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THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE

A Comedy

by Frank Marcus

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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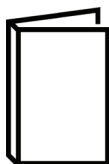
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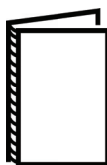


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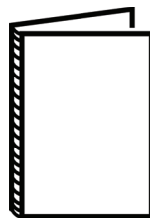
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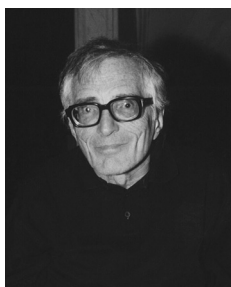
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Frank Marcus was born in Breslau, Germany in 1928, and emigrated to England in 1939. After being educated in England, he worked as a secretary, salesman and antique shop manager before joining London's Unity Theatre as an actor, director and scenic designer. His first play, *Minuet for Stuffed Birds*, was written and performed in 1950, and *The Killing of Sister George* was his fourth play. It won him the Variety, Evening Standard and Plays and Players Awards, and critics lavished praise on it.

Frank Marcus wrote a total of sixteen plays, including two mime scenarios. He is also the author of five television plays and six translations of plays by authors including Arthur Schnitzler and Ferenc Molnar.

He was theatre critic of the Sunday Telegraph for ten years from 1968, and contributed regularly to magazines in Britain and America.

He has written "All my plays are about illusion and reality: about the impossibility of living either with or without illusions. The only honest conclusion to comedy is the sense of life going on. What more dare one suggest? ...in the sense in which I write my plays, comedy is the very last alternative to despair. Sad and funny at the same time. Is that deliberate? No, it's natural. That's how I see people and events".

He died in 1996.

THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE

Produced by Michael Codron, in association with Bernard Delfont, at The Duke of York's Theatre, London, on the 17th June 1965, with the following cast of characters:

In the order of their appearance

JUNE BUCKRIDGE (Sister George)	Beryl Reid
ALICE 'CHIL DIE' MCNAUGHT	Eileen Atkins
MRS MERCY CROFT	Lally Bowers
MADAME XENIA	Margaret Courtenay

Directed By Val May
Designed by Catherine Browne

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the living room of a London West End flat

ACT I

A Tuesday afternoon in late September

ACT II

Scene One A week later. 4 a.m.

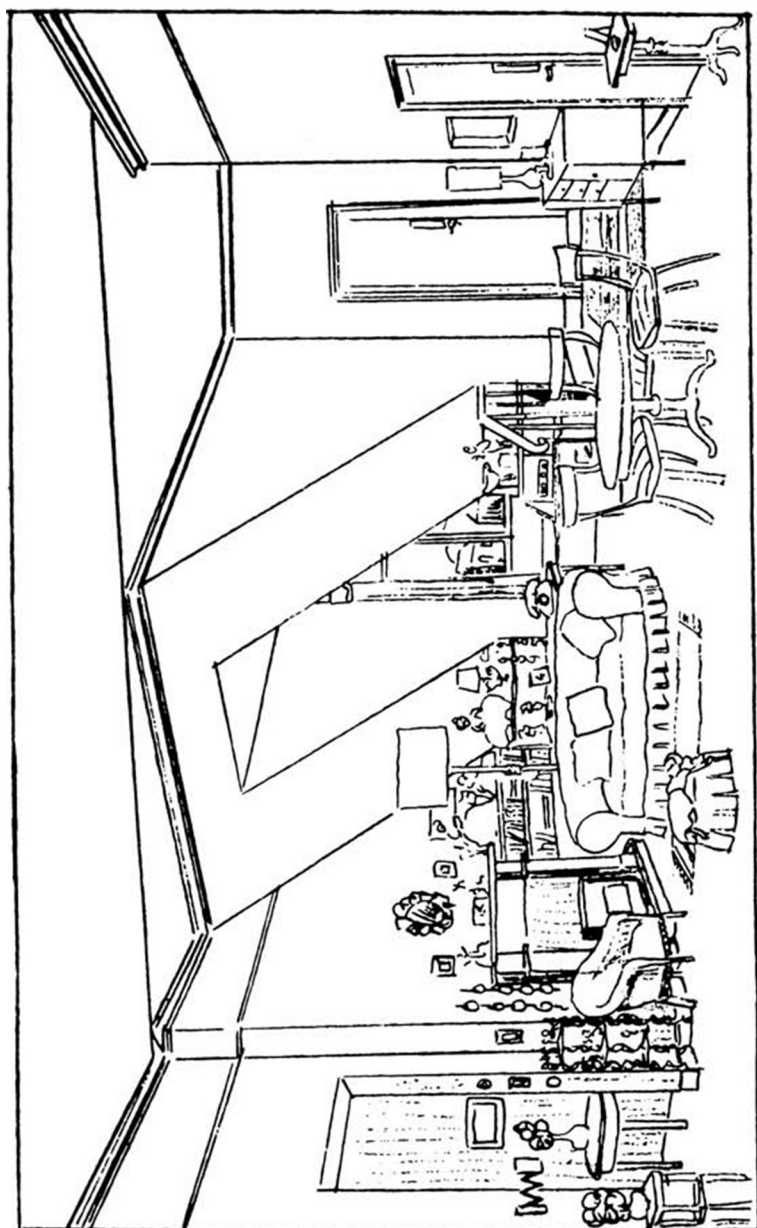
Scene Two Late afternoon of the same day

