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SF PERUSALS

Cat on the Fiddle

A Farcical Comedy

by

JOHN DOLE

Samuel French–London
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Cat on the Fiddle

This play was first produced under the title 'Hot Ice' at the Playhouse, Erith, on 14th September 1963, with the following cast:

DAVID ABBOTT	*John Wharton*
KATE ABBOTT	*Betty Willard*
MRS. MACWHIMBLE	*Elizabeth McNie*
MRS. SCOTT	*Betty Cottee*
TAXI-DRIVER	*Louis Cox*
A VISITOR	*Kathleen Clark*
CUTHBERT FORTESCUE	*Tony Stebbings*
ARTURO CELLINI	*Alex Baird*
MRS. BOTTLE	*Effie Castleton*
TWO POLICEMEN	*Ted Brooks* *John Monk*

The play was directed by T. HADLEY PRESTAGE

with décor by SEAMUS MULCAHY.

The action takes place in the ABBOTTS' *rented flat in London.*

ACT ONE

SCENE 1	An afternoon in spring
SCENE 2	Later the same day

ACT TWO

SCENE 1	That night
SCENE 2	Next morning

ACT THREE

Later the same day

No character in this play is intended to portray any specific person, alive or dead.

NOTE: *The running time of this play, excluding the intervals, is approximately one hour and forty-five minutes.*

PRODUCTION NOTE

This play should be produced as a light-hearted romp at a galloping pace, giving the audience no time to consider the credibility of the various unlikely situations. At the same time the story-line, which is perhaps a little stronger than in many farces, should not be lost in the rush.

The characters are as mixed a bunch as you are likely to find outside the United Nations and provide plenty of opportunities for contrasts of mood and style: contrasts, for example, between Maria's flamboyance and self-possession and David's artless innocence, between Mrs. MacWhimble's narrow-minded bluster and Mrs. Scott's calm assurance. But for all their diversity the characters have one thing in common: however ludicrous the situation they never see the funny side themselves and many of the laughs spring from this paradox.

The audience must be persuaded from the outset to believe in the relationship between David and Kate. The actor and actress playing these parts should convey the close understanding between a happily married couple with their private banter and acceptance of one another's shortcomings. David can be allowed his share of the tomfoolery but should resist any temptation to guy the part. While he is not above taking advantage of the odd situation when it presents itself he is basically a well-intentioned if accident-prone young fellow. He surveys the disastrous results of his handiwork with as much genuine astonishment as if a genie had materialized out of one of his own wine bottles. Kate needs to be played fairly straight and stern but not too heavily. She is no virago, just a loving young wife who doesn't altogether trust David to shun temptation without a helping hand. But even the most trying circumstances can't quench her natural gaiety for long and she should be allowed the occasional glimpse of skittishness, especially when things begin to go her way.

The actress playing Maria clearly needs looks and a good figure but above all she must bring to the play that touch of Mediterranean colour and temperament which throws David's quiet little world topsy-turvy. This can be assisted by her wardrobe, which should be as luscious and spectacular as possible. Beware of making Maria too hard and heartless. Admittedly she makes the most of her unfair feminine advantages over David but she does it so nicely that the male section of the audience at least should be left with the impression that, in spite of her parentage, she's a nice girl at heart. Her scenes with Cellini should be played dramatically to give substance to the underlying plot.

Mrs. Scott is a complex character. On the surface feather-brained and giddy she has, in fact, a commanding personality and is a born organizer, whether of old people's outings, picnics or truculent landladies. Much of the fun should stem from her unruffled acceptance of the most extraordinary situations which she swiftly turns to her own advantage. The actress playing the part should give the impression of upper-middle class well-being and should aim to strike a happy medium between appearing too vague or too domineering.

The Taxi Driver/Burglar is a cheerful Cockney who has taken to crime to supplement his income. Although he takes himself and his professional activities very seriously, this is a broad comedy part and should be played for laughs throughout. To give point to his various transformations he must, of course, be immediately recognizable to the audience beneath his "disguises", perhaps by adopting a characteristic trick of style such as a distinctive walk.

Mrs. Bottle, too, is a broad comedy part and can be played almost as a caricature.

