When We Are Married

A Yorkshire Farcical Comedy

J.B. Priestley

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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WHEN WE ARE MARRIED

First performed at the St. Martin's Theatre, London, on October 11th, 1938, with the following cast:

(In the order of appearance)

RUBY BIRTLE	*Patricia Hayes.*
GERALD FORBES	*Richard Warner.*
MRS. NORTHROP	*Beatrice Varley.*
NANCY HOLMES	*Betty Fleetwood.*
FRED DYSON	*Alexander Grandison.*
HENRY ORMONROYD	*Frank Pettingell.*
ALDERMAN JOSEPH HELLIWELL	*Lloyd Pearson.*
MARIA HELLIWELL	*Muriel George.*
COUNCILLOR ALBERT PARKER	*Raymond Huntley.*
HERBERT SOPPITT	*Ernest Butcher.*
CLARA SOPPITT	*Ethel Coleridge.*
ANNIE PARKER	*Helena Pickard.*
LOTTIE GRADY	*Mai Bacon.*
REV. CLEMENT MERCER	*Norman Wooland.*
MAYOR OF CLECKLEWYKE	*H. Marsh Dunn.*

A BASIL DEAN Production.

The action takes place in the sitting-room of Alderman Helliwell's house in Clecklewyke, a town in the West Riding, on an evening about thirty years ago.

ACT I

A September evening.

ACT II

About half an hour later.

ACT III

About a quarter of an hour later.

WHEN WE ARE MARRIED

ACT I

SCENE.—*The sitting-room in Helliwell's house.*

It is a solid detached late-Victorian house. On the L. (*actor's* L.) *wall is a window.* L.C. *in the back wall is a door to the rest of the house, leading directly into the hall. On the* R. *wall is a small conservatory, with a door leading into this, and then into the garden. The room is furnished without taste, in the style of about thirty years ago. There is an upright piano, little cupboards, drawers in small tables, etc.*

At the rise of the CURTAIN, *the evening sunlight comes through the window. There is nobody on the stage. We hear the front-door bell ring. A moment later,* RUBY BIRTLE *ushers in* GERALD FORBES. RUBY *is a very young "slavey" of the period, who looks as if her hair has just gone "up."* FORBES *is a pleasant young man, in the smart clothes of the period, and unlike* RUBY *and most of the other characters does not talk with a marked West Riding accent.*

RUBY (L. *of the door*). You'll have to wait, 'cos they haven't finished their tea.

GERALD. Bit late, aren't they? (*He crosses to* R.C.)

RUBY (*approaching, confidentially*). It's a do.

GERALD. It's what?

RUBY. A do. Y'know, they've company.

GERALD. Oh—I see. It's a sort of party, and they're having high tea.

RUBY (*after nodding, going closer still*). Roast pork, stand pie, salmon and salad, trifle, two kinds o' jellies, lemon-cheese tarts, jam tarts, swiss tarts, sponge cake, walnut cake, chocolate roll, and a pound cake kept from last Christmas.

GERALD (*with irony*). Is that all?

RUBY (*seriously*). No, there's white bread, brown bread, currant teacake, one o' them big curd tarts from Gregory's, and a lot o' cheese.

GERALD. It *is* a do, isn't it? (*He moves towards the conservatory.*)

RUBY (*after nodding, then very confidentially*). *And* a little brown jug.

Gerald (*turning, astonished*). A little brown jug ?

Ruby (*still confidentially*). You know what that is, don't you ? *Don't* you ? (*She laughs.*) Well, I never did ! Little brown jug's a drop o' rum for your tea. They're getting right lively on it. (*Coolly.*) But you don't come from round here, do you ?

Gerald (*down* R., *not disposed for a chat*). No.

(*A distant bell rings, not the front-door bell.*)

Ruby. I come from near Rotherham. Me father works in t'pit, and so does our Frank and our Wilfred.

(*The distant bell sounds again.*)

Gerald. There's a bell ringing somewhere.

Ruby (*coolly*). I know. It's for me. Let her wait. She's run me off me legs to-day. And Mrs. Northrop's in t'kitchen—she can do a bit for a change. (*She crosses to* Gerald.) There's seven of 'em at it in t'dining-room—Alderman Helliwell and missus, of course—then Councillor Albert Parker and Mrs. Parker, and Mr. Herbert Soppitt and Mrs. Soppitt—and of course Miss Holmes.

Gerald. Oh—Miss Holmes *is* there, is she ?

Ruby. Yes, but she's stopped eating. (*She giggles.*) You're courting her, aren't you ?

Gerald (*astonished and alarmed*). What !

Ruby (*coolly*). Oh—I saw you both—the other night, near Cleckley Woods. I was out meself, with our milkman's lad.

(Gerald *turns away.*)

Now don't look like that, I won't tell on you.

Gerald (*producing a shilling, then rather desperately*). Now—look here ! What's your name ?

Ruby. Ruby Birtle.

Gerald. Well, Ruby, you wouldn't like Miss Holmes to get into a row here with her uncle and aunt, would you ?

Ruby. No, I wouldn't like that. But I'd like that shilling.

Gerald (*after giving it to her*). You said Miss Holmes had finished eating.

Ruby. Yes. She can't put it away like some of 'em. I'd rather keep Councillor Albert Parker a week than a fortnight. D'you want to see her ?

Gerald. Yes. Could you just give her the tip quietly that I'm here—if the rest of them aren't coming in here yet ?

Ruby. Not them ! You'd think they'd been pined for a month—way they're going at it ! (*She turns up stage.*) I'll tell her. (*She turns back.*) She'd better come round that way—through t'greenhouse——

(*Before she can move again*, MRS. NORTHROP, *an aggressive but humorous working-woman of about fifty, puts her head in through the doorway.*)

MRS. NORTHROP (*aggressively*). Oh—'ere y'are!

RUBY (*coolly*). That's right, Mrs. Northrop. (*She crosses up* L.C.)

MRS. NORTHROP (*aggressively*). I see nought right about it—you gassin' in 'ere as if you owned t'place instead o' gettin' on wi' your work. She's rung for yer twice, an' I've just taken another lot o' hot water in. Nah, come on, yer little crackpot!

(*She holds the door open, and* RUBY *exits after a grin at* GERALD. MRS. NORTHROP *looks in for a minute.*)

Aren't you t'organist at chapel? (*She moves down a little.*)

GERALD. Yes.

MRS. NORTHROP (*cheerfully*). Ay, well, they've got it in for you.

GERALD (*astonished*). How do you know?

MRS. NORTHROP. 'Cos I 'eard 'em say so. (*Complacently.*) I don't miss much.

GERALD (*slowly*). So that's why Mr. Helliwell asked me to come round and see him.

MRS. NORTHROP (*cheerfully*). That's right. There's three of 'em 'ere to-night, d'you see—all big men at chapel. You've been enjoyin' yerself a bit too much, I fancy, lad.

