on the *Buckingham Journal*.

STEPHEN (*leaning on the back of the chair R. of the table*). A busy man! You live in the town, don't you?

LAURA. Yes—in Crossdale Avenue.

STEPHEN. Are you a large family?

LAURA. I have a sister; but she's married and lives in New Zealand. There's only my parents and an aunt—she teaches in the Elementary School.

STEPHEN. Are you happy at home?

LAURA. Oh, yes!

STEPHEN (*sitting on the L. arm of the settee*). I sometimes wonder about my pupils. They come into my classroom for an hour and sit in the same seats and wear the same clothes—and submit to having their minds improved in a sort of armed neutrality.

LAURA. People are not themselves during school hours.

STEPHEN (*smiling*). I suppose not. Outside, are they different? Have they wit? Animation? Inquiring minds?

LAURA (*with a shy smile*). Animation anyhow.

STEPHEN. Or just excitement at leaving school? Your lot goes out into the big world in—six weeks.

LAURA. Five . . .

STEPHEN. So you're counting the days, eh? Striking them off the calendar?

LAURA. Yes. But not because I want to leave school.

STEPHEN. No? I thought the end of school was the great emancipation? I thought my pupils' marked apathy for the Latin tongue was because their heads were buzzing with the future?

LAURA. I don't like to think of the future. I hate the thought of leaving school.

STEPHEN. That's unusual, surely?

LAURA. I—I . . .

STEPHEN. What?

LAURA. I don't know what I shall do.

STEPHEN. Your career, you mean?

LAURA. No—that's not what I meant. I don't care . . .

STEPHEN. But you must. If you've no plans for the future, perhaps your parents have?

LAURA. They expect me to train as a secretary or something.

STEPHEN. I shouldn't think that was your destiny.

LAURA. I don't know about destiny . . . It's a word my aunt uses a lot.

STEPHEN. In what way? Romantically?

LAURA. Yes.

STEPHEN. Don't let her beguile you. One's character is one's destiny.

LAURA. But if you've nothing to tell you what your character is? I don't know my character—to me it's a muddle.

STEPHEN. That's not unique. But don't let it stay muddled. The mind is free—use its liberty, and be glad of the responsibility. *(He rises and moves up stage.)* Would you like some coffee? I make it myself. I'm the only person in the house who makes good coffee, and all I ask is lots of praise. *(He opens the door, and calls.)* Grace.

GRACE *(off)*. Yes?

STEPHEN. The lesson's over. I'm going to make some coffee.

(He exits, leaving the door open, and goes off R. GRACE enters from off R. She is an attractive woman, in her early forties, well dressed, but on the arty side. She is educated, but highly-strung; devoted to her husband, and jealous of any outside influence in his life. She gives LAURA a brittle smile.)

GRACE. Well! You've had a long session! I hope it has served some purpose.

LAURA *(rising and standing awkwardly behind her chair)*. Oh! Yes . . .

GRACE *(coming down to the chair L. of the table)*. Shall we get all this out of the way? *(She folds the chair.)* The room doesn't

seem itself somehow. (*She takes the chair into the bay window and puts it out of sight below the desk.*)

(LAURA folds the chair R. of the table, and hands it to GRACE.
GRACE stacks it with the first chair.)

Thank you.

(LAURA picks up her satchel and is about to fold the table.)

(*Stopping* LAURA.) Let me do that. You have to know how it works. It's one of those vicious contraptions. It has a bite like a rat-trap. (*She closes the table with a snap on the last word.*)

LAURA. Shall I put it away for you?

GRACE (*moving up to the door*). No, thank you. I know where it goes.

(*She exits L. into the hall, and returns immediately.*)

Would you like to wash your hands? (*She shuts the door.*)

LAURA (*moving to L. of the settee*). No, thank you.

GRACE (*coming down stage to the table down L. and taking a cigarette*). Well, sit down. Relax.

(LAURA sits on the settee, L. end. *She puts the satchel beside her.*)

I've been sitting in my bedroom for nearly two hours listening to the radio.

LAURA. Don't you like the radio?

GRACE (*finding there are no matches, and moving to the desk*). I don't like sitting in my bedroom. To be quite frank, I don't much like school work encroaching on my home life. I hope that doesn't sound unpleasant? (*She lights her cigarette.*)

LAURA. No. I'm sorry.

