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WAITING IN THE WINGS

A Play in Three Acts

by Noël Coward

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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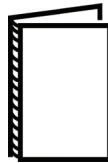


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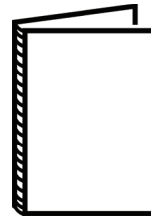
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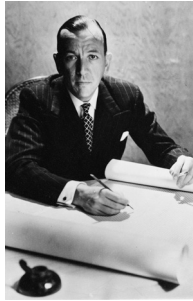
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Noël Peirce Coward was born in 1899 and made his professional stage debut as Prince Mussel in *The Goldfish* at the age of twelve, leading to many child actor appearances over the next few years. His breakthrough in playwriting was the controversial *The Vortex* (1924) which featured themes of drugs and adultery and made his name as both actor and playwright in the West End and on Broadway. During the frenzied 1920s and the more sedate 1930s, Coward wrote a string of successful plays, musicals and intimate revues including *Fallen Angels* (1925), *Hay Fever* (1925), *Easy Virtue* (1926), *This Year of Grace* (1928), and *Bitter Sweet* (1929). His professional partnership with childhood friend Gertrude Lawrence started with *Private Lives* (1931), and continued with *Tonight at 8.30* (1936).

During World War II, he remained a successful playwright, screenwriter and director, as well as entertaining the troops and even acting as an unofficial spy for the Foreign Office. His plays during these years included *Blithe Spirit*, which ran for 1,997 performances, outlasting the War (a West End record until *The Mousetrap* overtook it), *This Happy Breed* and *Present Laughter* (both 1943). His two wartime screenplays, *In Which We Serve*, which he co-directed with the young David Lean, and *Brief Encounter* quickly became classics of British cinema.

However, the post-war years were more difficult. Austerity Britain – the London critics determined – was out of tune with the brittle Coward wit. In response, Coward re-invented himself as a cabaret and TV star, particularly in America, and in 1955 he played a sell-out season in Las Vegas featuring many of his most

famous songs, including *Mad About the Boy*, *I'll See You Again* and *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*. In the mid-1950s he settled in Jamaica and Switzerland, and enjoyed a renaissance in the early 1960s becoming the first living playwright to be performed by the National Theatre, when he directed *Hay Fever* there. Late in his career he was lauded for his roles in a number of films including *Our Man In Havana* (1959) and his role as the iconic Mr. Bridger alongside Michael Caine in *The Italian Job* (1968).

Writer, actor, director, film producer, painter, songwriter, cabaret artist as well as an author of a novel, verse, essays and autobiographies, he was called by close friends 'The Master'. His final West End appearance was *Song at Twilight* in 1966, which he wrote and starred in. He was knighted in 1970 and died peacefully in 1973 in his beloved Jamaica.

For further information on Noël Coward's life and work, visit www.noelcoward.com and to join the Noël Coward Society, visit www.noelcoward.net

WAITING IN THE WINGS

Produced by F.E.S. (Plays) Ltd in association with Michael Redgrave Productions Ltd, at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, on the 7th September 1960, with the following cast of characters—

(in the order of their appearance)

BONITA BELGRAVE	}	residents at The Wings	<i>Maidie Andrews</i>
CORA CLARKE			<i>Una Venning</i>
MAUD MELROSE			<i>Norah Blaney</i>
MAY DAVENPORT			<i>Marie Löhr</i>
ALMINA CLARE			<i>Mary Clare</i>
ESTELLE CRAVEN			<i>Edith Day</i>
DEIRDRE O'MALLEY			<i>Maureen Delany</i>
PERRY LASCOE, the Secretary			<i>Graham Payn</i>
SYLVIA ARCHIBALD, the Superintendent			<i>Margot Boyd</i>
MR OSGOOD MEEKER			<i>Lewis Casson</i>
LOTTA BAINBRIDGE	<i>Sybil Thorndike</i>		
DORA, her dresser	<i>Betty Hare</i>		
DOREEN, the maid	<i>Jean Conroy</i>		
SARITA MYRTLE, a resident	<i>Nora Nicholson</i>		
ZELDA FENWICK, a journalist	<i>Jessica Dunning</i>		
DR JEVONS	<i>Eric Hillyard</i>		
ALAN BENNET, Lotta's son	<i>William Hutt</i>		
TOPSY BASKERVILLE	<i>Molly Lumley</i>		

Directed by Margaret Webster
Scenery and costumes by Motley

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the lounge of The Wings, a charity home for retired actresses, in the Thames Valley, not far from Bourne End

ACT I

Scene One	A Sunday afternoon in June
Scene Two	3 a.m. on a Monday morning, a month later

ACT II

Scene One	A Sunday afternoon in the following September
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Scene Two Several hours later

Scene Three A week later

ACT III

Scene One The evening of Christmas Day

Scene Two A Sunday afternoon in the following June

Time - the present



Photography by Angus McBean

ACT I

Scene One

SCENE. The lounge of *The Wings*, a small charity home for retired actresses, in the Thames Valley, not far from Bourne End. A Sunday afternoon in June.