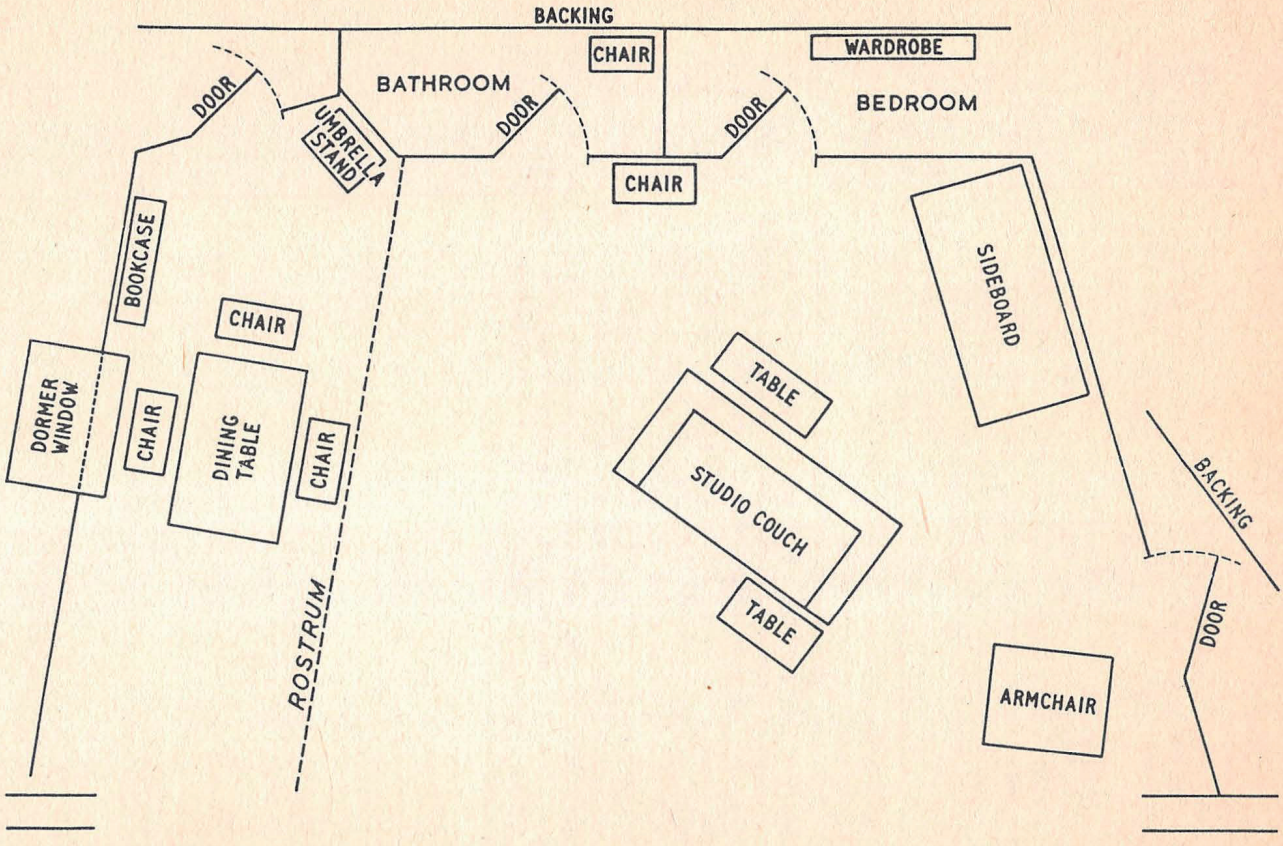
Mrs. MacWhimble should preferably be physically and vocally powerful and domineering. Grudging and suspicious after a life-time's experience of undesirable tenants, she has the disposition of sour wine. The audience should be made to feel that the late Mr. MacWhimble is better off wherever he is. Only when she crosses swords with Mrs. Scott in Act Two does she meet her match. Stripped of her truculence she is a poor thing.

Cellini: good strong melodramatic stuff here—sword-stick and all—with a general air of villainy and twirling moustachios. There should be a striking contrast between his oily charm with Mrs. Scott and his bullying attitude towards Maria. A thoroughly unpleasant character who deserves all he gets.