GRACE. There's nothing to be sorry for. It's just one of those things. When are your examinations? (*She crosses down R. to the easy chair.*)

LAURA. They begin on Monday week. They last five days.

GRACE (*sitting*). Whose idea was it that you should have extra coaching in Latin?

LAURA. Mr Barlow's.

GRACE. What do the other pupils say? Doesn't this individual attention suggest favouritism of some kind?

LAURA. Oh, no! He would do the same for anyone.

GRACE (*lightly*). He's never done it before. I hope it doesn't become a habit. I don't know any of my husband's pupils. When I ask him what they're like, he says they're just a row of faces.

(STEPHEN enters from off R.)

STEPHEN (*coming down behind the settee*). We'll have to wait

a moment for that kettle. Grace, why haven't we got one that whistles? They're so co-operative.

GRACE. Because I don't want to be a nervous wreck, that's why.

STEPHEN. Laura's father is a journalist. He writes for the *Rudford News*.

GRACE. What's that? A weekly?

STEPHEN. Really, darling! It's the local evening paper.

GRACE. I've never heard of it. What on earth do people find to say in it?

STEPHEN. In a town of thirty thousand inhabitants all sorts of things go on.

GRACE. Laura, don't you hate Rudford?

LAURA. Well . . . I was born here. I don't know any other place.

GRACE. How terrible for you. It's the worst kind of provincial town. Oxford! That's where one should live—or Cambridge. (*She smiles.*) My husband eats his heart out here for lack of conversation. There's no stimulus; nothing to exercise the mind of an intelligent man.

STEPHEN (*moving up to the door*). It's pretty well exercised earning a living.

(*He exits and goes off R.*)

GRACE (*rising and turning to the mantelpiece*). That dreary High Street on a Saturday morning! Sometimes this place seems to me to be entirely populated by skittish adolescents from the County School. When we walk through the town I often say to my husband he should wear a false beard.

LAURA (*for something to say*). Because so many people know him?

GRACE. People! I'd scarcely call them—people. Those giggly little teenagers with their bold eyes. Most of them look as if they were heading straight for the delinquency courts. This town seems to have a breed of its own. You should know, they're your contemporaries.

LAURA (*uncomfortably*). I don't know any who are—what you say.

GRACE. One glimpse of my husband and their day is made. Isn't it so?

LAURA (*stammering*). Well—they like him—they respect him.

GRACE. Respect! They've never heard of it. I'm sorry for them. I'm sorry for their bedraggled little minds, and their nasty little bodies bursting out of their clothes. Don't let's talk about them, it's depressing. Let's talk about something pleasant. Did you notice the garden as you came in?

LAURA. Yes.

GRACE. It's my great joy. I spend hours working in it while my husband's at school.

LAURA (*after a pause*). Are you lonely in Rudford?

GRACE. Not so lonely as I should be if I became involved in its social life. So I make the life I choose for myself here in my own home, and avoid the comings and goings. To tell you the truth, we are not very sociable. We are inclined to cheat a little so that we can be left alone. Do you like music? (*She sits on the settee, R. end.*)

LAURA. Yes, very much.

GRACE. My husband has a wonderful library of records. So we have concerts even though we are a long way from a concert hall—and we are the audience of two. Am I boring you?

LAURA. No. I was just thinking—how lovely it must be to sit and listen quietly. I mean people always talk.

GRACE (*blandly*). Do they? How tiresome! I don't think we do. If we do we don't notice it.

LAURA (*after a pause*). Sometimes they have a concert in the Kimber Hall.

GRACE. We've never been. When the day's work is done we shut our door. Occasionally my husband goes for a walk, that's all. The societies for this and that have given us up, the bridge players have given us up, so we've won the battle for our seclusion. It was quite a fight when we first came here a year ago.

(STEPHEN *enters from off R. with a tray of coffee.*)

STEPHEN (*moving behind the settee*). What was a fight? (*He puts the tray on the table.*)

GRACE. Protecting our privacy from the party-givers and whatnots.

STEPHEN (*with a laugh; to LAURA*). My wife is a stay-at-home.