The Wings differs from organisations of its kind in that it provides only for those who have been stars or leading ladies and who, through age, lack of providence, misfortune, etc., have been reduced to poverty. Some of these have been granted a pension of four pounds a week by the King George's Pension Fund; others have small, pitifully small, incomes of their own. No actress under the age of sixty is eligible for admittance to the home. *The Wings* is subscribed to by public funds and was founded in 1925 by Sir Hilary Brooks, a leading actor/manager and producer of his day. The organisation is controlled from London by a committee of leading actors and actresses who attend meetings once a month and make decisions on policy, investments, etc. *The Wings* is comfortable without being luxurious and has a pleasant garden with a view of the river in the distance. The lounge was originally three rooms, hall, dining room and drawing room, but these were amalgamated into one when the house was bought and it is now large, airy and cheerful. Up right centre there is a short staircase leading to a small landing with an arch centre giving access to the upper rooms of the house. Up left centre are french windows opening on to a flagged terrace which overlooks the garden and the distant Thames. Right of the staircase is a small hall, at the back of which is

a green baize door leading to the kitchen. There is an opening right of the hall which goes to the front door and dining room. A door centre of the wall right leads to the television room. There is a large fireplace left. Above this is a door to MISS ARCHIBALD's office. Down right there is a built-in bureau with a pull-down desk flap and bookshelves over it. In the crook of the stairs is an antiquated but still playable Bechstein Grand piano. The furniture is mixed. There are some fairly good "pieces" here and there, which have been donated at various times, and there are comfortable chairs and a sofa upholstered in faded chintz. The sofa is centre, angled to face down left, and a low coffee table stands in front of it. In the crook of the piano there is a tub chair. Armchairs are set up left and left centre and there is an easy chair down left. A small folding table stands right centre, with upright chairs right, left and above it. An upright chair stands at the bureau, and a butler's tray stands left of the hall. An occasional table is above the fireplace and a fire stool stands at the downstage end of the hearth. There are central heating radiators down left and on the landing. There is, inevitably, a set of framed playbills of earlier days on the landing wall, and, over the fireplace, dominating the lounge, is a very large but not very good oil painting of Ellen Terry. There is also an impressive bronze bust of the late Sir Hilary Brooks on a pedestal at the top of the stairs. At night, the room is lit by a standard lamp up centre and electric candle wall brackets over the mantelpiece, on the landing and on the wall down right. A small glass chandelier hangs in the hall. The switches are on a pillar right of the staircase, right of the landing arch and below the office door up left. A small fire extinguisher is on the wall left of the landing arch. On the terrace there are three garden chairs.

Before the curtain rises, the music of "WAITING IN THE WINGS" is heard.

When the curtain rises, the music fades. It is a sunny afternoon, just after lunch. The fire is lit, because although it is a summer day it is an English summer day and therefore unpredictable. BONITA BELGRAVE and CORA CLARKE are seated at the table right centre, just finishing a game of canasta. BONITA, in her late sixties, is seated above the table. She has reddish blonde hair and is wearing a well-cut but none too new beige jersey dress, two strings of pearls with earrings to match and a lucky charm bracelet. She is a gay, bright woman with a strongly developed theatrical sense of humour. She appeared with considerable success in revues and musical comedies during the 1914-18 war, and in the twenties and thirties forsook the musical for the legitimate stage. She was never a great star but was popular in supporting parts, worked for ENSA during the Second World War and was forced, owing to advancing years and lack of offers, to retire in 1950. CORA, who is a year or two older, is very brightly made-up with the rouge on her cheeks placed high. She wears a pink cotton afternoon dress and has a grey cardigan jacket slung over her shoulders. From beneath her coloured turban peep a few very black curls. She has several bead necklaces and a gold chain with a locket. MAUD MELROSE, a diminutive soubrette of seventy, is curled up in the upstage corner of the sofa, reading the theatre page of the "Sunday Times". She has rather sparse red hair, a neat blue print dress, enormous horn-rimmed glasses and a vast bag into which she plunges occasionally for her cigarettes and matches. In the years before the first war when she made her debut she appeared with success in several musical comedies. Vivacity was her strong suit. She was always an excellent musician and, in her youth, had a piercing soprano voice of startling volume. She appeared sporadically in the period between wars but her life, on the whole, has been a long and fairly fruitless struggle. MAY DAVENPORT, aged about seventy-five, is seated bolt upright in the armchair left centre, working slowly and majestically