Interlude

ACT III

Two weeks later. Morning

Time – the present



ACT I

SCENE. *The living room of a London West End flat. A Tuesday afternoon in late September.*

Down right is a wide arch showing part of a small entrance hall which leads to the front door of the flat. The fireplace is right, above the arch, and is fitted with an electric fire. Up right centre, facing the audience, under a sloping ceiling, is a window with a narrow window-seat, overlooking roofs. Up left is a low, wide rostrum, reached by two long steps, which forms a wide corridor leading off up left to the bathroom. In the back wall of the corridor, facing the audience, is the bedroom door. There is a banister rail along the right side of the rostrum. In the wall left is a serving hatch, which when open shows a glimpse of kitchen shelves. The door to the kitchen is down left, below the hatch. The furniture, an incongruous mixture of antique, nineteen-thirtyish and modern, looks expensive but ill-assorted. Down right is a small table with a single chair in front of it. On the wall over the table is a two-way speaker on an extending arm. Above the arch right there is a whatnot with Victorian china ornaments on its shelves. In front of the whatnot, facing left, is a small tub armchair. Above the fireplace is a long bookcase and there is a canterbury against the wall right of the window. A bureau-type radiogram is left of the window. A low coffee table stands left of the bedroom door, on the rostrum. A long sideboard is underneath the serving hatch left and a small occasional table and an upright chair are down left, below the kitchen door. A sofa with a table behind it is right centre. There is a telephone on the table. A circular, pedestal table is left

centre with chairs right and left of it. A pouffe is down right centre. The hall is furnished with a small table and an umbrella vase. At night the room is lit by a standard lamp up right and table lamps down right and left. There is a light switch below the fireplace.

Before the curtain rises, as the house lights fade, the 'Applehurst Theme', a cheerful folk-dance tune, is heard.

When the curtain rises, the music fades. The room is empty. The front door is heard to slam off right. JUNE BUCKRIDGE enters from the hall. She is a rotund, middle-aged woman, wearing a belted white mackintosh. She carries a leather briefcase and string gloves. She is very agitated.

ALICE *(off in the kitchen; calling)* George? George, is that you?

JUNE shows exasperation at the sound of ALICE's voice, throws her gloves and briefcase on to the sofa and goes to the table behind it. She opens a cigar box on the table, finds it empty and throws it violently on to the floor up centre, then moves to the fireplace. ALICE 'CHILDIE' MCNAUGHT, in the kitchen, opens the hatch and looks into the room. She is a girl-woman in her thirties, looking deceptively young. She conveys an impression of pallor: her hair, eyes and complexion are all very light. She is wearing a sweater and jeans, with a plastic apron and orange rubber gloves.

(surprised) George, what on earth...?

JUNE takes a cheroot from a box on the mantelpiece, reaches for the lighter, finds a doll in long clothes in the way and throws it into the fender.

George! What are you doing at home at this time of the afternoon?

JUNE lights her cheroot and moves down right of the sofa.

JUNE *(after a pause)* They are going to murder me.

ALICE What...?

JUNE *(moving left centre)* I've suspected it for some time.

ALICE What...?

JUNE Kindly close that hatch. *(She moves to right of the table left centre and removes her coat)*

ALICE *quickly closes the hatch and comes into the room by the kitchen door left. She carries a tea cloth.*

ALICE George, I don't understand what you're saying – what are you talking about?

JUNE *puts her cheroot on the rim of the ashtray on the table left centre.*

JUNE *(brutally)* Shut up! You know nothing. *(She moves right centre, below the sofa)*

ALICE, *silenced, watches JUNE's nervous pacing.*

That Australian bitch, that Sheila, let it out.

ALICE *(sitting right of the table left centre)* The one who used to be a lady cricketer?

JUNE *(with disgust)* Yes, that's her – the lolloping great trollop! *(She removes her coat)*

ALICE So, what did she say?

JUNE *(very excited)* It was during the tea break; she handed me my cup of tea and said, 'I trust you're in good health', she said with a sly wink.

ALICE There's nothing wrong with that.

JUNE *(tossing her coat into the armchair right)* I knew what she meant. I got the message all right. *(She moves up right centre)*

ALICE *(rising, crossing and picking up JUNE's coat)* It might have been quite innocuous. *(She follows to right of JUNE)*

JUNE Innocuous! (*She raps the table behind the sofa*) They are trying to kill me and you call that innocuous. Somebody's leaked it to her – another Australian probably. The place is rampant with them: they're multiplying like rabbits. (*She goes to the table left centre and picks up her cheroot*)

ALICE You're imagining things.

JUNE No, no, not rabbits – opossums. Those dreary little pests.

ALICE (*moving above the sofa*) Well, anyway, what did you do?

JUNE (*moving to the sideboard*) I left.

ALICE (*moving to left of the sofa; alarmed*) You walked out of the rehearsal? (*She removes her rubber gloves*)

JUNE (*subdued*) I wasn't going to let some illiterate bitch wink at me. (*She picks up a bottle of gin and a glass and takes them to the table left centre*)

ALICE (*biting her lip*) They won't like it. (*She crosses to the arch right*)

JUNE I've given six years devoted service to this programme.

ALICE You said yourself: they don't like contract artists to have tantrums.

ALICE exits to the hall and deposits the coat, the tea-cloth and her rubber gloves.

JUNE (*excitedly*) They have no right to do this to me. I'm a senior member of the cast.