The Curate, poor soul, is mild and unworldly and inevitably destined for disaster. He probably came into the world wearing pince-nez and with an indestructible faith in the milk of human kindness which even exploding geysers cannot entirely destroy.

One or two general points on staging. The play lends itself readily to a simple lighting plot and a basic set. Some producers may, however, prefer something more adventurous and the original Erith production adopted a cut-away effect on Stage Right with back projection and cloud effects suggesting the roof-top view outside by day and by night. Care should be taken to avoid making the set too dismal. Lighting must be good even during the late night scene or part of the action will be lost. Adequate lighting will also help to counter the depressive effect of the more ancient articles of furniture. Kate, too, has done her best in difficult circumstances and her influence is shown in the gaiety of the curtains, cushion covers, etc., which all help to brighten the place up. The general impression should be of two young people, recently married, making a pretty good stab at a tolerable standard of living on rather slender means.

J.A.D.


BACKING
CHAIR
WARDROBE
DOOR
BATHROOM
BEDROOM
UMBRELLA STAND
DOOR
DOOR
CHAIR
BOOKCASE
SIDEBOARD
CHAIR
DORMER WINDOW
CHAIR
DINING TABLE
CHAIR
TABLE
STUDIO COUCH
TABLE
BACKING
ROSTRUM
DOOR
ARMCHAIR

CAT ON THE FIDDLE

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

The action of the play takes place in the living-room of a small and thoroughly inconvenient second-floor flat in London.

It is an unattractive room and the general effect is not improved by the addition of one or two items of contemporary furnishing, notably a studio couch, among the older inhabitants which are predominantly of 1920 vintage.

A door D.L. *leads to the kitchen.* C.B. *are two other doors. The one on the* R. *is conspicuously and incongruously marked "Bathroom", the second leads into the bedroom. The main entrance to the flat is at a slightly higher level and set at an angle* U.R. *The whole right-hand side of the room is at this slightly higher level, suggesting that it was once two smaller rooms converted into one. This effect is further emphasized by the dormer window and sloping ceiling* R.

The studio couch stands obliquely L.C., *and below it is a small coffee-table with a portable record player. Behind the couch another and higher table carrying a table-lamp and telephone.* U.L. *an ornate sideboard with a suspicious number of bottles and glasses and a transistor radio.* L. *of the main entrance an umbrella-stand with a solitary umbrella and on the dais, under the window, a frail-looking dining-table with the remains of a meal. Old-fashioned dining-chairs to match, one of which stands against the wall between the bedroom and bathroom doors. Above the table a small book-case well stuffed with papers, knitting, etc. Below the kitchen door an easy chair with startling upholstery. A scattering of cushions and L.P. record jackets lends a touch of colour to the room and various papers and magazines lying around on the floor and furniture give it a "well-lived in" air. On the back wall hang two unglazed pictures. The one nearer the front door is extremely modern and completely incomprehensible; the other is a reproduction of "Dante and Beatrice" and well faded at that. On the* L. *wall the "Monarch of the Glen"*

On a nail in the bathroom door hangs a large printed notice—"Engaged".

As the curtain rises DAVID, *a personable fellow of 28, is sitting on the couch, book in hand, listening to an Italian Linguaphone record and repeating phrases in a faltering voice and a horrible accent. He is in shirt-sleeves without collar or tie. The voice on the record is female.*

After a few moments of this KATE, *his wife, enters. She is 24, pretty, with a snub nose and a determined chin. At present she is clearly bent on business. An apron covers a smart suit and her whole appearance suggests a last-minute rush before going away. Ignoring* DAVID, *she crosses to* C., *switches on a vacuum cleaner which stands centre stage plugged into the standard lamp and attacks the crumbs under the table. The cleaner is a horror of a thing, old and deafening.* DAVID *closes his book with a gesture of despair and turns off the record player. He stands and shouts something, but the cleaner drowns his words.* KATE *continues to clean ferociously.* DAVID *comes into her line of vision and waves his arms about vigorously mouthing words.* KATE *switches off.*

KATE. Cold?

