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SF PERUSALS

LORD ARTHUR SAVILE'S CRIME

A Comedy in Three Acts

by Constance Cox

SAMUEL FRENCH

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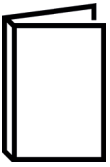
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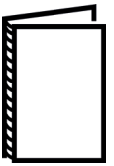
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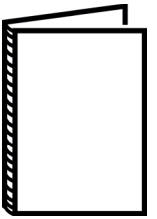
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LORD ARTHUR SAVILE'S CRIME

Produced at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 7th October 1952, with the following list of characters:

(*in the order of their appearance*)

BAINES
LORD ARTHUR SAVILE
SYBIL MERTON
THE DEAN OF PADDINGTON
LADY WINDERMERE
LADY CLEMENTINA BEAUCHAMP
LADY JULIA MERTON
MR PODGERS
NELLIE
HERR WINKELKOPF

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in the drawing room of Lord Arthur's house in Grosvenor Square, London

ACT I

Evening

ACT II

Scene One — The following morning
Scene Two — Morning, three days later

ACT III

Scene One — Early evening, several days later
Scene Two — The following morning

Time — the 1890s

CHARACTER

BAINES, the butler
LORD ARTHUR SAVILE
SYBIL MERTON, his fiancée
THE DEAN OF PADDINGTON, his uncle
LADY WINDERMERE, his aunt
LADY CLEMENTINA BEAUCHAMP, his great-aunt
LADY JULIA MERTON, Sybil's mother
MR PODGERS, a cheiromantist
NELLIE, the maid
HERR WINKELKOPF, an anarchist

ACT I

Scene—the drawing-room of **LORD ARTHUR SAVILE***'s house in Grosvenor Square, London. An evening in the 1890s.*

There are double doors in the back wall, another door up right and a window centre of the wall left. The fireplace is right. The room is elegantly furnished and curtained. A sofa stands left centre with a small table behind it. An armchair stands down left. There is an occasional table, left of the double doors, on which there are several pieces of silver plate, including an epergne containing roses. Right of the double doors is a sideboard on which stand glasses and more silverware. On it is also a card stand containing **LORD ARTHUR***'s visiting cards. There is an armchair right centre, with a small table right of it. An upright chair stands down right. An old fashioned telephone is fixed to the wall right of the double doors. A small bookcase stands above the fireplace. A bell rope hangs above the fireplace. There is an elegant clock on the mantelpiece, with a vase of flowers at each end. The empty grate is masked by a beautifully arranged bowl of flowers. Pictures of the period, in gilt frames, hang on the walls, and a mirror hangs over the mantelpiece.*

When the curtain rises, the room is empty. The door up right is open, and someone off right can be heard playing on a piano, the music of ***"THE WEDDING MARCH"****.* **BAINES**, **LORD ARTHUR***'s faithful butler, enters up centre. He is aged about fifty. He carries a buttonhole on a salver. He moves centre, pauses, listens to the music, then gloomily shakes his head, pulls out his handkerchief and loudly blows his nose. The playing*

ceases. **LORD ARTHUR SAVILE** *enters up right. He is young and pleasant but not overburdened with brains. He is always beautifully dressed, and at the moment is wearing evening dress.*

ARTHUR *(crossing to right of* **BAINES***)* Well, did you like my playing, Baines?

BAINES The manner and the execution were beyond praise, my lord, as with everything your lordship does.

ARTHUR *(pleased)* Thank you, Baines. *(He takes the buttonhole and crosses to the fireplace)*

BAINES But I regret I do not care for the piece, my lord.

ARTHUR *(turning)* But it was *The Wedding March!*

BAINES *(moving slightly down centre)* I recognised it, my lord. It is a piece with which most men are regrettably familiar.

ARTHUR And I thought you said I played it well.

BAINES If one may allow for a certain *joie de vivre* not generally associated with the marriage service, my lord.

ARTHUR *looks in the mirror over the mantelpiece and puts the buttonhole in his lapel.*

ARTHUR Well, dash it all, I'm happy. You haven't by any chance forgotten I'm being married next week?

BAINES *(gloomily)* No, my lord, the fact had not escaped my memory. *(He moves up centre and turns)* Will that be all, my lord?