GRACE. Listen to him. One would think I dictated our way of living.

STEPHEN. Well?

GRACE. Darling, we came to the same conclusions early on about living here. We got the hang of the place after we'd been here a couple of months.

STEPHEN. We didn't know it, that's all.

GRACE. You like it now? That's news.

STEPHEN (*pushing down the plunger of the coffee percolator*). Parts of it are lovely. (*He moves down L. of the settee.*) Laura, have you ever taken a boat up river towards Ravensbridge?

LAURA. Yes, we often do in the summer. We swim there in the pool.

STEPHEN. I know that pool. The willows touch the water, and the moorhens scurry in and out amongst them.

GRACE. That river smells. All the town sewage goes into it.

STEPHEN (*crossing down R. to the easy chair*). If you get on to that line of thought where do you end? On the beach at Cannes I suppose. (*He sits.*)

GRACE. Cannes is different.

STEPHEN. Its sewage isn't.

GRACE. Really, Stephen!

STEPHEN. In the summer we'll go swimming in the pool—Laura shall take us there.

GRACE. Or we could have school picnics, with gay little egg-and-spoon races along the banks. If we are going to take the community to our hearts we really should go the whole hog.

STEPHEN (*embarrassed*). Darling, we're newcomers to this community, and we're not very important to it. Let's shut up about it. (*He rises and crosses up L. to the bookshelves. The book he wants is not there. He moves to the desk.*) Laura, at least a third of the Latin papers are bound to centre on Virgil.

(*LAURA rises and moves L. of the settee.*)

(*He picks up a small book.*) You ought to read this.

(*They move towards each other. STEPHEN hands her the book and their eyes meet.*)

It will give you some idea of his relationship to his own age—the particular moment in history in which he was born.

LAURA. Thank you.

STEPHEN (*crossing behind the settee*). If you can write about him with some authority it might help balance up your weaknesses in other directions. (*He pours out coffee.*)

GRACE. Is it vital to her future that she should be an authority on Virgil's relationship to his age?

STEPHEN. The passing or not-passing of an examination is vital to her immediate future, that's all.

GRACE. How about the others? How do they get on without this special knowledge?

STEPHEN. They'll get by—most of them. Laura, do you take sugar in your coffee?

LAURA. Yes please.

STEPHEN. And milk?

LAURA. No thanks. I like it black.

STEPHEN. There we are. (*He hands her a cup.*)

LAURA. Thank you.

GRACE. This is my husband's one chore. He makes the coffee every evening.

(*STEPHEN hands GRACE a cup.*)

And every evening I tell him how excellent it is and how clever he is.

STEPHEN. I've already told her I require lots of praise. (*He moves to R. of LAURA with his own cup.*)

(LAURA sips her coffee.)

LAURA. It's wonderful.

STEPHEN (*laughing, and crossing down R. to the easy chair*). Good. I'm glad you like it. (*He sits.*)

GRACE. You're a very shy person, aren't you? Come and sit down. (*She indicates the settee.*)

(LAURA sits on the settee.)

I notice a sort of tenseness in the conversation that really isn't necessary. My husband has always told me that the relationship between pupil and teacher is a much more friendly one than in our day. (*With a smile.*) Perhaps it's I who make the conversation difficult?

LAURA (*earnestly*). Oh no! I'm not shy—truly.

STEPHEN (*gently; smiling*). My wife is very direct in her approach—but she means well.

GRACE. Darling, that is what a man says when he apologizes for a fussy mother, or an aunt—she means well.

STEPHEN. I beg your pardon.

GRACE (*appeased and rather coy*). I should say so.

STEPHEN. One is not, after all, madly sure of oneself at seventeen—or very communicative—you've forgotten.

GRACE. You mean it's so long ago?

STEPHEN. Darling, of course I didn't mean that.

GRACE. It is long ago—thank heaven.

STEPHEN. It's Laura's first visit here. She doesn't know us.

GRACE (*lightly, but edged*). She knows you.

(LAURA is acutely embarrassed.)

It seems somehow strange that we should be sitting talking about her in the third person as if she weren't here.