DAVID. Must you make that unearthly row?

KATE. Yes. (*She stoops to switch on again.*)

DAVID. But I can't hear what I'm saying.

KATE. Neither can I. (*She switches on.*)

(DAVID *waits until the work is well under way again and* KATE'S *back turned, then quickly switches off again at the table-lamp. He leans back on the couch and awaits results.* KATE *regards the nozzle of her expiring cleaner in some surprise.*)

Damn! (*She gives the cleaner a hearty kick.*) Work, you decrepit old wind-bag! David, it's no good, you'll have to buy me a new one.

DAVID (*looking up innocently from his book*). What's that? Oh, have you finished?

KATE (*crossly*). Does it look as though I have?

DAVID (*gazing vacantly round the room*). Yes. Jolly nice. Now I'll just— (*He moves towards the record player.*)

KATE. Oh no, you don't. (*She advances to* C., *pointing the nozzle of the cleaner at him accusingly.*) Just you lend a hand, my lad; sitting there like an advert for Turkish Delight!

DAVID. Now, now, don't insult the sultan. (*He assumes a cross-legged attitude on the couch and claps his hands.*) Bring on my favourite dancing-girl.

(KATE *reaches into her apron pocket and throws a duster into his hands.*)

KATE. Here you are, you wicked old potentate. Full of Eastern promise. Warm from my bare pocket. Now get cracking.

(*During the ensuing dialogue they move round the room dusting, although* DAVID'S *contribution is not particularly useful, as he is still holding his book in one hand and invariably chooses to dust the articles* KATE *has just finished.*)

DAVID. I thought you cleaned this room last week.

KATE. Honestly, David, I do believe you'd live in a pig-sty if I let you.

DAVID (*grunting*). Am I boring you? (*He nuzzles her neck.*)

KATE. That'll do. Dust!

DAVID. Oh Lord, this is supposed to be my holiday. Don't you think we've done enough? (*He collapses on the step.*)

KATE. What time is it?

DAVID (*consulting his watch*). Let's see. This says a quarter to four—that makes it about two-thirty.

KATE. Why on earth don't you keep it right?

DAVID. Well, I did put it right last Tuesday, but it gains a bit.

KATE. It's certainly got more energy than you. (*She pushes the cleaner close to the couch and crosses to the bathroom, taking off her apron.*) I shall have to leave the rest to you. Do try to make it look presentable before he arrives. (*She goes into bathroom.*)

DAVID (*who has returned to his book and is dusting with one hand while reading*). Right-ho! (*Looking up.*) Who?

KATE (*looking out of the bathroom with powder and puff and dabbing at her nose*). Your guest, dear. The wonderful Señor Lauro or whatever his name is.

DAVID. Oh, Mario, you mean. He won't mind roughing it a bit. And Kate dear, it's Signore—remember? Italian. S—I—G—N—

KATE. Oh!

DAVID. That's right. —R—E.

KATE. I don't care if he's a Japanese mandarin with long pigtail moustaches! I still think the whole thing's crazy. (*And having spoken she disappears into the bedroom.*)

DAVID (*considering this possibility*). There wouldn't be much point in me learning Italian if he can only talk Japaneesy. Anyway, I don't think mandarins come from Japan. They're a sort of orange. I'll look it up. (*He moves towards the book-case, but* KATE *reappears.*)

KATE. Don't you dare. You can keep your old books for Signor Lauro.

DAVID. Are you sure you won't stay and meet him?

KATE. No, thank you. It's been bad enough you asking for your breakfast in Italian. I couldn't stand two of you at it. (*She crosses to the bathroom.*) I wouldn't mind so much if I knew what you were on about; but I can't help feeling you're being rude behind my back—so I do. (*She disappears into the bathroom.*)

DAVID. Do what?

KATE (*her head appearing again*). Mind!

DAVID. Oh!

KATE. Now do go and put on a tie, David. Mother will be here with the car any minute.

(*Her head disappears again.* DAVID, *immersed in his book, crosses to the couch, reaches out for his tie, which is over the back of the couch, and starts to put it on without bothering about the collar.* KATE, *now dressed for going out, emerges finally from the bathroom.*)

I can't think why I agreed to the crazy idea in the first place. (*She observes his activities.*) David! (*She leads him by the tie to the bathroom.*) Collar and tie. And hurry up!