GERALD (*slowly*). So that's it—is it?

MRS. NORTHROP (*coming a little farther in, leaning forward, with a very confidential air*). Ay—and d'you know what I say? I say—to 'ell with 'em!

(*She turns up and exits, leaving* GERALD *looking a little worried. He moves about restlessly towards* L., *takes his cigarette-case out of his pocket mechanically, then puts it back again. He keeps an eye on the door into the conservatory. After a few moments,* NANCY HOLMES, *an attractive girl in her early twenties, hurries in through this doorway, and checks down* R.)

NANCY (*in breathless whisper*). Gerald!

GERALD (*joyfully advancing*). Nancy! (*He makes as if to kiss her.*)

NANCY (*breathlessly*). No, you mustn't, not here—no, Gerald—please——

(*But he does kiss her and no harm has been done. They sit on the* R. *settee,* GERALD *on her* R.)

Now, listen, Gerald, and be sensible. This is serious. You know why Uncle Joe sent for you?

GERALD (*with a slight grin*). They've *got it in for* me. I've just been told.

NANCY. It's serious, Gerald. They've been grumbling about you some time, and now, as far as I can gather, one of these miserable old beasts saw you late one night—with *me*——

GERALD (*serious now*). Oh—I say—you weren't recognized, were you ?

NANCY. No. But *you* were.

GERALD. Well, that's not so bad, as long as they can't drag you into it. I know how strict your aunt is, and you can't afford to quarrel with them here until we're ready to be married——

NANCY (*earnestly*). No, but you can't either, Gerald. And they're going to be very cross with you, and you'll have to be awfully careful what you say to them. And there's that beastly Councillor Parker here, too, and you loathe him, don't you ?

GERALD. Absolutely. And I'll loathe him more than ever now that he's full of roast pork and trifle. (*He rises, moving to above the* L. *settee.*) I think I'd better give them time to recover from that huge ghastly tuck-in they're having.

NANCY. I should. Though they've nearly finished now.

GERALD (*returns to the* R. *settee*). If I clear out for half an hour or so, could you slip away too ? (*He sits.*)

NANCY. I might. They don't really want me. I'm in the way. You see, it's an anniversary celebration, and I don't come into it at all.

GERALD. What are they celebrating ?

(*Before she can reply,* RUBY *opens the door, announcing.*)

RUBY. It's " Yorkshire Argus "—two of 'em.

(GERALD *rises, and moves down* R.

Enter FRED DYSON, *a cheerful, rather cheeky youngish reporter, and* HENRY ORMONROYD, *who carries a large and old-fashioned newspaperman's camera and a flashlight apparatus.* ORMONROYD *is a middle-aged man with an air of beery dignity and wears a large drooping moustache.* NANCY *has risen. She crosses up* L.C.)

This is Miss Holmes, Alderman Helliwell's niece. T'others is still having their tea.

(RUBY *goes out.* DYSON *comes down to* NANCY.)

DYSON (*cheerfully*). 'Evening, Miss Holmes. (*To* GERALD.) How-d'you-do ? This is Mr. Henry Ormonroyd, our photographer. (*He crosses down* L.)

ORMONROYD (*bowing*). Pleased to meet you, I'm sure. Delightful weather we're having for the time of year.

GERALD. Isn't it ?

ORMONROYD (*profoundly*). It is.

DYSON. We seem to have come too early.

NANCY. I'm afraid you have——

ORMONROYD (*with dignified reproach*). What did I tell you, Fred ? (*He moves to* DYSON.) Always wanting to rush things. We could have had at least a couple more with my friend at the "Lion." (*He crosses to* C.) He's a chap who used to have a very good little peppermint rock business on the Central Pier, Blackpool, at the time I had my studio there. Old times, y'know, Mr. —er—and happy days, happy days ! (*He turns up stage, humming.*)

DYSON (*briskly, moving to* L.C.). All right, Henry. I'm sorry we're early. Matter of fact, I don't know yet what this is about. I just got a message from the office to come up here and bring a photographer.

NANCY. You see, it's their Silver Wedding.

DYSON. Henry ! It's Alderman Helliwell's *Silver Wedding* !

ORMONROYD. Very nice—I suppose.

NANCY. Yes, but not only my uncle and aunt's. There were three couples—my uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Soppitt, Mr. and Mrs. Parker——

DYSON. Is that Councillor Albert Parker ?

NANCY (*pulling a little face*). Yes. You know him ?

DYSON (*gloomily*). Yes, we know him.

ORMONROYD (*confidentially*). Every time he opens his mouth at the Town Hall, he puts his foot in it, so they call him the "foot and mouth disease"—— Ha ! ha ! (*Now suddenly solemn again.*) Are all three happy couples here ?

NANCY. Yes, because they were all married on the same morning at the same chapel. They have a photograph—a combined wedding-group. (*She goes to the piano to find it.*)

GERALD (*to* DYSON, *moving in to* R.C.). You'll have to interview 'em, and they'll tell you how happy they've been—— (*He sits on the* R. *settee.*)

DYSON. Oh—yes. I see the idea now.

NANCY (*returning with an old photograph*). Here you are. All six of them on their wedding morning. Don't they look absurd in those clothes ?

ORMONROYD (*solemnly*). To you—yes. To me—no. I was married myself about that time. (*Holding the photograph at arm's length, and looking at it critically.*) Now, you see, Fred (*he crosses down to* DYSON), what's wanted is another group in the very same positions—— After twenty-five years' wear and tear. Very nice.

DYSON. You're holding it upside down.

ORMONROYD. I know, lad, I know. That's the way we always look at 'em professionally. (*He looks closely.*) Either the flies have been at this, or someone's touched up Albert Parker with a screw-driver. (*He gives the photograph to* GERALD.) Well, if

we're too early, we're too early. Might nip back to the "Lion," Fred lad, eh ?

(ORMONROYD *takes the camera from the top of the settee* L.)

DYSON. We'll come back in about an hour.

ORMONROYD. They're keeping a very nice drop of beer down at the "Lion," now.

(DYSON *and* ORMONROYD *go out,* NANCY *going towards the door with them, and shutting it behind them.* GERALD *looks at the photograph, then at the back of it, and is obviously interested and amused.*)

GERALD (*moving to* C., *with some excitement*). This was when they were all married, then—September the fifth, 'eighty-three ?

NANCY. Yes—why ? (*Coming down* C.) What's the matter, Gerald ? (*He has started laughing.*) Gerald, what is it ? Oh—don't be so mean. They'll be here in a minute.

(*As he shakes his head, still laughing softly, we hear voices behind the door into the hall.*)

GERALD. They're coming in. Nancy, let's dodge out that way.