STEPHEN (*sharply*). If we are then one of us is being extremely rude. (*He puts his cup on the table, beside the reading lamp.*)

GRACE. Am I? I'm sorry. You must forgive me. But, as I told you, we live in such seclusion here that you probably think I'm very unsociable.

LAURA. No, not at all. I ought to go home. It's getting late.

GRACE. Will you fetch her coat, Stephen. (*She takes LAURA'S cup and leans over and puts it, and her own, on the table behind the settee.*)

STEPHEN (*rising*). Yes. Where is it?

GRACE. I left it upstairs in my room.

(STEPHEN exits and goes off R. There is a brief silence.)

Shall I give you a piece of advice, my dear? You should try to control your imagination.

LAURA. What do you mean?

GRACE (*blandly*). I can sense that you're in love with my husband. I just want you to know that it amuses me—up to a point.

(LAURA reacts in dismay.)

(*Kindly.*) I say—up to a point—because I can visualize circumstances in which it might be embarrassing—for him.

LAURA (*in distress*). As if I would ever embarrass him! (*She rises and moves down L.*)

GRACE. You do admit it?

LAURA (*turning to GRACE*). No! No!

GRACE. Hush then—forget it.

(STEPHEN enters with the coat. He looks at LAURA'S distressed face, then at GRACE.)

STEPHEN. What's the matter? (*He comes down L. of the settee.*)

GRACE. Nothing. Why must men always say when they come into a silence, "What's the matter?"

(STEPHEN holds the coat up. LAURA moves to him and puts it on, quickly struggling into it as he tries to help. She is pent up and looks as if she would like to rush out of the house.)

LAURA (*to GRACE*). Good night. (*To STEPHEN.*) Good night, Mr Barlow—and thank you very much.

STEPHEN. Will you be all right, Laura? Shall I walk back with you?

LAURA (*moving up stage*). I'll be all right. (*She goes into the hall.*)

(STEPHEN follows her into the hall and goes off L.)

GRACE. You've forgotten your books, my dear. (*She rises, picks up the satchel and moves up stage to the door.*)

LAURA (*taking the satchel*). Thank you.

(*She exits and goes off L. GRACE moves down stage below the settee.*)

STEPHEN enters, closes the door and crosses to the desk.)

GRACE. Well that, I should say, is quite a temperamental little piece. (*She sits on the settee, c.*)

STEPHEN (*distantly*). She was shy. You didn't help her much. (*He picks up a pamphlet.*) What devastating information people get hold of. "Three hundred and twenty million people eat with a knife and fork, five hundred and thirty million people use sticks, seven hundred and forty million use their fingers, and one hundred and ninety million use a hunting knife."

GRACE. Who found all that out?

STEPHEN. UNESCO.

GRACE. Why did you bring her here?

STEPHEN. Why should I not have brought her here, dear?
(*He sits at the desk, and opens a book.*)

GRACE. It's been a wasted evening. I listened to the deadliest stuff on the radio.

STEPHEN. There was no reason for you to go and relegate yourself to your bedroom. You could easily have stayed here.

GRACE. There was an atmosphere . . . It worried me.

STEPHEN. Atmosphere?

GRACE. Of guilt—frustration—something.

STEPHEN. Whose guilt and whose frustration? (*He looks round at her.*)

GRACE (*after a pause*). There was hostility in the air.

STEPHEN. To whom—from whom?

GRACE. To me—from that girl.

STEPHEN (*turning back to his book*). You're talking nonsense. GRACE. I'm not talking nonsense. And it's the first time you've charged me with it. Already, you see, there's something. I ask you a question and you reply by another question. You can't expect me to let it slide when the whole perfection of our marriage has been based on our keeping nothing from each other.

STEPHEN. I'm keeping nothing from you that I'm aware of.

GRACE. Except why you asked that girl to the house. The real reason please, Stephen.

STEPHEN. I should have thought it was obvious. (*He turns to her.*) She's below standard in Latin. With a little extra coaching before the exam she might just make it. It was better to bring her here than to keep her in the class-room after hours. That's one of the things you just can't do in a mixed school. (*He turns back to his book.*)

GRACE. Why did we ever come to this wretched town! And that beastly mongrel school that's neither one thing nor the other!

STEPHEN. It's a good school. The educational authorities are very proud of it; it's their show-piece.