(*She goes into the kitchen. There is a knock at the door and the nearest picture falls off its hook.*)

(*Off.*) Answer the door, there's a sweet. It's Mother, I expect.

(DAVID *re-enters, book in one hand, collar and tie in the other, a sports jacket slung over one arm. He opens the door.*)

DAVID (*without looking*). Hello, Mother-in-law.

(*Enter* MRS. MACWHIMBLE. *She is clearly not* KATE'S *mother, being wrapped in a voluminous overall. Her arms are red, muscular and folded; her face grim; her hair drawn back into a severe and uncompromising bun. She is, in fact,* DAVID'S *landlady from the flat below. Thus addressed she gives him a cold, hard glare.*)

Oh! My mistake—thank goodness.

KATE (*off*). Is that you, Mummy?

DAVID (*calling*). No, dear, it's Mrs. MacRumble—MacWhimble I mean. (*He replaces the picture.*)

KATE. Oh! (*She enters, wiping her hands.*) Good afternoon, Mrs. MacWhimble. What a nice surprise. (*She moves to* C.)

DAVID (*registering extreme horror*). Lovely! The rent must be due. (*He gets another glare from the visitor.*)

MRS. MAC (*ignoring* DAVID *and addressing* KATE). You're going away I believe. (*It is more of an accusation than a question.*)

KATE. Why, yes. Mummy's taking me round to look after granny for a few days.

DAVID. She's expecting.

MRS. MAC. Expecting!

DAVID. Yes. She's been like it for years. Always expecting Kate to go and look after her.

KATE. Shut up, David.

MRS. MAC. Women's place is in the 'ome.

DAVID (*crossing to couch and depositing his coat, collar and tie*). That's what granny always says—her home.

KATE. Is anything wrong, Mrs. MacWhimble?

MRS. MAC (*coming closer to* KATE *and addressing her in a sinister whisper*). I come to warn you!

KATE. Warn me?

MRS. MAC (*jerking her thumb at* DAVID). About 'im. 'E ain't safe—not on 'is own. They never are. Hmph! Men! I knows 'em.

DAVID. You wicked old rascal!

MRS. MAC (*steadfastly ignoring him*). 'Elpless as new-born 'ippopotamuses, they are. Leave 'em alone for five minutes and they're in a fine pickle.

DAVID. I didn't know 'ippopotamuses liked pickle.

KATE. But David will be all right on his own. He's very capable.

MRS. MAC. Capable of anything I'd say. (*She lowers her voice.*) It ain't 'is being alone what worries me.

DAVID (*jumping up and coming forward*). Oh, if it's Mario you're thinking about— Ow!

(KATE *has kicked his shin and he retires to the couch hurt.*)

MRS. MAC. 'Oo?

KATE. That's what we call the cat.

MRS. MAC. I didn't know you 'ad a cat.

KATE. You may not have noticed him—he's very thin. By the way, did you know we get smoke coming out from under the bath?

MRS. MAC. Wot?

KATE. You really ought to send for a plumber at once.

DAVID (*holding his shin*). Or a doctor.

MRS. MAC (*draws from her apron pocket a well-thumbed copy of the lease and reads from it*). 'Ere, wait a minute. "Tenants is responsible for all repairs and replacements to furniture and fittings"—and baths is fittings.

DAVID. That one's a very tight fitting.

MRS. MAC (*making for the door*). I'll call the plumber at once—and tell 'im to send you the bill.

KATE (*shepherding her out*). Thank you, Mrs. MacWhimble.

DAVID. And may your aspidistras never get the green-fly.

MRS. MAC (*wagging her finger at him*). And just you remember, any trouble from you while Mrs. Abbott's away and I'll cut off yer 'ot water.