ALICE re-enters from the hall.

If they wanted to – (*She swallows*) write me out – (*She pours a drink*) they should have asked me to come to the office in a proper manner. (*She returns the bottle of gin to the sideboard, replacing it with a bang*)

ALICE picks up a doll from the pouffe then sits on the pouffe and hugs the doll.

ALICE Nobody wants to write you out. It's unthinkable. *Applehurst* couldn't survive without you.

JUNE (*sitting right of the table left centre*) Don't you be too sure. *Applehurst* is more than a village, you know – it's a community, it's a way of life. It doesn't depend on individuals. (*In a country accent*) There's many a stone in that churchyard...

ALICE You talk as if it was real.

JUNE *leans forward and raises her voice.*

JUNE (*in her own voice*) It is real to millions. It stands for the traditional values to English life – common sense – tenacity – our rural heritage...

ALICE Oh, belt up!

JUNE You're getting above yourself, missy.

ALICE You *are* the serial. It would be nothing without you.

JUNE Stranger things have happened. Only the other day Ronnie said to me: 'There'll have to be some changes, you know.'

ALICE He probably meant the story line.

JUNE No – no – it's the axe again. We're losing listeners, and they're looking for a scapegoat. It's over a year since old Mrs Prescott was kicked by a horse. (*She drinks*)

ALICE Yes, and look at the rumpus there was over that. And she was only a minor character.

JUNE She had her following.

ALICE She hardly had a line to say from one week to the next.

JUNE What about the time I nursed her back to health, when she had concussion?

ALICE That was exceptional.

JUNE No, no, no. She had nice little bits and pieces here and there. When she found that stray dog, and the village adopted

it... (*A dark thought occurs to her*) Until it was run over by a tractor. (*She shudders*)

ALICE There's no comparison. Mrs Prescott...

JUNE (*rising and shouting*) Mrs Prescott had a following. (*She leaves her drink on the table*)

ALICE (*shrugging*) All right – Mrs Prescott had a following.

JUNE (*moving down left*) The subject is now closed.

ALICE (*after a pause*) But she *was* expendable.

JUNE (*crossing to ALICE; angrily*) Are you trying to aggravate me? Are you deliberately trying to annoy me?

ALICE (*loudly*) You're the most popular character in it. (*She rises*)

JUNE Don't screech at me. It's an ugly, grating sound.

ALICE Well, look at your ratings.

JUNE They are down. Four per cent last week – I'm slipping. Now do you understand? (*She moves centre*)

ALICE (*after a pause*) You still get the most fan mail, don't you? (*Still holding the doll, she goes to the small table down right and takes a threaded needle from the work basket*)

JUNE (*sitting right of the table left centre*) Only just. Ginger, the publican, is close on my heels. Ever since he had that win on the Premium Bonds, and gave the money to Farmer Bromley, so that they wouldn't turn his place into a broiler house...

ALICE (*moving right centre*) What about young Rosie?

JUNE (*conspiratorially*) Aha!

ALICE looks puzzled.

She's preggers.

ALICE No! (*She sits on the pouffe*) You mean the actress...?

JUNE No, the character, blockhead! We reckon that'll bring back some listeners.

ALICE (*intrigued*) Who was responsible? (*She sews the skirt of Emmeline, the doll*)

JUNE We haven't been told yet. I think it was Lennie, her steady. If so it'll be absolutely splendid. They can get married – everybody loves a wedding. But Arthur thinks it was Roy.

ALICE Who's Roy?

JUNE That soldier – stationed at the army camp at Oakmead. He took her to that dance, remember?

ALICE (*concerned*) What's she going to do – about the baby?

JUNE Well, she confides in me – in the next instalment. Comes to me in tears; wants to get rid of it. (*She sighs*) Don't know what the younger generation's coming to.

ALICE What do you tell her?

JUNE What *don't* I tell her. (*She puts out her cheroot in the ashtray on the table left centre*) I give her a dressing down she won't forget in a hurry. (*She rises, moves to left of ALICE and speaks in her country accent*) Where is he? Mr Clever Lad? Show me where he is so's I can tear some strips off him, the fine young fellow. Just don't you aggravate yourself, my dear – leave it to me. Just you tell me who it was, my dear. Just you tell me who it was.

ALICE And does she tell you?

JUNE No. (*She pauses, crosses to right of the table left centre and sits*) But I'll wheedle it out of her, never fear. Just give me three instalments, that's all. (*She picks up her drink*)

ALICE (*tensely*) They shouldn't talk about – things like that.

JUNE (*happier now*) It's nice, though, the way they come to me with their troubles. Oh, they know they'll get straight talking from me. (*In her country accent*) No lard ever passed my lips. No, sir, fine words butter no parsnips.

ALICE What *are* you talking about?

JUNE (*putting down her glass and leaning forward*) They need me. Get that into your thick head. *Applehurst* needs a District Nurse. Who'd deliver the babies, who'd look after the old folk, I'd like to know.

ALICE Exactly. (*She finishes her sewing, rises, leaves the doll on the pouffe and crosses to JUNE*) Nobody's suggesting...

JUNE What do you mean – nobody's suggesting? Why did that woman enquire after my health? Why did she wink at me, eh?

ALICE Perhaps she fancies you. (*She gives a slight snigger and crosses to right*)

JUNE This is no time for jesting.