GRACE (*after a slight pause*). She's madly in love with you. (*For a moment STEPHEN is silent. He moves slightly in his chair.*)

STEPHEN (*quietly*). Grace dear—be your age.

GRACE (*tensely*). It would have been kinder not to rub that in at the moment.

STEPHEN. "Be your age" is an expression which simply means—be your age. There was nothing sinister in my using it.

GRACE. I could feel her in my bones as she was sitting there. I could hear that adolescent imagination working—seeing herself alone here with you—thinking of herself sleeping in your arms . . .

(STEPHEN *puts down his book and rises. He moves to the L. end of the settee and stands looking angrily at GRACE.*)

(*In a low tone.*) Sex-mad little tart!

STEPHEN (*quietly*). What on earth's got into you?

GRACE (*looking at him*). It's absurd to try to pretend it's news to you that she's in love with you. (*She rises and moves to him.*)

STEPHEN. Do you suppose I spend my day puzzling out whether or not one of my pupils is in love with me?

GRACE. There's been something about you lately. You sit behind a book but you're not reading it. You sit in a chair and go off into a trance.

(STEPHEN *crosses to the fireplace and stands with his back to GRACE.*)

STEPHEN (*with an edge of sarcasm*). It must be my spirit friend taking control.

GRACE (*moving away L. of the settee*). It's her taking control—and you going back on some nostalgic journey to your own youth. (*She turns to him.*) It's you, my dear Stephen, who should remember to be your age.

STEPHEN (*after a slight pause*). You glean things—like an old woman collecting rubbish—counting it over—muttering to yourself.

GRACE. Is that how you see me?

STEPHEN. At the moment—yes. (*He turns to her.*) This kind of conversation could go on all night. It's your sort of game—you're good at it; I'm not. (*He pauses.*) I'll tell you about this girl: she's got what I believe is called a crush on me. I'm quite aware of it. It's been going on for some time. It's upsetting her work, and probably her nerves. One reason I brought her here—apart from the obvious one that she needs coaching—was to meet you—to see us both in our own home. I thought it would be a friendly pleasant evening, and that it might help her to get things in their proper perspective.

GRACE. It might help *her*! What did you think it would do to me?

STEPHEN. You're twenty-five years older than she is. I thought you might behave like an intelligent adult.

GRACE. With her sitting there weighing up what her chances might be against me—counting every line on my face?

STEPHEN. What lines, Grace?

GRACE (*moving away L.; hysteria creeping in*). Don't be so false! Now I know—I was to be noble. I was to play the role of the self-effacing wife, all detachment and tolerance. Sit back and let your flaming romance crackle on . . .

STEPHEN. Romance! She's a child. (*He turns to the fireplace and fills his cigarette case from the box on the mantelpiece.*)

GRACE (*turning to him*). Not such a child—not that **one**! And well you know it.

(*There is a brief silence.*)

(*She moves towards him, below the settee.*) Don't you?

(*STEPHEN gives a tired shrug.*)

Anyhow I told her.

STEPHEN. Told her what?

GRACE. That I knew she was in love with you.

(*STEPHEN is very quiet. For a moment he is too angry to speak. He turns to GRACE.*)

STEPHEN. You can't be serious? *Did* you say that?

GRACE. And I said that it amused me—up to a point. (*She sits on the settee.*)

(*STEPHEN stares at her incredulously.*)

So it did. She sat there on the sofa like something behind a cage—tame only because there are bars between it and you.

STEPHEN. You talk like some crazy neurotic—all exaggeration and chatter—silly chatter dressed up to impress yourself. How could you hurt that child? I knew something was going on—I knew by her face when I came in and you made one of your bright covering-up remarks.

GRACE. All I did was to warn her off. Judging from the way you're carrying on it was high time I did.

STEPHEN. Have you quite forgotten that age? How vulnerable one is? How serious one is?

GRACE. You talk as if I were so old that I had forgotten everything.

STEPHEN. I was talking about her. She is the one who has been hurt—not you.

(*He moves quickly up to the door and goes off L.*)

GRACE (*frightened*). Where are you going? (*She rises.*)

STEPHEN (*off*). Out.

GRACE (*moving R. of the settee and behind it; her voice high-pitched*). You're going to catch up with that little slut . . .