(*He puts down the photograph on the table below the* R. *settee, picks up his straw hat, while she has gone to the door into the conservatory, and they hurry out that way, shutting the door behind them. Voices outside the door into the hall are louder now, and after a moment the* PARKERS, *the* SOPPITTS *and the* HELLIWELLS *enter. They are dressed in their best, and obviously crammed with high tea.* ALBERT PARKER *is a tall, thin, conceited, sententious man ; his wife* ANNIE, *a hopeful kind of woman.* HERBERT SOPPITT *is a smallish, neat man, clearly dominated by his wife* CLARA, *a noisy woman.* JOSEPH *and* MARIA HELLIWELL *are high-coloured, rather bouncing, rather pompous, very pleased with themselves Their ages are all between forty-five and fifty-five.* HERBERT SOPPITT *and* MRS. PARKER *talk a rather genteel ordinary English ; the other four have pronounced North-Country accents, with particularly broad "a" sounds.*)

HELLIWELL (*very much the host*). Now what's wanted now's a good cigar, an' I've got the very thing. (*He goes to get a box from the drawer of the table.*)

(PARKER *and* SOPPITT *move to* R.C., *above the settee.*)

MARIA (*indignantly*). That Mrs. Northrop ! When she's finished her washing-up to-night she goes—and goes for good.

CLARA. And quite right too ! They're all the same. Answering back—if you say anything.

MARIA. Trouble with her is—she likes a drop. I've smelt it before to-day.

(CLARA *sits on the lower end of the settee* L.C., MARIA *at the upper end.* ANNIE *crosses, and sits below the settee* R.C.)

HELLIWELL (C., *offering the cigar-box to* PARKER). Now then, Albert! You'll find that's a good cigar, La Corona.

PARKER (*taking one*). Thanks, Joe. As you know, I don't smoke a lot, but when I do, I like a good cigar.

HELLIWELL (*offering to* SOPPITT). Herbert?

SOPPITT. I don't think—er—I will—thanks, Joe.

MARIA (*expansively*). Nay, Herbert, 'ave one o' Joe's cigars.

CLARA. If he'd had it to pay for himself, he'd have been wanting one.

SOPPITT (*rather nervously*). I think—I'd rather not smoke just now—I believe I ate too much at tea.

ANNIE (*to keep him company*). I know *I* did.

(SOPPITT *moves to the conservatory.*)

PARKER (*severely*). Yes, an' you'll be complaining before the night's out. (*He comes to the settee* R.C. *and sits on* ANNIE'S L.)

CLARA. An' so will Herbert.

PARKER (*complacently*). Now that's something that never bothers me.

HELLIWELL (C., *guffawing*). No, we've noticed that, Albert.

PARKER (*offended*). How d'you mean?

MARIA. Go on, Albert, you know what Joe is—must 'ave his little joke.

ANNIE. I know *I* ought to have stopped long before I did—I mean, at tea—but, Maria, everything was *so* nice.

CLARA. 'Ear, 'ear!

MARIA (*complacently accepting this*). Well, I said to Joe, "Now, Joe," I said, "we'll only have just the six of us, but we'll make it an occasion an' do it well while we're at it," I said. Didn't I, Joe?

HELLIWELL (*busy attending to his cigar, though he does not remove the band*). Did you?

MARIA (*indignantly*). You know very well I did.

HELLIWELL (*still not interested*). All right, you did then.

MARIA (*same indignant tone*). You know quite well I did, Joe Helliwell.

HELLIWELL (*suddenly annoyed himself*). All right, all right, all right, you did then.

CLARA (*pats* MARIA'S *hands*). They're all alike. Wait till somebody else's with you, and then try to make you out a liar.

PARKER (*severely*). Speak for yourself! I don't try to make my wife out a liar, do I, Annie?

ANNIE (*rather timidly, hesitantly*). Well—no—Albert, not—really——

PARKER (*very severely*). How d'you mean—*not really*—I just don't, that's all. (*Changing the subject, in rather lordly style.*) A good smoke, Joe, quite a good smoke. It reminds me of that cigar Sir Harold Watson gave me not so long since at the club. I was standing near the fireplace, and Sir Harold came up——

ANNIE (*gathering courage to interrupt*). Albert—you told them before.

PARKER (*glaring*). Well, I can tell 'em again, can't I ?

SOPPITT (*tactfully, coming to below the* R. *settee*). Maria, have you got a copy of that old photograph we had taken ? I couldn't find ours.

MARIA. Yes. Where is it, Joe ? (*While he looks round.*) Aaa, I laugh many a time when I think o' that morning—six of us, all so nervous——

HELLIWELL. And the parson worse still. He was only like twopennorth o' copper, an' I could ha' given him a few years myself.

CLARA. I think we were about first he'd ever married.

ANNIE. I'm sure we were. I didn't feel I'd been married properly——

PARKER (*severely*). Of course you'd been married properly. If he'd been ninety and doing it all his life, you wouldn't ha' been married any better, would you ?

MARIA. I've forgotten his name now. He was only a temporary, wasn't he ?

SOPPITT. I remember ! (*A pause.*) It was a tree—Beech.

HELLIWELL. That's right—Beech—an' he'd a funny squint. (*He has found the photograph.*) And here's the old photo. (*He hands it to his wife.* ANNIE *crosses to the* L. *settee, and the ladies look at it, with exclamations, while the men remain aloof.*)

PARKER (*the business-man now*). I see Crossbreds are down again.

HELLIWELL (*another business-man*). Ay—and they'll stay down with Australian market as it is. (*He sits in the chair* C.) If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times—if Merinos is down and staying down, then your Crossbreds'll have to follow. Now, look at Merinos——

MARIA (*looking up to expostulate*). Here, Joe, we didn't come here to talk about Merinos. This isn't Wool Exchange. Take a look at yourselves and see what we took on.

(*He ignores her. She puts the photograph on the table behind the settee.*)

HELLIWELL. Now wait a minute. 'Ealths !

MARIA. That's right, Joe. Ring !

(HELLIWELL *rings.* MARIA *turns to the others.*)

We ought to do it in proper style, an' drink our healths before we go any further.

SOPPITT (*attempting a joke*). Further—where ?

CLARA (*severely*). That'll do, Herbert. A bit o' fun's all right, but you go too far.

SOPPITT (*indignantly*). I didn't mean——

CLARA (*rises, cutting in*). That'll do, Herbert ! (*She crosses to the settee* R., *and sits.*)

(MRS. NORTHROP *looks in.*)

MRS. NORTHROP (*aggressively*). Well ?

MARIA (*rather grandly*). There's a tray with glasses on—just bring it in——

MRS. NORTHROP (*indignantly*). What—me ? How many pairs of 'ands——

HELLIWELL (*peremptorily*). *Now then*—just tell thingumpty-ite—Ruby—to bring in the port wine.

MRS. NORTHROP. What—on top o' your tea ? You'll be poorly.