ALICE (*replacing the needle in the work-basket*) How do I know why she winked at you? Perhaps she's got a nervous twitch. (*She tidies the things in the work basket*)

JUNE (*picking up her glass, rising and moving down centre*) She's Australian, dunce! They're extroverts, not neurotic townsfolk, like us. They come from the bloody bush.

ALICE (*becoming exasperated*) Well, I don't know why she winked at you.

JUNE Oh, shut up! Silly bitch! (*She moves to left of the table behind the sofa, puts down her glass, picks up a framed certificate and reads*) 'And in recognition of your devoted work and care for the old and sick, we name the Geriatric Ward the Sister George Ward.' (*She replaces the certificate*)

ALICE *applauds slowly and ironically.*

Take care, Childie, you're trailing your coat...

ALICE (*giggling*) You're the bull. (*She moves to the pouffe, kneels on it with one knee and puts the doll's clothes straight*)

JUNE (*dangerously*) We're very cocky all of a sudden.

ALICE (*mock innocently*) Who – me?

JUNE Yes, you. (*She moves centre*) And what the hell are you doing at home on a Tuesday afternoon? Why aren't you at work?

ALICE Mr Katz gave us the day off. It's a Jewish holiday.

JUNE (*suspiciously*) Oh, really! What holiday?

ALICE I don't know. The Feast of the Contamination, or something.

JUNE You seem to have more holidays than work days lately.

ALICE (*picking up the doll and moving to the fireplace*) Not my fault.

JUNE (*still suspicious*) He hasn't been having another 'go' at you, your Mr Katz, has he?

ALICE (*moving to the table behind the sofa and putting the doll on it; primly*) Certainly not.

JUNE I bet he has.

ALICE He hasn't. I'd tell you.

JUNE I wonder. (*Self-pityingly*) Nobody tells me anything.

ALICE That's because you always make such a stupid fuss about things. (*She sits on the right arm of the sofa and puts her feet on the fender*)

JUNE All right, then, I won't make a fuss. (*She moves to left of the sofa*) Come on, tell me.

ALICE There's nothing to tell.

JUNE (*venomously*) You expect me to believe that after what happened last time?

ALICE Nothing happened.

JUNE A four-inch tear and three buttons off your blouse and you call that nothing.

ALICE (*angrily*) I told you. I got it caught in the Gestetner.

JUNE Don't lie to me, Childie.

ALICE (*rising and moving above the sofa*) I'm not lying. (*She crosses towards the kitchen door*)

JUNE *intercepts ALICE, grasps her arm and turns her to face her.*

JUNE Then why are you avoiding my eyes?

ALICE Because – because... Oh! (*She throws off JUNE's hand*) You're impossible, George.

ALICE *runs up the two steps and exits up left to the bathroom.*

JUNE (*calling*) Don't throw tantrums with me, young lady. (*She leans over the banister and roars*) Come out! Come out this instant.

ALICE (*off left; calling*) I shan't.

JUNE *turns, picks up Emmeline the doll from the table behind the sofa, moves up left centre and calls towards the bathroom.*

JUNE Can you hear me, Childie? I've got Emmeline here, your favourite doll. (*Softly but clearly*) And if you don't come out of the bathroom *at once* – I'm going to pull Emmeline's head off.

ALICE, *tear-stained, rushes in up left, tears the doll out of JUNE's hand and hugs it.*

ALICE Monster! (*She moves down centre*)

JUNE (*moving to left of ALICE*) There, that's better. (*She pauses*) And now: apologize.

ALICE What for?

JUNE For causing me unnecessary aggravation.

ALICE I'm sorry.

JUNE (*crossing to right of ALICE*) You don't sound it.

ALICE Look, George, I know that you're worried and everything,
but that's no reason...

JUNE Don't answer back. Don't be cheeky.

ALICE Look, George...

JUNE Has Mr Katz 'had a go' at you?

ALICE (*screaming*) No!

JUNE Don't screech at me. Apologize this instant, or there'll
be severe chastisement.

ALICE I'm sorry.

JUNE That's better. Now, down on your knees.

ALICE Must I?

JUNE Yes. Come on.

ALICE, still hugging the doll, goes on her knees.

Show your contrition.

ALICE How?

JUNE You must eat the butt of my cigar.

ALICE I couldn't; it would make me sick.

JUNE (*standing over ALICE*) Are you arguing with me?

ALICE O.K. Hand it over.

*JUNE crosses to the table left centre picks up the ashtray
and holds it out to ALICE, who takes the cigar butt. This
is actually a piece of chocolate previously concealed in
the ashtray.*

JUNE Good girl. Now eat it.

ALICE Can I take the ash off?

JUNE You may take the ash off, but you must eat the paper.

ALICE, with an expression of extreme distaste, eats the butt.

ALICE Ooh, it tastes vile.

JUNE Good.

The telephone rings.

That'll teach you to be rude.

ALICE jumps to her feet, rushes to the telephone, lifts the receiver, sits on the sofa at the right end of it, with her feet up and speaks with her mouth full.

ALICE *(into the telephone)* Hello... Miss June Buckridge? ...
One moment, please.

JUNE *(moving above the sofa; apprehensively)* Who is it?

ALICE Don't know.

JUNE *(moving to right of the sofa)* Why didn't you ask, fathead?
(She takes the receiver from ALICE. Into the telephone) Hello,
this is June Buckridge. Who wants her? ...Yes, of course...
Yes, I'll hold, on... *(She puts her hand over the mouthpiece.*
To ALICE) God Almighty, Childie, it's the B.B.C.