on an embroidery frame. She was an authentic star in her day and specialised in Shakespeare and the more ponderous Restoration comedies. Her movements are slow and immensely dignified, and she wears a black velvet dress which in earlier years might have been described as a tea gown. Her hair is coal-black but she has allowed it graciously to go a little grey at the sides. Her discreetly made-up face is still structurally beautiful and she wears a narrow black velvet ribbon round her neck. Outside, on the terrace, ALMINA CLARE and ESTELLE CRAVEN can be seen through the open french windows. They are both muffled up against the June weather. ESTELLE is seated centre of the terrace. She is aged seventy four and is white-haired and permanently wistful. She is knitting. ALMINA is seated left of the terrace. She is aged eighty-five and is immensely fat. She has dropped off to sleep over the "Sunday Express". They have both been on the stage all their lives and have played leading parts from time to time but genuine stardom has eluded them.

BONITA (to **CORA**) Well, that's that. (*She adds up her score card*)
You owe me two and six.

CORA You owe me a shilling from last Sunday.

BONITA In that case you only owe me one and six.

CORA We'd better hold it over until next time we play.

BONITA I thought you'd say that.

CORA (*sharply*) Why – may I ask?

BONITA (*sweetly*) Because you always do, dear.

MAUD (*looking up from her paper*) I see they're hoping to get
Buck Randy for the Midnight Matinée this year.

MAY Who in heaven's name is Buck Randy?

MAUD Really, May – you must have heard of Buck Randy. He's
the rage of America.

MAY I haven't been to America since nineteen-thirteen. What does he do?

MAUD He sings, stripped to the waist, to a zither.

MAY Why should he be stripped to the waist?

BONITA (*rising and standing behind the sofa*) Because he's supposed to have the most beautiful male body in the world, dear. He was Mr America of nineteen-fifty-five and nineteen-fifty-six. (*She crosses to the shelves down right, looks at the books and selects one*)

MAY Why a zither?

MAUD He accompanies himself on it. Last year one of his records sold over two million. He has to have police protection wherever he goes.

MAY I'm not surprised.

BONITA *sits in the desk chair and glances through the book.*

MAUD (*looking at her paper*) They say that Carolita Pagadicci is going to appear, too. She's flying over from Rome specially.

MAY Is that the one with the vast bust who came last year and just stood about?

CORA I'm sure it's very kind of all of them to take so much trouble for a bunch of old has-beens like us.

BONITA Speak for yourself, dear.

CORA I know they got a lot of publicity out of it but even so I shouldn't think from their point of view it was worth all the effort.

MAY It is always possible, my dear Cora, that just one or two of them might do it from sheer kindness of heart.

CORA I said it was kind of them to take the trouble, and Bonita flew at me.

BONITA I didn't fly at you for that. It was because you said we were a bunch of old has-beens.

CORA We wouldn't be here if we weren't.

MAY In essence, you are quite right, my dear Cora, but please remember before you say things like that again that it is painful to some of us to be so vulgarly reminded that we are dependent on the charity of our younger colleagues.

CORA Oh, dear, I'm sure I'm sorry I spoke.

MAY So are we all, Cora. So are we all.

DEIRDRE O'MALLEY *stamps in from the television room right, leaving the door open. She is a spry, white-haired old woman of eighty-two, attired in dusty black. She speaks with a strong brogue.*

DEIRDRE *(standing above the card table)* I'm telling you all here and now that I would like to take the man who invented television, and strangle the damned life out of him.

BONITA *(rising with her book)* Has it gone wrong again?

DEIRDRE It has indeed, and for no reason in the world other than pure devilment. *(She crosses above the sofa to right of MAY)* I was sitting there quiet as the grave listening to Father Dugan giving his Sunday afternoon talk when suddenly the damned contraption gets up to its blasphemous tricks, and before me very eyes I see the blessed Father begin to wobble about like a dancing dervish with one side of his saintly face pulled out of shape as though it was made of india-rubber.