(*She withdraws.* HELLIWELL *is furious.*)

HELLIWELL (*angrily*). Now did you 'ear that——

MARIA (*hastily*). All right, Joe, we don't want any trouble. She goes to-night, an' she doesn't come back.

CLARA. I don't know what things are coming to ! All the same ! Answering back !

PARKER (*sententiously*). They're all alike, that class of people. We have the same trouble at mill. Don't know when they're well off. Idle, that's what they are—bone idle !

CLARA. *And* impudent ! Back answers !

ANNIE (*timidly*). Yes—but I suppose they don't know any better——

PARKER (*severely*). They know a lot better. And what you want to stick up for 'em for, I can't think.

HELLIWELL (*heartily*). Now then, Albert, don't start fratching, but try an' enjoy yourself for once. This is an anniversary. Which reminds me, Charlie Pearson told me, t'other day, they built a new Wesleyan Methodist Chapel up at Thornton, and they opened with an anniversary. Anyhow, this is ours, so let's have peace an' goodwill all round. Now I thought we'd first drink a bit of a toast to ourselves——

MARIA. That was *my* idea.

HELLIWELL (*ignoring this, but only just*). Then I thought we'd have a bit of a chat about old times, an' then we'd settle down to a game o' Newmarket——

MARIA. That was my idea too.

HELLIWELL (*annoyed*). What the hangment does it matter whose idea it was, so long as we get on with it and enjoy ourselves !

SOPPITT. That's the great thing. (*Controlled belch. He catches his wife's eye and falters.*) Enjoy ourselves. (*He rises, moves to the* R. *door, looking miserable and a bit sick.*)

CLARA (*severely*). I told you to leave that salmon alone.

HELLIWELL (*moves down a step*). Nay, Clara, why can't he have a bit o' salmon if he fancies it ?

CLARA (*sharply*). 'Cos it doesn't fancy him, Joe Helliwell, that's why. Look at that time we all went to Scarborough !

SOPPITT. It was Bridlington. (*She turns back to the* R. *end of the settee.*)

CLARA. It was both ! And what did that doctor say ? *You're digging your grave with your teeth, Mr. Soppitt.*

HELLIWELL. Ha-ha-ha !

(*Enter* RUBY, *carrying a tray with six small glasses on it, and three bottles of port.* HELLIWELL *crosses up to her.*)

Here, what did you want to bring 'em all for ? One bottle at a time's enough.

RUBY (*putting down the tray*). Mrs. Northrop said you'd better 'ave t'lot while you was at it.

HELLIWELL (*heavily*). In future, just take your orders from me and not from Mrs. Northrop. Now just trot along—an' no lip.

(*He starts to take the cork out of the bottle.*)

RUBY (*turning at the door*). Mrs. Northrop says she's not coming 'ere again——

HELLIWELL (*heatedly*). We know all about it. (*He moves after her, cigar in mouth, bottle in hand.*)

MARIA (*cutting in*). Now let it be, Joe.

(HELLIWELL *draws the cork with an effort.*)

(RUBY *has now gone and closed the door.* HELLIWELL *begins pouring out the port.*)

D'you know what we ought to do for this ? We ought to get just in the same places we were in that old photo. Where is it ? (*She finds it and directs them from it.*) Now here we are. (*She uses a settee.*) I was in the middle. You were here, Clara. You this side, Annie. Now come on, Albert—behind Annie. Herbert.

(MARIA *sits last. These five have now arranged themselves in the grouping of the old photograph.* HELLIWELL *hands them their glasses of port, then takes up a position himself.*)

HELLIWELL (*facetiously*). Here's to me and my wife's husband !

MARIA. Let's have none o' that silly nonsense, Joe.

PARKER (*solemnly*). A few serious words is what's needed.

ANNIE (*rather plaintively*). Oh—must you, Albert ?

PARKER. How d'you mean—must I ? What's wrong with a few serious words on an occasion like this ? Marriage—is a serious business.

CLARA. That's right, Albert. Where'd we be without it ?

SOPPITT. Single.

CLARA. That'll do, Herbert.

PARKER (*sententiously, moving to* C., *facing the others*). Marriage—well—marriage—to begin with, it's an institution, isn't it ?

MARIA (*solemnly*). That is so. (*Sighs profoundly.*)

PARKER (*getting into his stride*). One of the *oldest* institutions. It goes back—right back to—well, it goes right back. And it's still going strong to-day. Why ?

HELLIWELL (*hastily*). Well, because——

PARKER (*sharply cutting in*). Let me finish, Joe, let me finish. Now, why is it still going strong to-day ? Because it's the backbone of a decent respectable life.

HELLIWELL (*solemnly*). True, Albert, true.

PARKER. Where would women be without marriage ?

CLARA (*sharply*). And where'd some o' you men be ?

PARKER. All right, I'm coming to that.

HELLIWELL. Well, don't be too long, Albert. I want to try this port.

PARKER (*solemnly*). Marriage may be a bit more necessary to women than it is to men——

ANNIE. Why ?

PARKER (*annoyed at this*). *Why ?*

HELLIWELL. Children, you see, Annie.

ANNIE (*abashed*). Oh—yes—I'd forgotten. Still——

PARKER. I'm talking now, *if* you please. But if a woman wants a 'ome and security and a respectable life, *which* she gets from marriage, a man wants something to——

CLARA (*quickly*). He wants all he can get.

PARKER. He wants a nice comfortable 'ome, somebody to tell his troubles to and so forth——

HELLIWELL (*facetiously*). That's good, Albert, the *and so forth.*

PARKER. Now, Joe——

HELLIWELL. Well, cut it short——

PARKER (*slowly and solemnly, moving back to the top of the settee* R.). So, as we're all gathered 'ere to celebrate the anniversary of our joint wedding-day, friends, I give you—the toast of *Marriage* !

MARIA. Very nice, Albert.

(*They all drink.*)

ANNIE (*confidentially*). It'll go straight to my head. D'you remember that time at Harrogate ? I could have sunk through the floor when that waiter laughed.

HELLIWELL (*producing the bottle again from the table* R.C.). Now,

wait a minute. That's all right as far as it goes—but—nay—damn it !——

Maria (*reproachfully*). Joe !

Helliwell. We must have another toast, just for ourselves. I bet it isn't often there's three couples can meet like this who were all wed on same morning together. Now then——

(*He insists on filling the glasses again as they still hold them in their hands. He takes the bottle back to the table.*)

Maria (*confidentially*). I don't act silly, but my face gets so red.

Helliwell. Now—here's to all of us—and the Reverend Mr. What's-his-name—Beech—who tied us up—wherever he is——

The Others. Here's to us. Here's to him. (*Etc.*)

(*They drink. When they have finished, the front-door bell is heard.*)

Maria. Front door ! Who'll that be ?

Helliwell (*rather importantly*). Well, I told " Yorkshire Argus " to send somebody round to have a word with us.