ALICE *(trembling)* Oh, Lord, I hope it's nothing serious.

JUNE *(into the telephone)* Hello? ...Hello, Mrs Mercy, dear... No,
of course not... Quite... Quite... Yes, I – there was something
I wanted to talk to you about... Perhaps we'd better have a
man-to-man... You have something to say to *me*? ...No, I'm
not doing anything at the moment... Well, I'd rather not
come back to Broadcasting House today... Yes, yes, that's a
splendid idea. Love to see you... That's right: Devonshire
Street – top floor. You press the bell, and one of those 'I
speak your weight' machines answers... *(With a rather forced*
laugh) Yes, you know the kind of thing. *(She intones in a deep*
voice) 'You are thirteen stone two.' ...No, no, of course not –
I wasn't implying that you were... Yes, that'll be absolutely
lovely... *Any* time... 'Bye. *(She replaces the receiver and wipes*

her brow) She's coming round. She'll be here in a minute.
Oh, God, I'm for it. *(She crosses to left of the sofa)*

ALICE *(putting the doll on the table behind the sofa)* Who was it?

JUNE *goes to the table left centre, takes a cigar from the box and lights it with the lighter.*

JUNE The Assistant Head – Mrs Mercy Croft.

ALICE The one who has that weekly spot on *Woman's Hour*?

JUNE 'Ask Mrs Mercy'. Yes, that's her.

ALICE *(rising)* But she sounds awfully nice on the radio – at least her advice is sort of – sensible.

JUNE *(pacing nervously down left)* She is nice. *(She tries to convince herself)* Mrs Mercy is a *nice woman*.

ALICE *(crossing to left centre)* Well, then.

JUNE *(crossing below ALICE to the fireplace)* She's coming to see me, you understand? First she asked to see me in her office, now she's asking to see me.

ALICE *(after a pause)* Did she seem friendly?

JUNE *(tensely)* Yep.

ALICE It'll be a good thing to clear the air.

JUNE *(moving to right of ALICE)* You don't know what you're talking about. She wants to see me on an urgent matter. We must brace ourselves for the worst.

ALICE Will she expect some tea?

JUNE Tea, oh, God, yes! *(She turns ALICE round and gives her a push towards the sideboard)* You must make her something special – at the double.

ALICE *clears everything from the table left centre on to the sideboard.*

ALICE There's that piece of Dundee cake that mother sent.
(She takes a lace tablecloth from the sideboard cupboard and spreads it on the table left centre)

JUNE *(pacing right)* That'll be absolutely first class. *(She paces to left centre)* And make her some of those Scotch scones of yours. And when you're serving the stuff, try to make a good impression, look cheerful, keep your shoulders back. And if she speaks to you don't open your mouth about things you don't understand.

ALICE I can quite easily go out. *(She gets three teaspoons and three knives from the sideboard drawer and puts them on the table, then takes three cups, saucers and small plates from the sideboard cupboard and puts them on the table)*

JUNE What, and leave me to pour out and all that pansy stuff. Not likely. *(She crosses to the fireplace)* You'll stay here and do some work.

ALICE *(setting out the china, etc.)* Look, George, try not to show her how worried you are. You always get sort of – aggressive when you're nervous.

JUNE *(moving centre)* Go on. Back to the kitchen where you belong. *(She roughly tidies the cushions on the sofa)*

ALICE I wish you'd do relaxing exercises or something.

ALICE *exits to the kitchen.*

JUNE *(shouting after ALICE)* I'll do relaxing exercises on your behind in a minute. *(She collects her briefcase and puts it on the floor right of the radiogram)* Now then. *(She picks up two framed certificates from the top of the radiogram and reads)* 'Personality of the Year.' I'll put that in a prominent position. *(She puts the certificate on the mantelpiece and reads the second certificate)* 'The English Village Preservation Society.' *(She puts the certificate on the right end of the table behind the sofa, then goes to the radiogram and moves a third framed certificate into a better position)* 'The Variety Club of Great Britain.' *(She moves a silver cup along the top of*

the radiogram) 'The Association of British Nursing Sisters.' *(She moves another cup along and then picks up a silver statuette, faces front, holds out the statuette and reads its inscription)* 'Miss Humanity' – *(She pauses)* 'nominated by the *Daily Mirror*.' *(She places the statuette on the left end of the table behind the sofa and turns to the radiogram)* There's something missing. *(She calls)* Alice.

ALICE *(offstage; calling)* I'm busy.

JUNE *(moving down centre; imperiously)* Come here. I want you.

ALICE *enters from the kitchen, carrying a washing-up mop.*

ALICE What is it *now*? You're always interrupting.

JUNE *(pointing to the trophies)* There's one missing.

ALICE I haven't touched anything.

JUNE *(moving to right of the table left centre)* There's one missing, isn't there? Go on – *have a look*. I want to hear you tell me, in your own words, which one is missing.

ALICE *(without looking)* I don't know.

JUNE *(softly, but with deadly emphasis)* Where is the Honorary 'Stag'?

ALICE *(uncertainly)* What...?

JUNE *(in the same tone)* What have you done with it?

ALICE *is silent.*

I'll give you ten seconds to confess. *(She waits, breathing heavily)*

ALICE Let me get on with the tea. She'll be here in a minute.

JUNE You've destroyed it, haven't you? *(She pauses)* Where is the Honorary 'Stag'?