(*She goes out, banging the door. The picture falls off the wall and* KATE *replaces it.*)

DAVID. Exit the wicked fairy in a shower of hairpins. (*He inspects his outraged shin.*) What's the idea of crippling me? (*He hobbles over and takes from the book-case a sheet of cardboard, a crayon and an india-rubber. He sits on the couch with his feet up, facing the bathroom, and sets to work.*)

KATE. Oh, you know what she's like about visitors. Seems to think their one ambition is to stop up the sink or leave ball-bearings on the stairs. Now get dressed before mother arrives, there's a dear. She ought to be here by now. (*She goes into the bedroom.*)

DAVID. There's a little job I want to finish first.

KATE (*off*). Does Mario like animals?

DAVID. He said in his last letter that he loved baby sheep roasted.

KATE (*looking in*). Can he handle baby 'ippopotamuses?

(DAVID *throws the rubber at her. There is a knock on the door and the picture falls.*)

I'll get it.

(*She restores the picture and opens the door. Enter* MRS. SCOTT, KATE'S *mother. She is middle-aged, extremely smart and bustling, with the occasional hint of vagueness. A very strong character.*)

Hello, Mummy darling.

(*They kiss.*)

I'm nearly ready. (*She goes into the bedroom.*)

MRS. SCOTT. Hello, dear. Hello, David, how are you? (DAVID *grunts and waves a hand.*) I'm a wee bit late, I'm afraid, but I had trouble with the car. I think the man said my plackets were loose, but that doesn't sound quite right. (*She sits in easy chair* D.L.)

DAVID. Gaskets.

MRS. SCOTT. What an expressive word. I must remember it next time I play bridge. What are you doing, David?

(DAVID *rises and holds up his cardboard against the bathroom door.*)

DAVID. There, that should do the trick. No more accidents, eh?

(*It reads "Out of Order. Please use the Bell". As he is holding it it appears to refer to the bathroom.* MRS. SCOTT *crosses and looks hard at the title on the door.*)

MRS. SCOTT. How very inconvenient. Is it a big bell?

DAVID. No, no, you don't understand. I'm going to hang this on the knocker. (*He crosses to the sideboard.*)

MRS. SCOTT. But the knocker isn't out of order.

(*Enter* KATE *from the bedroom. She is carrying a small suitcase which she puts down by the bedroom door.*)

KATE. Here we are then. What's that? (*She reads the placard over* DAVID'S *shoulder.*) But it isn't out of order.

DAVID (*a little peevishly*). I know that. But we've got to consider Psyche. Where's the hammer? (*He rummages about in the sideboard and emerges with a very small tack hammer and a tin of tacks.*)

MRS. SCOTT. Who's Psyche?

DAVID. That is. (*He points at the picture.*) Poor girl's bruised all over. (*He pats the picture-frame affectionately and goes outside to fix the notice.*)

KATE (*looking after him doubtfully*). I suppose it's safe to leave him?

MRS. SCOTT (*sitting again in the easy chair*). Of course. I left your father dozens of times. It did him the world of good.

KATE. Yes, but that wasn't quite the same.

MRS. SCOTT. Besides, hasn't he got a friend coming to keep him company?

KATE. That's what's worrying me. You see, we don't really know much about this friend of his. (*She sits on couch.*)

MRS. SCOTT. But surely David must know him quite well or he wouldn't have invited him.

(*There is a prolonged hammering from outside and the picture falls.*)

KATE. You don't know David. Remember last time you were here he was taking a course in pottery?

MRS. SCOTT. Yes. He made me such a charming ash-tray, I remember.

KATE. It was supposed to be a jug. Well, now it's Italian. (*More hammering.*)

MRS. SCOTT. Italian pottery?

KATE. No—language.

MRS. SCOTT. Oh, what a pity. I saw a delightful little Italian vase in that antique shop round the corner and I wanted an expert opinion.

KATE. Not quite in David's line, I'm afraid. He doesn't know a spade from a Spode.

(*Hammering.*)

MRS. SCOTT. Dear boy. What is he doing out there?

KATE. Putting in a drawing pin, I expect.

MRS. SCOTT. And I suppose he met this—what's his name?

KATE. Mario Lauro.

MRS. SCOTT. Such lovely names they have. Well, I suppose he met him at evening classes.

KATE. No such luck. He's never set eyes on him.

(*Devastating hammering.*)

(*Shouting.*) David! For goodness' sake.