Clara (*delighted*). What—are you going to have a piece in the papers ?

Parker. They don't want to catch us like this.

(*He swallows the rest of his port hastily. The others do the same. The group breaks up,* Parker *to the table* R.C., *then down* R. Soppitt *behind the table, then to the head of the settee.* Joe *to above the* L. *settee.* Ruby *enters.*)

Maria. Is it " Yorkshire Argus " ?

Ruby. No, it's Mr. Forbes, t'organist from t'chapel. He came afore, an' then went away again.

Helliwell. Tell him to wait.

(Ruby *goes.* Helliwell *turns to the others.*)

You know about this business, Albert. You too, Herbert.

Soppitt (*hesitantly, moving to* Helliwell). Yes—but——

Helliwell (*sharply*). But, nothing. You're too soft, Herbert.

Clara. I'm always telling him so.

Helliwell. He's chapel organist—he's paid for t'job—an' either he behaves himself properly or he goes.

Parker (*severely*). He'll go anyhow, if I've *my* say.

Annie. No, Albert, he's not a bad young fellow——

Parker. Now you shut up, Annie. You don't know half of what we know. An' I'll bet we don't know half there is to know about that chap. Never should ha' been appointed. I said so then. I say so now. I know my own mind.

ANNIE (*rebelliously*). I wish sometimes you'd keep a bit of it to yourself.

PARKER. What's that mean ?

(NANCY *now appears at the door from the conservatory* R.)

MARIA. Hello, love, where've you been ?

NANCY (*who seems a trifle giggly*). Just out a minute. (*Crossing up to the door.*) You don't want me, do you, Auntie ? Because if you don't, I thought I'd put my hat and coat on and see if Muriel Spencer's in.

MARIA (*rises*). All right. (*As she moves across.*) There's that Gerald Forbes waiting outside—your uncle has something to say to him—now don't go talking to him. (*She puts the glass on the buffet, and moves to* R. *of* HELLIWELL.)

HELLIWELL. I should think not. (*Moving towards* NANCY.) Just say " Hello " or " Good evening " and leave it at that. The less you have to do with that chap the better, Nancy.

(NANCY *suddenly explodes into giggles.*)

Now what's funny about that ?

NANCY (*still giggling*). I'm sorry, Uncle. I just remembered —something that amused me——

(*She goes out giggling.*)

HELLIWELL. Now what's got hold of her ?

MARIA. Oh—she's at silly age. They don't know half the time whether to laugh or cry when they're that age. (*She goes to the top of the settee* L.C.) Now, Clara—Annie—we'll leave the men to it. I expect that's what they want——

(CLARA *comes round below the settee and up to* MARIA.)

PARKER (*solemnly*). Certainly. After all, it's chapel business.

MARIA. Well, we want to go upstairs anyhow.

HELLIWELL. That's right.

(CLARA *glares. He collapses on the settee.*)

MARIA. You haven't seen what Joe bought me yet. (*To* JOE.) But don't take too long over him.

PARKER. *Him !* It wouldn't take *me* long——

HELLIWELL (*jovially*). It'll take me less long, 'cos I don't make speeches. Here, we'll put these out o' t'way——

(*As the women go out,* HELLIWELL *puts the glasses back on the buffet. A certain primness now descends on them.* PARKER *sits at the* L. *end of the settee* R.)

PARKER. I said from first—it's a bad appointment. To start with, he's too young.

SOPPITT (*rather timidly*). I don't think that matters much. (*He sits on* PARKER'S L.)

PARKER (*severely*). Trouble with you, Herbert, is you don't think anything matters much, and that's just where you're wrong.

HELLIWELL. Young Forbes is a southerner an' all.

PARKER (*with grim triumph*). Ah—I was coming to that.

SOPPITT. Oughtn't we to have him in ?

HELLIWELL. No, let him wait a bit.

PARKER. Do him good. No, as soon as they told me he's a Southerner and his name's Gerald, I said, " We don't want him." I said, " La-di-dah. That's what you're going to get from him," I said. " La-di-dah. What we want at Lane End—biggest chapel for miles—wi' any amount o' money in congregation—what we want is a bit o' good old Yorkshire organ-playing and choir-training," I said. " We don't want la-di-dah." (*With awful imitation of ultra-refined accents.*) " Heow-d'yew-dew. Sow chawmed to meek your acquaintance. Eoh, dee-lateful wethah ! " You know what I call that stuff ?

SOPPITT (*who has a sense of humour*). Yes. (*Broadly.*) La-di-dah.

HELLIWELL. Albert's right. We made a mistake. Mind you, he'd good qualifications, an' he seemed a nice quiet lad. But I must say, after old Sam Fawcett, chapel didn't seem right with an organist who goes round wearing one o' these pink shirts and knitted ties and creases in his trousers——

PARKER. It's all——

PARKER } (*together*). La-di-dah !
SOPPITT }

PARKER (*in a disgusted tone*). Then look at his *Messiah* ! We warned him. I said to him myself, " I know it's a Christmas piece, but you've got to get in quick, afore the others."

HELLIWELL. Right, Albert. After t'end o' November, there's been so many of 'em you might as well take your Messiah an' throw it into t'canal.

PARKER. And look what happened. Hillroad Baptist gave *Messiah*. Salem gave *Messiah*. Tong Congregational gave *Messiah*. Pickicbrook Wesleyans gave *Messiah*. And where was Lane End ?

SOPPITT. Well, when we did get it—it was a good one.

HELLIWELL. I'm not saying it wasn't, but by that time who cared ? But anyhow all that's a detail. Point is, we can't have any carrying on, can we ?

SOPPITT (*gravely*). Ah—there I agree, Joe.

PARKER (*indignantly*). An' I should think so. Organist at Lane End Chapel *carrying on* ! (*He puts out his cigar, on the table behind the settee.*) That sort o' game may do down South, but it won't do up 'ere.

HELLIWELL. We're all agreed on that.

(SOPPITT *and* PARKER *nod.*)

Right, then! We'll have 'im in.

(*He goes to the door, the other two sitting up stiffly and looking official and important. Rather grimly through the open door.*)

All right, come in.

(HELLIWELL *returns to his chair* C. GERALD FORBES *follows him in, closing but not latching the door behind him.* GERALD *looks cool and self-possessed, with a twinkle in his eye.* HELLIWELL *sits down and looks as official and important as the other two. All three stare severely at* GERALD, *as he sits down.* GERALD *pulls out a cigarette-case, but no sooner has he taken a cigarette from it than* PARKER *remonstrates with him.*)

PARKER (*severely*). I wouldn't do that.

GERALD (*rather startled*). Do what?

PARKER (*severely*). Well, what 'ave you got in your 'and?

GERALD (*still surprised*). This? Cigarette. Why?

PARKER. Under the circumstances, young man, don't you think it might be better—more—more suitable—more fitting—if you didn't smoke that just now?