ALICE *(after a pause)* I threw it away.

JUNE *(moving to ALICE)* You – *what*?

ALICE (*slightly hysterically*) I *hated* it. A cut-off stag's head, impaled on a pike. You had no right to keep such abominations in the house – you know I like animals.

JUNE When did you – throw it away?

ALICE (*looking at JUNE*) Last night.

There is a pause. JUNE sits right of the table left centre, ALICE sits left of it.

JUNE You know it meant a lot to me – to be nominated Honorary 'Stag'.

ALICE (*very contrite*) I'll get it back; I'll get another.

JUNE (*tragically*) Too late.

ALICE I'll phone up the Town Hall – the Borough Litter Disposal Unit...

JUNE (*tragically*) You mean the dustman, don't you? Why can't you bloody well say so?

There is a long ring from the front door buzzer.

It's her. (*She stubs out her cigar on a tea plate*)

ALICE *rises.*

(*she rises and crosses to the speaker right*) It's the bitch, the cow, the plague spot, the embossed carbuncle. (*She pulls out the extending arm of the speaker and speaks into it*) Hello, Mrs Mercy, dear... Yes, we're expecting you... Top floor. (*She pushes the speaker back against the wall and crosses to centre*) Don't stand there, gawping. Blow your nose. Pull your sweater straight: you look disgusting. (*She tweaks ALICE's sweater down like an angry mother*) Now, remember: be polite and keep mum. (*She moves right*) I'll speak to you later. (*She pauses*) Where the hell has she got to?

ALICE Maybe she got stuck in the lift.

JUNE (*aghast*) Oh, my God, I forgot to close the lift gates.

ALICE (*moving right of the table left centre*) I'll do it.

JUNE (*in a hoarse whisper*) Don't – it's too late.

The front door bell rings.

She'll either walk, or...

ALICE (*suddenly scared*) Let's not open the door.

JUNE *throws ALICE a glance expressing contempt and strides out through the arch right.*

JUNE (*off right*) Oh, hello, Mrs Mercy.

The front door is heard to close.

I'm so sorry – I forgot to tell you that the lift was out of order.

MRS MERCY CROFT *enters through the arch right. She is a well-groomed lady of indeterminate age, gracious of manner and freezingly polite. She is wearing a navy blue two-piece suit, matching hat and accessories, and a discreet double string of pearls round her neck. She carries a briefcase.*

MERCY (*as she enters; cheerfully*) Not at all – I never use the lift. (*She sees ALICE*) Oh? (*She moves centre*)

JUNE *enters through the arch.*

JUNE (*moving right centre*) This is Miss Alice McNaught – Mrs Mercy Croft.

MERCY (*smiling but not shaking hands*) How do you do? (*She turns to JUNE*) Yes, I always say: we get far too little exercise these days. If we walked upstairs instead of using lifts, those extra inches would disappear.

ALICE (*the mop behind her back; trying to be helpful*) I sometimes walk...

MERCY You don't need to lose any weight, my dear.

JUNE (*at ALICE*) Alice was just preparing the tea.

MERCY Oh, that *is* nice. (*She smiles politely at ALICE*)

JUNE, while MERCY is looking away, makes a furious gesture to ALICE to go into the kitchen.

I do hope I haven't put you to any trouble – inviting myself out of the blue.

JUNE }
ALICE } (*together*) { Rubbish!
Not at all.

ALICE *exits to the kitchen.*

MERCY May I look round? (*She moves up centre*) I adore looking at other people's flats – they do reflect their occupiers' personalities in an uncannily accurate way.

JUNE *moves to the fireplace.*

(*she looks around*) To be perfectly honest, I imagined your home to be – different.

JUNE Really?

MERCY (*indicating the ornaments on the bookcase*) This charming Victoriana – the dolls – somehow...

JUNE (*slightly embarrassed*) They're Miss McNaught's.

MERCY Oh, of course, that would explain it. They just weren't *you*. I didn't know...

JUNE (*rather sheepishly*) Yes, I have a flat-mate.

MERCY (*sympathetically*) How nice. It's so important to have – companionship – especially when one's an artist.

JUNE (*moving down right and indicating the brasses on the wall*) These are mine – I collect horse brasses.

MERCY How useful. (*She moves to the window*) May I look out from your window?

JUNE *moves up right of the sofa.*

I love overlooking things. I've always adored heights. In my young days, my husband and I often used to go mountaineering – in the Austrian Alps for preference. *(She looks out of the window and gives a sudden yell of delight)* Ah! There's B.H.! You can see Broadcasting House from your window – isn't that – *super!* To have that reassuring presence brooding over you, seeing that you don't get into mischief.

JUNE *laughs nervously.*

ALICE *raises the hatch left and leans through.*

ALICE Ready in a minute.

MERCY Oh – good.

JUNE Kindly close that hatch.

ALICE *withdraws and slams the hatch down.*

Sometimes I have the insuperable desire to decapitate her.
(She laughs)

MERCY *(moving to left of the sofa)* Oh, poor Miss McNaught. I do like your settee cover – a homely pattern. I love a floral design – I know it's old-fashioned, but...

JUNE Childie – Miss McNaught – made them.

MERCY *(putting her briefcase, handbag and gloves on the table behind the sofa)* Really. How clever of her – they're beautifully fitted. You're fortunate to have such a handy companion.

JUNE *(moving down right; in her country accent)* Yes, she's good with the needle, I'll say that for her.