(*More hammering.* KATE *crosses to the door and calls maliciously.*) You see, Mummy, Mario is David's "pen pal". (*The hammering stops at once and* DAVID *enters brandishing the tack hammer.*)

DAVID. Italian correspondent, if you don't mind.

(*He gives the picture hook a bang or two for good measure, then rehangs the picture.*)

KATE. They've been writing incomprehensible letters to one another for about three months.

MRS. SCOTT. Well, I wouldn't worry, dear, if I were you. I'm sure David's well able to look after himself.

DAVID (*bowing*). Thank you, Mother-in-law. Efficiency incorporated. (*He shuts the door reasonably gently and the picture falls off the hook.*) Gaskets! (*He replaces the picture yet again.*)

MRS. SCOTT (*rising and pulling herself together*). Well, dear, if you're not going to offer me a drink, we might as well get started.

DAVID. Sorry. Not a very good host. Will you have home-made ginger beer or some of Great-aunt Mabel's rhubarb and dandelion?

MRS. SCOTT. On second thoughts, perhaps I won't risk it. The police would never believe me. Ready, Catherine?

(KATE *pats her hair into place, looking into the mirror which hangs on the "fourth wall".*)

DAVID. Sure you won't wait and meet Mario? His train is due in about an hour.

MRS. SCOTT. We really shouldn't. I want to be home before seven. The car does the most extraordinary things after dark. It leaps at unsuspecting old men and stops at lamp-posts.

KATE. But, Mummy dear, it isn't all that far.

MRS. SCOTT. You never know. I spent an hour and a half once trying to find my way out of Regent's Park Zoo. (*She crosses to front door.*)

DAVID. But you're not supposed to take cars into the zoo.

MRS. SCOTT. Yes, I know, dear. That's what made it all so difficult.

(KATE *picks up her suitcase.*)

KATE. Good-bye then, darling.

DAVID. Good-bye, my sweet.

KATE. Take care.

(*They kiss.*)

There's lots of food in the larder and I've told the milkman to leave an extra pint in case of emergencies.

DAVID. Right-ho!

KATE. The butcher closes at three on Wednesdays and don't forget to switch the water on before you light the gas in the geyser.

DAVID. Yes, yes. Right-ho!

KATE. And you know where the first-aid box is.

MRS. SCOTT. Really, Catherine, anyone would think David was as helpless as a new-born—

KATE. 'Ippopotamus. He is, the darling. Good-bye.

DAVID. Cheerio, darling. Good-bye.

(*He sees them out of the door, then returns to the couch with his book and flops down. Re-enter* KATE.)

KATE. Good-bye darling. Be careful won't you and—(*She rushes over and kisses him tearfully.*) put your collar and tie on before Mario arrives.

(*She runs off, banging the door.* DAVID *rushes over to catch the picture which stays put. He turns round with a smirk of triumph rubbing his hands as at a good job done. The telephone rings and the picture falls.*)

DAVID (*into the phone*). Hello?—Yes, Mr. Abbott speaking—Who?—Oh, the plumber.—Hmmm?—Well, it's the bathroom—no, not a leak, we get smoke coming out from underneath.—What?—No it's not the flue, it's the bath.—Oh, you have the flu. Bad luck. Draughty pipes, I expect.—Yes, of course—your mate—old what?—your old Chinaman?—Oh, never mind. You will?—Jolly good—tomorrow then. Oh, I say, you don't happen to be a picture hanger as well, I suppose?—Not? Pity. No, it doesn't matter. We'll expect your old Chinese mate tomorrow then. Yes—Good-bye. (*He hangs up.*) Chinese plumbers? (*He puts on his collar and tie in front of the mirror,*

addressing his reflection.) Me Peeping Tom. You got leakee? Old Chinese Ploverb him say "Honolable gentleman velly unhappy, him spling leak in illustlious tappee." (*He puts on his jacket.*) Now then. Tidy up.