ARTHUR *(turning)* No, it won't. *(He moves right centre)* Now, look here, Baines, I want to know why you're taking up this attitude about my marriage. Miss Merton is beautiful, sweet, gifted...

BAINES I own it, my lord.

ARTHUR *(crossing to the sofa)* She is rich, but so am I, so that is of no importance. But what is – she loves me to distraction.

BAINES *(moving centre, level with the sofa; with emotion)* Who could not help it, my lord?

ARTHUR *(sitting on the sofa, at the right end; pleased)* Oh, that's very nice of you, Baines.

BAINES Not at all, my lord. From a small boy you have always been accounted irresistible.

ARTHUR Yes, now that you mention it, I have, haven't I? Do you remember when I used to figure as a page in almost every fashionable wedding?

BAINES I do indeed, my lord. Whether in small white satin breeches or an abbreviated kilt, your lordship was always the cynosure of all eyes.

ARTHUR Yes, I was, wasn't I? *(He recollects himself)* But look here, we weren't talking about me, we were talking about Miss Merton. I want to know what it is you have against her, Baines.

BAINES Heaven forbid, my lord, that I should presume to have anything against so lovely and charming a lady, but... *(He pauses)*

ARTHUR Well?

BAINES It is only that I cannot bear to think of your lordship – so young – so happy – treading that undiscovered bourne from which no traveller returns.

ARTHUR *(puzzled)* Undiscovered what?

BAINES "Bourne", my lord. A quotation from a play called Hamlet. *(He moves to the armchair right centre and smoothes the cushion)*

ARTHUR *(irritably)* I wish you wouldn't be so dashed literary, Baines. It's so depressing. *(He rises)*

BAINES *(humbly)* It *is* a fault, my lord. I own it.

ARTHUR To hear you talk, anyone would think I shan't feel just as young and happy after I'm married as I do now.

BAINES *(gloomily)* One can only hope, my lord.

ARTHUR Anyway, nothing you can say is going to alter my mind. Now, is everything ready for tonight? *(He moves behind the sofa)*

BAINES A cold collation has been laid in the dining room. A small gathering, I think your lordship said? *(He moves centre)*

ARTHUR That's right. Just a few of my relations and Miss Merton's mother to discuss the final arrangements for the wedding.

A knock is heard from the front door.

Ah, that may be them, now. *(He moves down left)* If so, show them in here, Baines.

BAINES Very good, my lord.

BAINES *exits up centre.* **ARTHUR**, *humming* ***"THE WEDDING MARCH"*** *crosses to the fireplace and examines himself in the mirror.*

BAINES *re-enters and stands right of the doorway.*

(he announces) Miss Sybil Merton.

ARTHUR *turns in surprise.*

SYBIL MERTON, **ARTHUR***'s fiancée, enters up centre. She is young, lovely and charming. She wears evening dress.*

BAINES *exits up centre.*

ARTHUR Sybil! *(He crosses to right centre)* Why, Sybil darling, what a lovely surprise.

SYBIL *moves to left of* **ARTHUR.**

I thought you weren't coming tonight.

SYBIL I wasn't, Arthur, but something happened, and I simply *had* to see you.

ARTHUR *(holding her hands)* I'm so glad.

SYBIL I know you'll think it disgraceful of me to come here unchaperoned...

ARTHUR No, I don't. I like it. I hardly ever see you alone. *(He attempts to kiss her)*

SYBIL No, Arthur, you mustn't kiss me. *(She moves to the sofa)* We're not married yet.

ARTHUR *(following her; persuasively)* We kissed in the conservatory last night.

SYBIL Yes, I know, but that was different. It was dark, and I couldn't see what you were going to do. If you tried to kiss me now, I could stop you.

ARTHUR And would you? *(He moves close to her)* Would you, Sybil?

SYBIL *(looking away)* I'm not very strong.

ARTHUR *(taking her in his arms)* I hate strong women.

They kiss.

Oh, Sybil, just think. Next week it will be like this all the time.

SYBIL *moves away down left.*

What's the matter, darling?

SYBIL *(turning)* Arthur, that's what I've come to tell you. Prepare yourself for a shock, my love. We – may never be married.