MERCY *(lightly)* That was Sister George speaking.

JUNE *(in her own voice; self-consciously)* One can't help slipping.

MERCY *(moving below the sofa)* But you *are* Sister George far more than Miss June Buckridge to all of us at B.H.

JUNE Jolly nice of you to say so. (*She indicates to MERCY to sit on the sofa*)

MERCY *sits on the sofa, at the left end of it. JUNE sits in the armchair right, with her knees apart.*

MERCY Thank you. You have made the part completely your own. It was obvious – even at the first auditions. I remember it quite clearly, although it must be – oh...

JUNE Almost six years ago. I was scared stiff.

MERCY How charming! One can't imagine you scared stiff.

JUNE I don't mind actual physical danger. You know, I almost like it. I was in the A.T.S. during the war.

MERCY Lovely!

JUNE None of that sissy ENSA stuff for yours truly.

MERCY It wasn't that bad.

There is a slight pause. JUNE's smile fades.

As a matter of fact, I did a bit of organizing for ENSA myself.

JUNE I'm sorry. No offence meant.

MERCY None taken. (*She reaches over the back of the sofa and gets her briefcase*) Now, Miss Buckridge – or may I call you Sister George, like everybody else?

JUNE Certainly.

MERCY As you know, I hold a monthly 'surgery' in my office, when I welcome people to come to me with their problems. I've always made it a rule to be approachable. But in certain cases, involving matters of special importance, I prefer to visit the subjects in their own homes, so that we can talk more easily, without any duress. That's why I'm here today.

JUNE (*in her country accent*) Ah, well, a farmer's footsteps are the best manure. (*She laughs*)

MERCY Quite. But there is rather a serious matter I wish to discuss with you.

JUNE I see.

ALICE enters from the kitchen, carrying a tray of tea. She has removed her apron.

ALICE Sorry I took so long. *(She puts the tray on the table left centre)*

MERCY *(slightly annoyed at the interruption, but politely)* Ah, lovely! *(She rises. To JUNE)* We'll continue our little chat after tea.

ALICE If you'd rather...

JUNE *(rising and moving right centre)* You can speak quite freely, Mrs Mercy. Miss McNaught and I have no secrets from each other.

MERCY Oh. Well, let's all have tea first.

ALICE moves the chair left of the table left centre and places it above the table.

(she moves above the table left centre) I say, what delicious-looking scones.

ALICE moves the chair down left and places it left of the table.

ALICE They're Scotch scones. *(She goes to the hatch, opens it and collects a plate with a lump of Dundee cake with four small slices of cake arranged beside it. She leaves the hatch open and puts the plate on the table left centre)*

JUNE They're Childie's speciality. Copied from a recipe of her grandmother's. *(She sits right of the table)*

MERCY sits above the table, and ALICE sits left of it.

MERCY They look delish! May I try one?

ALICE Help yourself. (*She puts the plate of scones in front of MERCY*) Here's the jam. (*She passes the jam pot to MERCY*)

MERCY (*taking a scone and spreading it with jam*) They're what we used to call 'Girdle Scones'.

JUNE (*mocking MERCY's inflection*) Or 'Drop Scones'.

ALICE It's frightfully important not to get the girdle too hot, or the outside of the scones will brown before the inside is cooked.

MERCY They're a lovely even colour.

ALICE *pours tea for MERCY and herself but not for JUNE.*

ALICE (*very animated*) I always cool them in a towel.

MERCY Do you?

ALICE Yes, and I wait till the bubbles rise to the surface before I turn them over.

MERCY They're very successful.

ALICE I use half a level teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda—

MERCY Now you're giving away trade secrets.

ALICE and one level teaspoonful of cream of tartar—

JUNE Shut up!

There is a moment's silence.

ALICE eight ounces of flour—

JUNE (*exploding*) Shut up!

ALICE (*softly but firmly*) and one egg.

JUNE Shut up! (*She picks up the lump of Dundee cake and hurls it at ALICE*)

ALICE *ducks. The cake flies to pieces against the sideboard. There is a pause during which MERCY continues to eat unperturbed.*

MERCY Now then, girls!

ALICE (*after a pause*) She hates me to talk about food.
(*Confidentially*) She's a wee bit overwrought.

JUNE (*rising*) Overwrought my arse! (*She stumps over to the fireplace, takes a cheroot from the box on the mantelpiece, and lights it*)

ALICE (*chiding*) Now that wasn't nice – that was not a nice thing to say.

MERCY (*smiling indulgently*) I expect she picked it up in the army.

ALICE She swears like a trooper.

MERCY But she has a heart of gold.

ALICE Once, she got into such a temper, that I wrote a poem about it.

JUNE (*moving below the sofa; bitterly*) Yes, she fancies herself as a poetess. Goes to the City Lit. every Wednesday night, to learn about metre and things.

MERCY What a nice hobby.

JUNE As a poetess, she makes a very good cook.

MERCY It's still a question of mixing the right ingredients to make a tasty whole.

ALICE That night she came back in a raging temper—

JUNE (*moving centre*) Thank you very much, we've all stopped listening.

ALICE (*ignoring JUNE*) I wrote this poem. It began:

‘Fierce as the wind
Blows the rampaging termagant...’

JUNE *prowls furiously right centre.*

MERCY Very expressive. (*To JUNE*) And how did you like being compared to the wind?