(*STEPHEN appears at the door, angrily wrapping a scarf round his neck.*)

(*Hysterically.*) You subject me to an evening like this till I'm racked with nerves—then you go out and leave me with it all pent up inside me.

STEPHEN (*looking at her*). You've got rid of quite a lot of it.

GRACE. Stephen, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. (*She moves up stage to R. of the doorway.*) I'm so terrified I'll lose you.

(*STEPHEN looks at her in a tired preoccupied way.*)

STEPHEN. How could you lose me? We're tied together by twenty years of life.

GRACE. Is that all?

(There is a brief pause.)

Are you going out?

STEPHEN. Yes.

GRACE. Stephen! I have a recurring dream like this. That I am standing at the door—as I am now—begging you not to go out—and you go. And you never come back.

STEPHEN. I shall be back.

(He goes off L. The front door is heard to slam. GRACE moves slowly down stage.)

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

SCENE.—*The same. Two hours later.*

When the CURTAIN rises, the stage is in darkness except for the reading lamp and a light in the hall. GRACE is sitting in the easy chair down R. She has an open book on her lap. The door is open. She raises her head and listens. MRS USHER crosses the hall from L. to R. She is the housekeeper, a middle-aged woman dressed in black, with a tatty black bag and an umbrella. As she passes the open door she glances in, sees GRACE and stops.

MRS USHER. I was creeping in quietly, ma'am. I thought you'd have gone to bed.

GRACE. No, not yet. Did you have a nice evening?

MRS USHER *(making a face)*. Don't know about nice. I went to my sister's and had an earful as usual. Shall I bolt the front door?

GRACE *(in a stiff little voice)*. No. Mr Barlow isn't in yet.

MRS USHER. He's late, isn't he? It's half-past eleven.

GRACE. He went out for a breath of air. It's a lovely night.

MRS USHER. I suppose it is. I never noticed. Well, good night, ma'am.

GRACE. Good night, Mrs Usher.

(MRS USHER goes, closing the door behind her. The clock chimes the half-hour. GRACE looks at it anxiously. She puts her book on the table by the reading lamp and rises. She crosses to the window, parts the curtains and looks out. She wanders restlessly about the room, arrives at the easy chair and sits. Almost at once the front-door bell rings. She rises, runs to the door and exits into the hall off L.)

HENRY *(off)*. Mrs Barlow?

GRACE *(off)*. Yes.

HENRY (*off*). I'm Henry Vining—Laura's father. I came to collect her because my wife was getting a little anxious about her coming home alone.

(There is a slight pause.)

GRACE (*off*). Won't you come in?

HENRY (*off*). Thank you.

(HENRY enters from off L. He is forty-five; and although he is a small-town journalist he has a scholarly and philosophic personality. He tends to talk—and drink—too much. He moves R. of the door. GRACE follows him in and leaves the door open.)

GRACE. She isn't here, Mr Vining. She left about half-past nine. *(She switches on the lights, and moves down L.C.)*

(HENRY and GRACE look at each other, held by the doubts of the moment, but HENRY refuses to be alarmed.)

HENRY. Where on earth can the girl be? It must be getting on for midnight.

GRACE (*glancing at the clock*). It's just after half-past eleven.

HENRY. She must have called in at one of her friends. Thoughtless creatures, children. I don't worry, but her mother does.

GRACE (*stiffly*). Naturally. Do sit down.

HENRY. Thanks. *(He moves to the R. end of the settee and slowly takes off his coat.)*

GRACE. Will you have something to drink, Mr Vining?

HENRY. That's a charming idea.

(GRACE moves up L. to the table behind the door.)

GRACE. A whisky and soda?

HENRY. Wonderful. *(He folds his coat over the arm of the settee.)*

(There is silence while GRACE pours out the drink.)

I promised my wife faithfully that I wouldn't stop even if I were offered a drink. Where can that girl be?

(GRACE brings the drink to him below the settee.)

Thank you.

(GRACE crosses down L. to the table for the cigarettes.)