BONITA *(moving up right towards the hall)* Miss Archie will fix it, dear. I'll go and ask her.

DEIRDRE *(moving towards BONITA)* I'm grateful for the thought but spare yourself the trouble. By the time Miss Archie's fiddled with the damn thing the blessed Father will have finished his talk and be having his tea. *(She goes up the stairs on to the landing)* I'm going up to have me forty winks. It's

a dark world we're living in when a bit of soulless machinery can suddenly turn a holy man into a figure of fun.

DEIRDRE exits on the landing.

BONITA (*laughing*) That old girl's wonderful, she really is. (*She moves down right centre*) You must have seen her in the old days, May – was she really good? (*She sits on the sofa, at the downstage end*)

ESTELLE, *on the terrace, puts away her knitting and rises.* **ALMINA** *wakes and rises.*

MAY (*after a moment's thought*) Good, but unreliable. She's never played a scene the same way twice.

ESTELLE and **ALMINA** *come into the room.*

ESTELLE (*crossing between MAY and the sofa to the fireplace*) I'm perished to the bone and it's no good pretending I'm not. (*She puts her knitting bag on the fire stool and warms her hands at the fire*)

ALMINA (*crossing to left of BONITA; quaveringly*) Do you think we shall ever get it?

BONITA Get what, dear?

ALMINA The solarium lounge.

MAUD (*rising and picking up her bag*) The letter went off to the committee over two weeks ago. (*She moves to the piano, puts her bag on it, then sits on the piano stool*)

BONITA It probably came up at Friday's meeting.

ALMINA Even if they say "yes" I shall be dead and gone before they get round to building it. My heart's been pounding again; I hardly slept a wink last night.

MAUD *starts to strum part of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto in C Minor.*

MAY You know perfectly well, Almina, that that's only indigestion.
Dr Jevons told you so. You eat far too much far too quickly.

ALMINA (*crossing to the easy chair down left*) I like eating.
(*She sits*)

ESTELLE (*sitting on the fire stool*) That east wind comes straight
across the valley and cuts you in two.

CORA The committee could well afford it if they chose. Perry
told me so himself.

MAY As official secretary to the Fund he had no right to. That
young man talks far too much.

BONITA Now then, May, you know perfectly well you dote on him
– we all do. You gossip away with him for hours whenever
you get the chance.

MAY What nonsense you talk, my dear Bonita.

MAUD (*still playing*) I suppose he'll be down as usual this
afternoon.

*CORA picks up the cards, rises, and pushes her chair
into the table.*

CORA Of course he will, it's Sunday. (*She moves towards the
desk*) Also he'll be sure to come today in order to welcome...

BONITA (*interrupting; warningly*) Cora!

*CORA stops. MAUD ceases playing. ESTELLE and ALMINA
react.*

CORA (*with a hurried glance at MAY*) Well, you know what I
mean.

There is a slightly awkward silence.

MAY In order to welcome who?

MAUD (*rising and moving above the sofa; embarrassed*) We've
got a new addition to our cosy little family arriving this
afternoon.

MAY Why wasn't I told? Who is it?

BONITA Oh, dear, that cat's out of the bag, now, with a vengeance.
I suppose we'd better say.

MAY What are you all talking about? Why all this mystery?

BONITA It's Lotta Bainbridge.

MAY (*stiffening*) Lotta Bainbridge.

BONITA Yes.

MAY (*ominously*) Lotta Bainbridge – coming here?

BONITA (*hurriedly*) We all thought – knowing that you and she are not exactly the best of friends – that it would be better not to say anything about it.

MAY How long have you known?

MAUD Perry told us last Sunday.

MAY (*accusingly*) You mean you were all prepared to let me meet her face to face without even warning me? (*She packs her embroidery away in the bag*)

BONITA Old Dora, her dresser, who's been with her for years, is leaving her to get married, and the maisonnette she had just off the Fulham Road is being pulled down to make way for office buildings...

MAY I am not in the least interested in where she lives and what is being pulled down. (*She picks up her bag, rises and crosses to the stairs*) I only know that I find your combined conspiracy of silence difficult to forgive.

CORA *puts the cards on the desk.*

MAUD (*putting her hand on MAY's arm*) It was only that we didn't want to upset you.

MAY Do you seriously imagine that it would have upset me less to find her here in this house without being prepared?

CORA *moves down right.*

BONITA Don't be angry with us, May. After all, it was a long long time ago, wasn't it? The quarrel, I mean...