(*The three men look at one another.*)

GERALD (*with a shrug*). Oh—all right, if that's how you feel about it. (*Puts the case away. A pause.*) Well? You wanted to talk about something, didn't you? (*He sits at the upper end of the settee* L.C.)

HELLIWELL (*firmly*). We did. We do.

PARKER. And if I'd 'ad *my* way, we'd have been talking to you long since.

GERALD. Well, not very long since, because I haven't been up here very long.

PARKER. No, you haven't been up here very long, and I don't think you'll be up here much longer.

HELLIWELL. Here, Albert, let *me* get a word in. Mr. Forbes, you're organist of our Lane End Chapel, and that's the biggest place o' worship round here, and this is a very respectable neighbourhood, with a lot o' money behind it. You have a paid appointment as organist and choir-master.

GERALD. Yes, though it doesn't keep me, y'know, Mr. Helliwell.

HELLIWELL. No, but because you *are* our organist, you're able to get pupils and various extra jobs, so you don't do so bad out of it, eh?

GERALD (*a trifle dubiously*). No, I'm quite satisfied—for the time being.

PARKER (*annoyed*). *You're* satisfied! For the time being! You're satisfied!

GERALD (*quietly*). That's what I said, Mr. Parker.

Parker (*with dignity*). Councillor Parker. (*Pointing.*) Alderman Helliwell. Councillor Parker. *Mr.* Soppitt.

Gerald (*indicating himself*). Plain mud!

Parker (*explosively, rising*). Now listen——

Helliwell (*cutting in noisily*). Nay, let me finish, Albert. We want to keep calm about this—just keep calm.

(Parker *sits.*)

Gerald. I'm quite calm.

Helliwell (*rather explosively*). You're a damn' sight too calm for my liking, young man. You ought to be sitting there looking right ashamed of yourself, instead of looking—looking—well, as you do look.

Gerald. But you haven't told me what's wrong yet.

Parker (*angrily*). Wrong? You're wrong. And carrying on's wrong.

Helliwell (*loftily*). In some chapels they mightn't care what you did—I don't know—but Lane End's got a position to keep up. We're respectable folk, and naturally we expect our organist to *behave* respectably.

Soppitt (*apologetically*). I think you have been very careless, Mr. Forbes, and there really has been a lot of grumbling.

Parker. For one thing—you've been seen out—late at night—wi' girls.

Gerald. Girls?

Helliwell. It may be t'same lass each time, for all I know, but if what I hear is true, whoever she is, she ought to be ashamed of herself. My word, if she'd owt to do wi' me, I'd teach her a sharp lesson.

Parker. Somebody saw you once, gallivanting away late at night, at Morecambe. And it gets round, y'know—oh yes—it gets round.

Gerald (*beginning to lose his temper*). Yes, so it seems. But I didn't think you'd find it worth while to listen to a lot of silly gossip——

Parker (*sharply*). Now don't start taking that tone——

Gerald. What tone can I take? I say, a lot of silly gossip——

Soppitt. Now, steady, steady.

Gerald. Silly gossip. Old women's twaddle——

Helliwell (*heavily*). That'll do. Just remember, you're not much more than a lad yet. We're nearly twice your age, and we know what's what——

Gerald (*angrily*). Well, what is what, then?

Helliwell (*angrily*). This is what. We're not going to have any more of this. Either behave yourself, or get back to where you came from. You're not going to make us a laughing-stock and a byword in t'neighbourhood. Now this is a fair warning——

GERALD (*steadily*). I haven't done anything I'm ashamed of.

PARKER. What's that prove ? If a chap's got cheek of a brass mónkey, he never need do aught he's ashamed of.

SOPPITT. Careful, Albert.

PARKER. Why should I be careful ? I'll tell him to his face what I've said behind his back. He never ought to have been appointed, and now he's been carrying on and not caring tuppence what respectable folk might think, he oughtn't to be given any warnings but told to get back to where he came from, and then he can carry on as much as he likes.

(*Both* GERALD *and* SOPPITT *start to protest, but* HELLIWELL *loudly stops them.*)

HELLIWELL. Now, Albert, we mustn't be too hard. We must give young men just another chance. (*Severely and patronizingly to* GERALD.) I'm not sure I should if this were any other time. But nay—damn it, this is a festive occasion an' we must take it easy a bit. So I'm giving you a last chance to mend yourself. And you can think yourself lucky catching me i' this humour. Just happens we're all celebrating anniversary of our wedding-day—all three of us—ay, we've all been married twenty-five years to-day. (*He blows his nose.*)

(GERALD *shakes his head rather sadly.*)

What you're shaking your head about ?

GERALD (*quietly, gently*). Well, you see, Mr. Helliwell—I beg your pardon, Alderman Helliwell—I'm rather afraid you haven't been married twenty-five years.

HELLIWELL (*roaring*). Do you think we can't count, lad ?

GERALD (*same quiet tone*). No, I don't mean that. But I'm afraid you've only been living together all this time.

HELLIWELL (*jumping up angrily*). *Living together !* I'll knock your head right off your shoulders, lad, if you start talking like that to me.

GERALD (*also standing up*). No, no, no. I'm not trying to insult you. I mean what I say.

PARKER (*angrily*). Mean what you say ! You're wrong in your damned 'ead.

SOPPITT (*authoritatively for him*). Wait a minute—Albert, Joe. We must listen. He means it.

HELLIWELL (*angrily*). Means it ! Means what ?

GERALD (*impressively*). If you'll just be quiet a minute I'll explain.

PARKER (*explosively*). I don't want to——

GERALD (*sharply*). I said—*quiet.*

HELLIWELL. Leave him be, Albert.

GERALD (*sits*). Thanks. Mind if I smoke now ?

(*All sit. With maddening slowness,* GERALD *takes out and lights*

a cigarette. Helliwell *and* Parker *watch him with impatience and look as if about to explode.*)

I went to North Wales for my holiday this summer——

Helliwell (*impatiently*). Is this part of it, 'cos *I* don't care *where* you went for your holidays ?

Gerald (*calmly*). I went to North Wales, and only came back about a fortnight ago. While I was there I made the acquaintance of a parson, who'd been in Africa for the last twenty years. When he learnt that I was the organist of Lane End Chapel, Clecklewyke, he became very excited, and then it turned out that he'd been at Lane End himself for a short time. About twenty-five years ago.

Soppitt. What was his name ?

Gerald. Beech. Francis Edwin Beech.

Helliwell (*boisterously*). Oh—yes—Beech ! We were only talking about him to-night. We remember Mr. Beech. He married us, y'know. Yes, he married us, five-and-twenty years ago—all three couples. That's what we're celebrating—(*his voice suddenly dies away because he realizes what the other two have realized for the last minute that there might be something wrong. So as he mutters the end of his sentence now, he glances unhappily at the others*) y'know—being—married—twenty-five years——

(Gerald *looks at them over his cigarette.*)

Parker (*swallowing*). Go on. Go on.