JUNE *blows a raspberry. There is a pause. MERCY drinks her tea.*

ALICE *(passing the plate of cake)* Slice of cake, Mrs Mercy?

JUNE *sits right of the table.*

MERCY *(taking a slice of cake)* Just a teeny one. I mustn't be greedy. *(She spreads the cake with jam)*

ALICE *takes a piece of cake.*

JUNE Her mother made it. *(She continues smoking and uses her plate as an ashtray)*

MERCY You can always tell if it's home-baked; it tastes quite different.

JUNE *(laughing)* You'd be amazed if you knew what old Mother McNaught put into it.

MERCY I'm not even going to ask.

JUNE I'm delighted to hear it. *(She laughs)*

MERCY *(enjoying herself)* Oh, dear, this is just like a dormitory feast – all this girlish banter. *(To JUNE)* I bet you were a terror at school. *(She eats her cake)*

JUNE I was captain of the hockey team and a keen disciplinarian – God help the girl I caught – *(in her country accent)* making me an apple-pie bed. *(She chuckles)*

MERCY Ah, there's Sister George again. It's wonderful how over the years the character's *evolved*.

ALICE Who first thought of putting her on a Moped?

JUNE That was because of the sound effects. As long as I was on the old bike, listeners never knew whether I was static or mobile.

MERCY It's a unique sound – Sister George on her Moped, whizzing through the countryside, singing snatches of hymns. *(She drinks her tea)*

JUNE I got into a terrible row the other day because I sang a hymn which sounded like ‘*On the good ship Venus...*’

MERCY A traditional air?

JUNE I’ve found it safer to stick to hymns. Once I tried a pop song, and d’you know – hundreds of letters came in protesting.

MERCY We learn from experience. But we don’t want *Applehurst* falling behind the times.

JUNE No. (*She looks away. Worried*) No, of course not.

MERCY But we must constantly examine criticism, and if it’s constructive, we must act on it. Ruthlessly.

JUNE What sort of criticism?

MERCY Oh, nothing in *particular*. At least...

JUNE But *what*?

MERCY Well, that, I’m afraid, brings me – (*she rises*) to the unpleasant part of my business.

ALICE Oh, dear!

MERCY But first, would you show me to the little girls’ room?

JUNE (*rising*) Alice – show Mrs Mercy to the...

ALICE (*rising and moving up left*) This way, Mrs Mercy.

ALICE exits up left.

MERCY follows her off.

JUNE (*muttering*) ‘Little girls’... (*She moves to the table behind the sofa, stubs out her cigar in the ashtray on it, and looks off up left*)

ALICE (*offstage*) It’s that door there.

JUNE sees MERCY’s briefcase on the sofa, looks off left, hurriedly picks up the briefcase, crosses to the armchair right and opens the case.

ALICE enters up left and stands at the top of the steps.

(aghast) What are you doing?

JUNE *(turning)* Shh! Keep a look-out. *(She rummages in the case)*

ALICE *(moving up centre)* You can't, you mustn't.

JUNE *(taking a folder from the case)* My own personal file.

ALICE *(in an hysterical whisper)* Put it back!

JUNE *searches in the folder, takes an envelope from it and reads the inscription.*

JUNE 'Sister George. Confidential.'

The sound of a water cistern flushing is heard off left.

ALICE She's coming.

JUNE *quickly replaces the folder in the briefcase, moves up right of the sofa, closes the briefcase and puts it on the sofa. She realizes too late that she has still got the envelope in her hand, so quickly hides it behind a cushion at the right end of the sofa. She then picks up the doll Emmeline from the table behind the sofa.*

JUNE So Emmeline said: 'I don't want any drop scones today, thank you very much.'

MERCY *enters up left and crosses below the sofa. JUNE and ALICE stand rigid with suspense.*

MERCY I got on the scales, to see if I've put on any weight. *(She picks up her briefcase)*

JUNE *(indicating the tea table)* I don't suppose... *(Meaning 'would you like any more tea?')*

MERCY *(sitting on the sofa)* Now, then...

ALICE I'll make myself scarce.

ALICE *exits to the kitchen.*

MERCY Please sit down.

JUNE *sits in the armchair right.*

You won't hold it against me if I speak quite plainly?

JUNE Please do.

MERCY It's my unpleasant duty to haul you over the coals, and administer a severe reprimand.

JUNE *(with no apology in her tone)* Oh?

MERCY Believe me, Sister George, I'd much rather let bygones be bygones...

JUNE *(in her country accent)* Let sleeping dogs lie.

MERCY Precisely. But I must remind you of the little chat we had just about a year ago, after that unfortunate incident in the Club – involving a lady colleague of mine.

JUNE *(in her country accent)* Well, we don't want to rake over old embers.

MERCY I don't intend to. But in the light of recent events, it's difficult to forget an incident as vivid as the pouring of a glass of beer over the Assistant Head of Talks. I had hoped one black mark – *(She opens her briefcase)* would have been enough for you, but this morning – *(She takes out a clipboard and removes a sheet of paper from it)* I received this memo from the Director of Religious Broadcasting. *(She hands the paper to JUNE)* I should like to have your comments. *(She puts the briefcase beside her on the sofa, but holds the clipboard on her knee)*

JUNE *reads the paper then jumps up violently.*

JUNE *(excitedly)* It's a lie! It's an utter, bloody lie!

MERCY *(firmly)* Please calm yourself, Miss Buckridge. Kindly hand me back the paper.

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