MAUD *moves to the piano.*

MAY There was no quarrel, my dear Bonita. You have been misinformed. *(She goes to the foot of the stairs)*

BONITA *(weakly)* Well, whatever it was then...

MAY I have not spoken to Lotta Bainbridge for thirty years and I have no intention of doing so now. *(She goes up the stairs to the landing)*

ESTELLE *rises.*

MAUD *(moving to the foot of the stairs)* Oh, May dear – don't be like that – it's all over and done with.

MAY *(grandly)* One of you had better explain the situation to her when she arrives. Don't be afraid she won't understand. She'll understand perfectly.

MAY *exits on the landing. There is an embarrassed silence for a moment or two.*

BONITA Well, that's that, isn't it?

MAUD *(moving above the card table)* I suppose we ought to have told her really.

BONITA *(moving along the sofa seat to the upstage end)* They'll probably settle down together in time; they can't go on not speaking for ever, but the next few weeks are going to be hell.

CORA *goes to the desk and collects some patience cards.*

MAUD *(moving behind the sofa)* Who was it that said that there was something beautiful about growing old?

BONITA Whoever it was I have news for him.

ESTELLE *(picking up her bag and crossing to left of the coffee table)* Since I've been here I somehow can't remember not being old. *(She puts her bag on the coffee table)*

BONITA Perhaps that's something to do with having played character parts for so long.

ESTELLE I was an *ingénue* for years. I was very pretty and my eyes were enormous. They're quite small now. (*She moves to the armchair left centre and sits*)

CORA *closes the desk.*

MAUD What started it – the feud between her and May?

BONITA Come off it, Maudie. You weren't toddling home from school with your pencil box in nineteen-eighteen.

MAUD (*equably*) As a matter of fact that's exactly what I was doing, eight times a week. I was in Miss Mouse at the Adelphi and I had a number in the last act called Don't Play the Fool with a Schoolgirl. It used to stop the show.

CORA So far as I can remember it was the notices that stopped the show.

The sound of a motorcycle horn is heard off.

(*she moves and sits right of the card table*) Here's Perry. He's earlier than usual. (*She lays out the patience cards for a game*)

BONITA (*immediately opening her bag and taking out her compact*) Bless his heart. (*She touches up her face*)

MAUD (*crossing to the french windows*) Don't trouble to do that, dear – it's locking the stable door... (*She looks off right*)

BONITA All right, all right, I know – it's just habit.

ALMINA He'll tell us whether we're going to get the solarium lounge.

CORA Oh, no, he won't. He'll just say that the committee has it under consideration.

MAUD *moves and stands up centre by the piano.*

BONITA (*replacing the compact in her bag*) In any case we shall know by his tone whether there's any hope.

CORA I don't know why you're all working yourselves up about that damned solarium. It'll be waste of money even if we do get it. Just so much more glass for the rain to beat against.

BONITA That's right, dear – keep us all in hysterics.

PERRY LASCOE *enters briskly from the hall. He is a nice-looking young man somewhere between thirty-eight and forty. He is wearing a sports coat, grey flannel trousers, a highly-coloured pullover and driving gloves. He carries a crash helmet and goggles. Some years ago he had a certain success as a musical comedy juvenile but realising, wisely, that although he could sing and dance adequately he had little hope of becoming a star, he renounced the shadow for the substance and took on the job of being secretary to The Wings Fund. Most of the inmates adore him because he jokes with them and jollies them along and is fundamentally kind.*

PERRY (*standing above the card table*) Hullo, everybody.

LADIES (*ad lib*) Hullo, Perry.

PERRY My dears, I'm in trouble.

MAUD (*moving to left of PERRY*) What sort of trouble?

PERRY I knocked over a milk cart in Maidenhead. Fortunately they were mostly empties. The milkman was livid. (*He looks around*) Where's old May? (*He puts his helmet and goggles on the chair above the card table*)

BONITA Upstairs.

PERRY Good.

BONITA Not so good. She knows.

PERRY (*removing his gloves and putting them with his helmet*)
Oh, Lord! Who told her?

MAUD We all did – we had to.

PERRY Well, maybe it's all for the best.

BONITA It isn't. She's hopping mad.

PERRY Oh, poor Lotta. She's got enough to put up with without this.

CORA When's she arriving?

PERRY Any minute now. (*He crosses to right of ESTELLE*) Billy Musgrove lent her his car and Dora's bringing her down with all her bits and pieces. (*He kisses ESTELLE*)

MAUD Have you seen her?