Gerald. I could see that something he remembered about Clecklewyke and Lane End worried him. (*With obvious relish.*) You might say, gentlemen, it was *preying* on his mind, it was *gnawing* at his conscience, it was *haunting* him, it was——

Helliwell (*angrily*). What is this—a recitation ?

Gerald. I must apologize if I'm boring you, gentlemen——

Parker (*in sudden passion, jumping up*). La-di-dah ! La-di-dah ! (*He goes up stage, then turns down as* Gerald *stares at him in astonishment.*) Now if you've anything to tell us, for God's sake tell us—and don't la-di-dah ! (*He stands behind* Helliwell.)

Helliwell. Quite right, Albert. (*To* Gerald, *impatiently.*) Well, what did Mr. Beech say ?

Gerald. He didn't *say* anything.

(Helliwell *and* Parker *are at once relieved and annoyed. They breathe more freely, but then feel they have been needlessly alarmed.* Soppitt *waits to learn more and looks steadily at* Gerald.)

Helliwell. Well, what are you nattering on about him for—— ?

Soppitt (*moving up to above the* R. *settee*). Just a minute, Joe. (*To* Gerald.) That's not all, is it ?

GERALD. All ? I should think not ! Only you won't give me a chance. I said he didn't *say* anything, but he *wrote* something. The letter only came two days ago. I have it here. (*He produces one rather small sheet of notepaper, written on both sides. He now reads it impressively.*) From the Reverend Francis Edwin Beech. " Dear Mr. Forbes. Before returning to Africa I feel I owe it both to you and to myself to explain what you must have found puzzling in my many references to Clecklewyke and Lane End Chapel. Although I was only temporarily at Lane End, I could not forget it, for there I was guilty of the most culpable negligence.

(*The three men look at one another.*)

I went to Clecklewyke straight from college, and during those first few months I did not realize that there were various forms I ought to have signed and had witnessed by church officers, so that one may be recorded as an authorized person to perform the ceremony of marriage——"

HELLIWELL (*rises, shouting*). *What ?* (*He grabs the letter from* GERALD, *stares at it, then reads himself, slowly.*) . . . " the ceremony of marriage. The result was, I was not then an authorized person. Fortunately during that short period I was only called upon twice to marry people, but the first time there were no less than three hopeful young couples who imagined—poor souls—that I was joining them in holy wedlock—when—I—was completely—unauthorized—to—do—so——"

PARKER (*crosses to* HELLIWELL, *yelling and snatching the letter.*) Let's have a look. (*He looks and* SOPPITT *joins him.*) It's signed all right too—Francis Edwin Beech.

GERALD (*rises*). And if you compare that signature with the one in the Chapel register, you'll see it's the same man. No deception. (*He moves away to* L.)

HELLIWELL (*dazed and bitter*). Why—the bloody donkey !

(*He sits down, dazed, on the upper end of the settee* L. *He and* PARKER *and* SOPPITT *look at one another in silent consternation.*)

SOPPITT (*slowly, thoughtfully*). Why, if we've never been married at all, then—— (*He goes to the upper end of the settee* R.)

HELLIWELL. Don't start working it out in detail, Herbert, 'cos it gets very ugly—very ugly. There's that lad o' yours at Grammar School, for instance—I wouldn't like to have to give 'im a name now——

SOPPITT (*indignantly*). Here, steady, Joe——

HELLIWELL. Well, you see, it gets very ugly. Keep your mind off t'details.

PARKER (*bitterly*). Silver wedding ! (*He sits in the chair* C.)

HELLIWELL. Now don't you start neither, Albert.

PARKER (*solemnly*). Joe, Herbert, when them three poor women upstairs gets to know what they really are——

HELLIWELL (*grimly*). Then t'balloon goes up properly. Talk about a rumpus. You'll 'ear 'em from 'ere to Leeds.

PARKER (*gravely*). Joe, Herbert, they mustn't know. Nobody must know. Why—we'd be laughed right out o' town. What—Alderman Helliwell—Councillor Albert Parker—Herbert Soppitt—all big men at Chapel, too! I tell you, if this leaks out—we're done.

HELLIWELL. We are, Albert.

SOPPITT (*horrified*). If once it got into the papers!

HELLIWELL (*even more horrified*). *Papers!* Oh—Christmas! —it's got to be kept from t'papers.

(GERALD, *who has been leaving them to themselves to digest this news, now turns to them again, coming to* L.C.)

GERALD (*holding out his hand*). You'd better give me that letter, hadn't you?

PARKER
HELLIWELL } (*together*). Oh no! (*They both rise.*)

(*They stand together as if protecting it.*)

PARKER (*holding it out*). This letter——

HELLIWELL (*snatching it*). Here——

PARKER (*angrily*). Nay, Joe—give it back——

HELLIWELL. I'm sorry, Albert, but I don't trust nobody wi' this letter but meself. Why—it's—it's dynamite!

GERALD. Yes, but it's addressed to me, and so it happens to be my property, you know.

SOPPITT. I'm afraid he's right there.

HELLIWELL (*turning on him, annoyed*). You would have to put that in, wouldn't you? Dang me, you're in this mess just as we are, aren't you?

PARKER (*severely*). Anyhow, *we've* a position to keep up even if you haven't, Herbert.

SOPPITT (*apologetically*). I was only saying he's right when he says it's his property. We had a case——

HELLIWELL (*aggressively*). Never mind about that case. Think about this case. It's a whole truck-load o' cases, this is. (*He turns up* C.)

GERALD. My letter, please.

(HELLIWELL *turns down to him.*)

HELLIWELL (*ingratiatingly*). Now listen, lad. I know you only want to do what's right. And we happened to be a bit 'asty with you, when you first came in. We didn't mean it. Just—a way o' talking. When Herbert Soppitt there gets started——

SOPPITT (*indignantly*). What—me!

PARKER (*severely*). You were 'asty, y'know, Herbert, you can't deny it. (*To* GERALD.) Mind you, I'll say now to your face what I've often said behind your back. You gave us best *Messiah* and best *Elijah* we've ever had at Lane End.

HELLIWELL. Easy, easy! Best i' Clecklewyke! And why? I've told 'em when they've asked me. "That young feller of ours is clever," I said. "I knew he had it in him," I said.

SOPPITT (*hopefully, rising*). Yes, you did, Joe. (*To* GERALD.) And so did I. I've always been on your side.

GERALD. I believe you have, Mr. Soppitt. (*To all three of them.*) You can keep that letter to-night—on one condition. That Mr. Soppitt has it.

SOPPITT (*eagerly, holding out his hand*). Thank you, Joe.