The streets are empty and most people seem to be in bed. In this town they draw a line like the equator between night and day. *(He sits on the settee, R. end.)*

GRACE (*crossing to HENRY with the cigarette box*). It's a grim place—by day or by night. *(She offers him a cigarette.)*

HENRY. You don't like it? Don't smoke, thank you. But

you've an attractive home here and a charming husband, I'm told—though I've never met him.

GRACE (*smiling*). Oh yes, I'm more than content with my home and my husband. I devote my life to them.

HENRY (*casually*). That's as it should be.

GRACE. The typical bourgeois housewife?

HENRY (*smiling*). I don't know what typical means. To me all people are unique. You'd call my wife, I suppose, a bourgeois housewife. But to me, she's the projection of my conscience. (*With a change of tone.*) I'd like to thank your husband for the interest he's taken in my daughter. Is he in?

(GRACE crosses to the fireplace.)

GRACE (*after a perceptible pause*). He went out—a few moments ago—for a walk. (*She puts the cigarette box on the mantelpiece, takes a cigarette and turns to him.*) We're on the fringe of the country here, you see. It's very tempting on a night like this. (*She lights her cigarette.*)

HENRY. Quote—"To keep an appointment with a beech tree, or a yellow birch, or an old acquaintance amongst the pines"—unquote. For myself I prefer to look for old acquaintances amongst the wayward flesh. One doesn't have so far to walk. (*He drinks.*) Well, I suppose I ought to go back and make my report on this girl. Perhaps she's home by now.

GRACE. Has she any special friend she might be with? (*She sits in the easy chair.*)

HENRY. No doubt she has. I don't know. Men like me have to keep the most incalculable hours—we know nothing about our families. One day they are little children hanging on your every word and the next they are strange young women who live in your house but are elsewhere in spirit.

GRACE. Shall I ring your home and find out if she's back?

HENRY. Now that requires a little consideration . . . If she's back my poor dear wife will then say where is Henry, what's he doing, send him home at once because the night air affects his chest. For years she has been trying to persuade me the night air affects my chest . . . (*He drinks and glances at GRACE.*)

(GRACE is silent and preoccupied.)

Please don't worry about her. She is probably walking hand-in-hand with some young man under the moon.

GRACE (*rising quickly and turning to the fireplace*). Is it usual for her to be out as late as this?

HENRY (*smiling*). No. But the unusual happens. The personality, at that age, seems held together in a very precarious equilibrium—especially hers.

(GRACE tries not to show too much interest, but there is a certain eagerness in her questioning.)

GRACE (turning). Why especially hers?

(HENRY sips his drink thoughtfully.)

HENRY. Because there appears to be a certain revolt against her surroundings . . . (With a smile.) She's more intelligent than her mother, and we have a crazy woman who lives with us—my sister, I regret to say. She doesn't help in this period of malaise which some of the young are prone to. (He finishes his drink.)

GRACE. You say you know nothing about your daughter . . . I think you know quite a lot.

HENRY (smiling). Not until this conversation began. (He smiles more broadly.) I'm a reporter, you see. One's half-formed observations need only a little alcohol and a good listener to shape themselves into narrative.

(GRACE smiles. Unobtrusively she takes his glass and crosses up L. to refill it.)

GRACE. Tell me more about her.

HENRY. What can I tell you? I'm a careless parent. I bob like a cork on the currents and undercurrents of my household. I try to play the role of father but there is no perseverance. One would have to devote time to it—like one of those men with muscles.

(GRACE returns and hands him his glass.)

Thank you. (He smiles.)

(GRACE moves away L.C. HENRY's mood is mellow, talkative and amiable. He is unaware of the tenseness in GRACE's questioning.)

I know her only at second-hand, through my wife who throws me scraps of domestic drama from time to time. She tells me Laura has something on her mind . . . My dear wife thinks human happiness depends on everyone's mind being an amiable blank. (He drinks.)

GRACE. What could she have on her mind at her age?

HENRY. Some aspect of sex I suppose. She has the temperament for sharp personal anguish. So had I at her age—I wrote some good poetry.

GRACE (scarcely able to conceal her perturbation; edgily). I think you ought to find out what it is—and talk her out of it.

HENRY (blandly). I think I know what it is. Her sister was married at seventeen—she had a child when she was eighteen. My little Laura probably thinks life is passing her by. (He smiles at GRACE, but receives no answering smile.)

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