PERRY Yes – last week. I went along to her flat and had tea with her and made all the final arrangements.

BONITA How did she look?

PERRY Sort of miserable, but she tried not to show it.

MAUD moves to the downstage end of the sofa and sits.

I don't think she minds about the flat so much, it's Dora leaving her that's really got her down. (*He crosses to ALMINA and kisses her*) Where's the colonel?

CORA In her office, deciding whether we're going to have shepherd's pie or macaroni cheese for supper, I expect.

ALMINA We had macaroni cheese last night and it nearly killed me.

SYLVIA ARCHIBALD, known as MISS ARCHIE, enters from her office up left. She is the resident superintendent of The Wings. She is a woman of about fifty. Her gruff and rather masculine manner conceals a vulnerable heart and an amiable disposition. She is fairly popular with the inmates although at moments she is a trifle overbearing. Her build is on the bulky side, which does not prevent her from wearing corduroy trousers and rather tight woollen sweaters. She worked diligently for ENSA during World War Two and retired at the end of

it with the rank of colonel. This, incidentally, is her greatest pride.

MISS ARCHIE (*crossing to left of the coffee table*) There you are, Perry.

PERRY Hullo, ducks.

MISS ARCHIE I thought I heard the old bike.

PERRY The old bike's older than ever since the last half hour. She grazed her knees against a milk cart.

MISS ARCHIE (*whistling*) Good Lord! That means ten days confined to barracks for you, my lad. (*She collects the newspapers from the coffee table*)

PERRY I love to hear you talk like that, Archie. It reminds me of my Uncle Edgar.

MISS ARCHIE Never mind about your Uncle Edgar now, Perry. What time is Lotta Bainbridge arriving?

PERRY Any moment now. (*He sits on the fire stool*) She's coming down in Billy Musgrove's car.

MISS ARCHIE Nobody ever tells me anything. (*She puts the newspapers on the piano*) Has Osgood been yet?

BONITA No. He's late.

PERRY How *is* poor old Martha?

MISS ARCHIE She was a bit under the weather on Friday and yesterday, but she always perks up on Sundays. (*She crosses to the card table, picks up the ashtray and empties it in the wastepaper basket below the desk*)

ESTELLE Old Osgood must be seventy if he's a day.

MAUD Were they ever lovers, do you think? I mean, in the old days.

MISS ARCHIE *closes the door of the television room, then replaces the ashtray on the card table.*

PERRY (*laughing*) Good heavens, no! He's twenty-five years younger than she is, to start with. No, no, it's just star-worship, a sort of obsession. He used to wait outside stage doors for her when she was in her heyday and he was only a young boy. Rain or shine there he'd be with his bunch of violets.

MAUD He still brings her violets.

PERRY I know. It really is rather sweet, isn't it?

CORA I was in the last play she ever did. We all loathed her.

The front doorbell rings.

MISS ARCHIE There he is now, I expect. I'll answer her. Doreen's gone to the village.

MISS ARCHIE exits in the hall to right.

PERRY Is Doreen working out all right?

CORA She has adenoids and no time sense—

The front door is heard to slam.

—but she's better than that awful Gladys.

PERRY I rather liked Gladys, she was like a bad character performance in Act Three.

MISS ARCHIE enters from the hall.

OSGOOD MEEKER *follows her on. He is an elderly, bald-headed man, nattily dressed and rather dim. He carries a bunch of violets.*

PERRY *rises.*

OSGOOD (*moving behind the sofa; with a courtly manner*) Good afternoon, ladies.

MISS ARCHIE stands at the foot of the stairs.

BONITA Hullo, Osgood. How are you?

OSGOOD Fine, thank you, my dear. A little twinge every now and then, you know, but apart from that, fit as a fiddle.

MISS ARCHIE (*going on to the landing*) I'll take you up.

OSGOOD (*following MISS ARCHIE on to the landing*) No, please don't trouble, Miss Archie. I know the way. She is expecting me, isn't she?

PERRY *resumes his seat.*

MISS ARCHIE Yes, Mr Meeker – she's always expecting you.

OSGOOD Has she been – er – happier this last week?

MISS ARCHIE Oh, yes. She was a little low on Friday and yesterday, but nothing to worry about.

OSGOOD (*crossing to left of MISS ARCHIE on the landing*) I'll go on up, then.

MISS ARCHIE I'll have a cup of tea for you when you come down.