HELLIWELL (*uneasily*). What's the idea o' this? (*He backs up a little.*)

GERALD. That happens to be the way I feel about it. Now, either give it back to me at once—or hand it over to Mr. Soppitt, who'll be answerable to me for it.

SOPPITT (*eagerly*). Certainly, certainly.

(HELLIWELL *silently and grudgingly hands it over.* SOPPITT *puts it carefully in his inside pocket. The others watch him like hawks.* GERALD *moves to the window. There is a pause, then we hear a knocking from upstairs.*)

HELLIWELL. Knocking. (*Not happily.*)

PARKER (*grimly*). I 'eard.

HELLIWELL. That means she's getting impatient.

SOPPITT. I expect Clara's been ready to come down for some time.

HELLIWELL (*bitterly*). They want to get on with the celebration.

PARKER (*bitterly*). Chat about old times.

HELLIWELL (*bitterly*). Nice game o' cards.

GERALD (*after a pause*). I'd better be going. (*He moves up to the door.*)

HELLIWELL (*hastily going up to him*). No, no. No. Take it easy.

PARKER. No 'urry, no 'urry at all. I expect Joe has a nice cigar for you somewhere.

HELLIWELL (*with forced joviality*). Certainly I have. And a drink of anything you fancy——

GERALD. No, thanks. And I must be going.

(HELLIWELL *brings him down.*)

HELLIWELL. Now listen, lad. We've admitted we were 'asty with you, so just forget about it, will you? Now you see the mess we're in, through no fault of ours——

(*He goes up for his cigars.*)

GERALD. I do. And it *is* a mess, isn't it ? Especially when you begin to think——

PARKER (*hastily*). Yes, quite so, but don't you bother thinking. Just—(*rather desperately*) try an' forget you ever saw that letter.

HELLIWELL (*who now comes down* C. *with the cigars*). We're all friends, the best of friends. Now you've got to have a cigar or two, lad—I insist—(*he sticks several cigars into* GERALD'S *outside pocket, as he talks*) and you're going to promise us—on your word of honour—not to tell anybody anything about this nasty business, aren't you ?

(*All three look at him anxiously. He keeps them waiting a moment or two.*)

GERALD. All right.

(*They breathe again.* HELLIWELL *shakes his hand.*)

HELLIWELL. And you won't regret it, lad.

(*The knocking from upstairs is heard again.*)

PARKER (*miserably*). 'Ear that.

HELLIWELL. It's wife again.

SOPPITT (*thoughtfully*). Curious thing about wives. They're always telling you what poor company you are for them, yet they're always wanting to get back to you.

HELLIWELL (*darkly*). That isn't 'cos they enjoy your company. It's so they can see what you're doing.

PARKER. Well, what are we doing ?

HELLIWELL (*sharply now*). Wasting time. (*To them.*) Now listen, chaps, we're in no proper shape yet to face t'wives. They'd have it all out of us in ten minutes, and then fat'll be in t'fire.

PARKER. I know. We've got to put our thinking caps on.

SOPPITT. I suppose Mr. Beech couldn't have been mistaken, could he ?

PARKER. We might take that letter and get expert advice——

HELLIWELL (*hastily*). What ! An' 'ave it all over the town.

PARKER (*quickly*). We might put a case—without mentioning names——

HELLIWELL (*with decision*). I know what we'll do. We'll nip down to t'club, 'cos we can talk it over there in peace an' quiet. Come on, chaps. Just as we are, straight down t'club. (*To* GERALD.) Now, young man, you promised. You won't go back on your word ?

GERALD. No. You're safe with me.

HELLIWELL (*urgently*). Good lad ! Now, wait till we've got off, then go out front way. Come on, Albert, Herbert, we've no time to lose an' we go this way—(*bustling them towards the exit* R. *through the conservatory*) straight to t'club.

(*They go out* R. GERALD *looks at his watch, smiles, lights a cigarette, then makes for the door, which has never been quite closed. When he opens it suddenly,* MRS. NORTHROP, *still holding a towel and a large glass dish, which she is wiping perfunctorily, is discovered just behind the door. She is in high glee and not at all abashed at being found there. She leans against the hinge of the door, and* GERALD *backs a little into the room.*)

GERALD (*with mock sternness*). Have you been listening?

MRS. NORTHROP (*who may have had a drink or two*). Listening! I should think I have been listening! I wouldn't have missed this lot even if it means 'aving earache for a week. None of 'em rightly married at all! Not one of 'em properly tied up! (*She begins laughing quite suddenly, and then goes off into peals of laughter, rolling against the door. The dish she holds seems to be in danger.*)

GERALD (*amused as he goes past her, out*). Look out—or you may break that dish.

MRS. NORTHROP (*calling to him*). Brek a dish! If I want to, I'll brek a dozen now.

GERALD (*just off, challengingly*). Not you! I dare you!

MRS. NORTHROP (*coolly*). Well, here's a start, any road.

(*She tosses the dish down and it smashes noisily in the hall. We hear* GERALD *give a laughing shout, then bang the front door.* MRS. NORTHROP *now starts laughing helplessly again, still leaning against the door.*)

Nay—dammit!—— (*Laughing.*) Oh dear—oh dear—oh dear——

(*She is still roaring with laughter as—*

The CURTAIN *briskly descends.*)

ACT II

SCENE.—*The same, about half an hour later.*

The lights are on. MARIA *is drawing curtains,* ANNIE *and* CLARA *are laying out the cards and counters for Newmarket on a card table* C., *and they continue doing this throughout the scene that follows, chiefly counting the coloured counters and putting them into piles.*

CLARA (*with much discontent*). Well, I must say—this is a queer way o' going on.

MARIA. They'll have just gone outside to finish their smokes.

CLARA (*grimly*). When Herbert takes me out to enjoy myself, I don't expect him to be outside finishing any smokes.

ANNIE (*at table*). Perhaps they'd something they wanted to talk over.

CLARA. Well, they can talk it over here, can't they ?

(RUBY *enters from the conservatory.*)

MARIA (*turning away from the window*). Well, Ruby, are they out there ?

RUBY. No, they aren't.

MARIA (*sharply, moving to* L.C.). Have you looked properly ?

RUBY. Well, I couldn't miss three grown men in a garden that size.

MARIA. Did you look up and down the road like I told you ?

RUBY. Yes, but they aren't there.

(*The three wives look at one another, puzzled.*)

CLARA. Didn't you hear them go ?

RUBY. No. I was back in t'kitchen all time, doing t'washing up. That Mrs. Northrop left me to it.

MARIA. Where was she, then ?

RUBY. Out 'ere somewhere, I fancy. I know she's gone like a daftheaded ever since she come back. Laughin' to herself—like a proper barmpot.

MARIA. Well, ask Mrs. Northrop if she knows where they went.

(RUBY *goes.* MARIA *comes to the* L. *of the* C. *table.*)

That noise you heard upstairs was a bit o' this Mrs. Northrop's