(*His method of tidying is a model of male efficiency. He gathers up an armful of papers and magazines and decants them behind the sofa, at the same time steering the cleaner out of sight with his foot. He gathers the four corners of the tablecloth together, thus making a clean sweep of the remnants of lunch. He almost throws this into the kitchen, but changes his mind at the last minute and swings round once or twice with it while it loses momentum, then carries it out into the kitchen gently. Cushions fly. The gramophone lid goes down with a bang. Crumbs are brushed under a rug with* KATE'S *best table runner, which is then deftly flicked across the table. An empty wine-bottle is snatched from the book-case and plonked on to the table and two knitting-needles with knitting attached are pushed into the neck of the bottle, where they hang like some exotic flower. He marches to the door, then pauses and surveys the result of his labours with a self-satisfied smile. The whole job has taken little more than a minute.*)

I really don't know what they find to do all day! (*He replaces the picture and consults his watch.*) Twenty minutes to the station. Mustn't be late or he'll get lost. Heigh-ho!

He goes out singing "A Bachelor Gay" and crashes the door behind him. The singing stops and a moment later his head reappears. He regards the unmoved picture with satisfaction and gives it a conspiratorial nod. He closes the door very, very gently. The picture falls and so does the CURTAIN

SCENE 2

Later the same day. It is growing dark. The picture still lies where it fell at the end of Scene 1.

The door-bell rings insistently. After a pause the knocker is heard, then the bell again. After a further interval the door is opened gingerly and a head appears wearing a peaked cap. Enter a taxi-driver, a small, shifty-looking man.

TAXIMAN. Anyone about? (*Nothing happens.*) Ship ahoy! Anybody in? Let's 'ave a bit of light on the scene. (*He switches on the light by the door and walks in whistling. He carries a very large suitcase. Suddenly he sees the "Engaged" notice on the bathroom door and stops short.*) Oh! The island's in'abited. (*He leaves the case in the middle of the floor and goes to the bathroom door, where he makes coughing noises.*) 'Allo? (*He knocks politely at the empty room—nothing happens.*) Cor lummee!

Must be asleep in the bath. (*He raises his voice.*) 'Allo there! Anyone at 'ome?

(*Enter* MARIA. *She is dark and exotic and her figure breathtaking. Expensively and flamboyantly dressed, she moves with a natural and unselfconscious voluptuousness which cannot fail to turn a man's head in more ways than one. Her English is good, with sufficient accent to give charm to her simplest remark.*)

(*A little unsteadily in view of her closeness.*) Oh! 'Allo, miss. Made me jump. Seems there ain't nobody at 'ome. Or else (*He points to the bathroom.*)—one of the old ladies 'as been took bad.

MARIA. Old ladies? There are old ladies 'ere?

TAXIMAN. Figure of speech, miss. You know, old ladies locked in the —er—bathroom.

MARIA (*coming further into the room and looking around*). I suppose this is the right 'ouse. Is very small.

TAXIMAN (*coming forward*). This is it all right, miss. Number 187a. Small but cosy.

MARIA. They are not 'aving much money?

TAXIMAN. You can't always go by the looks of things. You'd be surprised at some of the things I've picked up—er—seen in 'ouses like this. 'Aven't got a telly either—that's a good sign. I'll go and get the rest of your stuff.

(*He goes out.* MARIA *inspects the room, replaces the picture and then pokes her head into the bedroom. The* TAXIMAN *returns, struggling with another enormous case.*)

'Ere we are then, miss. (*He puts it down beside the other.*) Good job you're travelling light.

MARIA. I think I like it 'ere. Is different.

(*She examines the unusual table decorations with interest.*)

TAXIMAN. Funny there ain't nobody in, though. Unless they're sitting tight in the bath. (*He goes to the bathroom door and knocks loudly.*) Anybody there? Speak now or for ever 'old your peace. I'm a-coming in. (*He looks in and turns on the light.*) Only an old bath-towel and a bit of soap. I suppose they knew you was coming?

MARIA. Oh, yes.

TAXIMAN. I'd 'ave took good care to be 'ere waiting if it was me.

MARIA. If what was you?

TAXIMAN. If 'e was me.

MARIA. 'Oo?

TAXIMAN. The bloke waiting 'ere for you.

MARIA. But there is no one.

TAXIMAN (*taking off his cap and scratching his head*). I've sort of lost track of this conversation.

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