OSGOOD Thank you, my dear, thank you. That will be delightful.

OSGOOD *exits on the landing.*

MAUD Do you think she recognises him?

MISS ARCHIE Oh, yes. He's never caught her on one of her bad days. She gets quite gay with him sometimes and tells him risky stories about the past – her memory's fantastic, at least for things that happened a long while ago.

PERRY That's quite usual, isn't it? I mean when people get old they can recall, say, Queen Victoria's Jubilee, and not be able to remember what happened last week.

CORA Nothing did.

ESTELLE One thing I can remember and that is that we wrote a round robin to the committee two weeks ago about having a solarium lounge so that we could enjoy the sun without being frozen to death. (*To PERRY*) Did they read it?

PERRY Yes. It came up at Friday's meeting.

BONITA What did they say?

PERRY They said they'd consider it.

CORA There now – what did I tell you!

MISS ARCHIE *comes down the stairs and stands right of ESTELLE.*

ESTELLE Is there any hope, do you think?

PERRY *(rising and kneeling beside ESTELLE)* Of course there is. We must always look on the bright side.

CORA *(rising and moving behind the sofa)* None of that bedside manner stuff, Perry. You don't think they're going to let us have it, do you?

PERRY *(rising)* I tell you they said they'd consider it – I really don't know.

BONITA You could tell from the way they discussed it which way the wind was blowing, couldn't you?

CORA Didn't anyone even suggest sending for an estimate?

PERRY *(unhappily)* I gave them an estimate – with the letter.

CORA How do you mean?

PERRY Hodges and Creal did it for me.

MISS ARCHIE *moves to the french windows and looks out.*

Miss Archie and I measured the whole terrace last Sunday evening, after you'd all gone to bed.

BONITA I thought I heard someone scuffling about under my window. I thought it was burglars.

CORA No burglar'd be fool enough to prowl round this house.

MISS ARCHIE *(turning and moving centre)* How much was the estimate? How much did Hodges and Creal say it would cost?

PERRY Two thousand five hundred.

BONITA God Almighty, what are they planning to build it of
– uranium?

MISS ARCHIE It's the frontage, I expect. It's a very wide frontage,
and glass costs an awful lot.

BONITA Were any of the committee in favour of it?

PERRY (*flatly*) One or two, but not the majority.

CORA Do you mean to say the Fund couldn't afford it – even
after poor Maurice's legacy?

PERRY That's already been invested.

CORA What did Boodie Nethersole say?

PERRY She was not in favour of it.

CORA Oh, she wasn't, wasn't she?

MISS ARCHIE (*warningly*) Look here, Perry my lad, you know
you're not supposed to discuss the committee.

BONITA (*irritably*) Oh, go and form fours for a minute, dear—

MISS ARCHIE *moves to the french windows.*

—this is important to all of us.

CORA Boodie Nethersole indeed! I'd like to strangle her.

BONITA So would I if I could find her neck.

MISS ARCHIE I say – steady.

CORA (*moving to the chair right of the card table*) She has
no right to be on the committee, anyhow; she can't act
her way out of a paper bag and never could. (*She sits and
plays patience*)

PERRY She's had four whacking successes in the last five years.

BONITA What did she say exactly?

PERRY *moves behind* **ESTELLE.**

PERRY *(after a pause)* I really can't say any more. She was just a bit more bossy about it than the others.

BONITA You mean she swung them round against the idea?

PERRY Yes – I suppose so.

ESTELLE Perhaps it was too much to ask. The home is very comfortable on the whole, but it would have been nice to enjoy the sun when it comes out without having to face that awful east wind.

PERRY *puts his arms around ESTELLE, over the back of the chair.*

PERRY I promise I'll bring it up again at the next meeting, when there aren't quite so many of them there.

ESTELLE *(rising and moving to left of the coffee table)* I feel it's all my fault really for having suggested it in the first place. Now you're all disappointed and I'm to blame. *(She picks up her bag, near to tears)*

BONITA Cheer up, dear – it doesn't matter all that much.

ESTELLE *(moving to the stairs)* I was so looking forward to it – we all were – it would have been so lovely. *(She weeps and turns to go up the stairs)*

PERRY *moves quickly to left of the banisters and leans over them to ESTELLE.*

PERRY Don't cry, my old duck egg – I'll swing it somehow, you see if I don't. I'll get another estimate from another firm, one that isn't quite so posh as Hodges and Creal, and we'll knock a bit off here and bit off there and I'll get the committee to agree if it's the last thing I do.

ESTELLE, *weeping, goes up the stairs and exits on the landing.*

BONITA *rises and throws her book on to the coffee table.*

BONITA (*crossing to the fireplace*) That Boodie Nethersole! I'll have a few words to say to her the next time she comes bouncing down here in her bloody Bentley.

CORA (*rising and crossing to centre*) Oh, for Heaven's sake let's change the subject. As Bonita said, it doesn't matter all that much anyhow. A little while ago we'd none of us even heard of a solarium – we've all got one foot in the grave, anyway.

BONITA Excuse me while I slip into my shroud.

The front doorbell rings.

PERRY That'll be Lotta Bainbridge, I expect.

MISS ARCHIE (*crossing to the card table*) Be a good chap, Perry, and yell for Ted to take up the bags—he's in the kitchen.

MAUD *risers and tidies the sofa cushions.*

PERRY Right.

PERRY *exits to the kitchen.*

MISS ARCHIE (*briskly*) I'll go to the door. (*She moves to the hall*) I hate welcoming new arrivals, they always look sort of lost.

MISS ARCHIE *exits right in the hall. MAUD goes to the card table, packs up the cards, puts them in the desk, then stands down right. ALMINA rises and tidies herself.*

CORA It's nothing to the way they look after they've been here a few months.

BONITA Why do you say that, Cora, you know you don't really mean it.

CORA Perhaps I was trying to be funny.

MISS ARCHIE (*offstage*) Come along – this way, Miss Bainbridge.

MISS ARCHIE *enters from the hall and stands by the door right.*

LOTTA BAINBRIDGE and **DORA**, her maid, follow **MISS ARCHIE** on. **LOTTA** is a well-preserved woman in her early seventies. Her hair, which was once blonde, is now ash-coloured. She wears a small hat and a dust coat over a plain but well-cut dress. She is well made-up and calmly cheerful. She stands at the foot of the stairs. **DORA**, who is carrying a suitcase, stands in the hall. She is in her forties and is fat and morose. She has obviously been crying.

LOTTA (*with a smile*) Well, this is all very exciting – rather like going to a new school— (*She sees CORA*) Except of course that at a new school one doesn't meet old friends. (*She crosses to centre*) Cora!

CORA meets **LOTTA** centre. **MISS ARCHIE** moves to **MAUD** and sends her to greet **LOTTA**.

I haven't seen you for years. (*She kisses CORA*)

CORA No. (*She stands above the chair left centre*)

MAUD (*crossing to right of LOTTA*) How do you do, Miss Bainbridge?

LOTTA Miss Melrose? (*She shakes hands with MAUD*)

MAUD Yes.

DORA comes in from the hall and puts the case down by the door right.

LOTTA We're not exactly old friends but I have admired you so often – I remember you years ago singing a most enchanting song dressed as a schoolgirl – I've forgotten the name of the play...

MAUD It was Miss Mouse at the Adelphi.

LOTTA Miss Mouse – of course it was.

MAUD moves down right.

(she crosses to BONITA) You're Bonita Belgrave, aren't you? I'd recognise you anywhere. I knew you were here because we have a great friend in common – Lucas Bradshaw.

BONITA Luke Bradshaw! I didn't know he was still alive. How is the old soak?

LOTTA Still soaking, I'm afraid, but only every now and then. He comes to see me sometimes in his more lucid moments and we reminisce about the good old days.

CORA A lot of that goes on here.

LOTTA Between ourselves, you know, I'm really getting a bit tired of the good old days – but I suppose it is fun, once in a while, to wander back for a little.

MISS ARCHIE *(crossing below the sofa)* You know Almina Clare.

LOTTA Of course I do.

ALMINA *moves to* **LOTTA**.

Almina! *(She kisses her)*

PERRY *enters from the kitchen and greets DORA, who is on the verge of tears.*

You really are very naughty to have put on so much weight. You used to be thin as a rail.

ALMINA I like eating and there's no need to diet any more.

LOTTA No, I suppose there isn't really.

PERRY *(crossing to right of LOTTA)* Welcome to St Trinians, Miss Bainbridge.

ALMINA *moves to the easy chair down left and sits.*

LOTTA Why, Mr Lascoe. *(She shakes hands with PERRY)* I had no idea you would be here to greet me – how very nice. *(She crosses to the foot of the stairs and looks at the bust)* I remember that bust of Hilary. He was sitting for it when we were playing in Brief Candles. *(She moves to DORA and*

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