ARTHUR Sybil, what are you saying? It's all arranged.

SYBIL Yes, I know.

ARTHUR *(moving to her)* You – you haven't changed your mind, have you? You do still love me?

SYBIL Yes, of course I do – with all my heart. *I* want to go on with it, but it's Mother. *(She crosses below* **ARTHUR** *to right of the sofa)*

ARTHUR Lady Julia? But she's given her consent.

SYBIL Yes, I know, but that was before she... Oh, Arthur, I hardly know how to tell you.

ARTHUR *(moving to her)* Sit down, darling. You're upset.

SYBIL *sits on the sofa, at the right end.*

(he sits left of **SYBIL** *on the sofa)* Now, tell me what it's all about.

SYBIL Arthur, have you ever heard of a man named Podgers?

ARTHUR No, I don't think so. Who is he?

SYBIL He's a cheiromantist.

ARTHUR *(after a pause)* Do you mean a chiropodist, darling?

SYBIL No, dear – cheiromantist. Palmist.

ARTHUR Oh, a sort of fortune teller, I suppose?

SYBIL Y-yes, in a way.

ARTHUR Well, what about him?

SYBIL Well, you see, Arthur, Mr Podgers isn't an ordinary fortune teller at all. In fact, he's the greatest cheiromantist in the world. With one glance at your hand he can tell you everything you've ever done in the past, and everything you're going to do in the future.

ARTHUR Can he, by Jove? I wish I'd met him before the St Leger.

SYBIL No, Arthur, not silly things like that. He's much more serious. He looks at your hand for crimes and – misdemeanours.

ARTHUR Can he see those, too?

SYBIL Oh, yes. Every disreputable thing everybody has ever done is recorded in the palm of their hand, and Mr Podgers can see it at once – no matter how well they may have concealed it from other people.

ARTHUR The man sounds a positive menace.

SYBIL Oh, no, Arthur, he's a benefactor, really. He's only been in London a month, and he's caused nine divorces and six separations already. So now of course, everyone in London is flocking to consult him.

ARTHUR I'm dashed if I can see why.

SYBIL Oh, it's quite understandable, darling. Previously, if a wife suspected that her husband was – well, not giving her his undivided attention, there was nothing she could do about it. Now, all she has to do is take him to have his hand read by Mr Podgers.

ARTHUR From the results you've mentioned, it seems to be disastrous.

SYBIL Only because there was something to find out, dear. If people had never done anything wrong, then Mr Podgers couldn't say anything against them, could he? I mean, he couldn't find out anything about *you,* for instance.

ARTHUR Me? No – no, of course not.

SYBIL Oh, Arthur, I'm so glad you said that. I was hoping you would, because now you won't mind what mamma has done.

ARTHUR Done?

SYBIL You see, dear, she's naturally very anxious that I shall be happy in my married life, and when she heard all about these divorces and separations she became more worried still. So when everybody told her how good Mr Podgers was at finding out about people's pasts and futures, she went to him at once, and... *(She breaks off)*

ARTHUR Well?

SYBIL *(in a small voice)* She's bringing him here tonight to read your hand.

ARTHUR *(jumping to his feet) Mine?*

SYBIL *(rising)* You don't mind, do you, dear?

ARTHUR But why does she want him to read *my* hand?

SYBIL To find out all about you, of course, before we're married.

ARTHUR But she *knows* all about me!

SYBIL *(crossing to right centre)* Well – she only knows what you've *told* her, Arthur, and she says young men in love don't always tell the truth about their pasts.

ARTHUR Does she think I've been concealing something?

SYBIL No, not exactly, but she'd like to make sure.

ARTHUR *(moving down left)* Well, really!

SYBIL I don't see why you should object, Arthur. If you've always told us the truth, then Mr Podgers won't be able to find out anything about you we don't already know. *(She crosses to him)* You *have* always told us the truth, haven't you?

ARTHUR *(nervously)* Y-yes, of course I have.

SYBIL Well, then, we've nothing to worry about.

ARTHUR That's not the point, Sybil. It's – it's the principle of the thing. I feel very hurt at being suspected like this. *(He crosses below* **SYBIL** *to centre)* Besides, I don't want my hand read.

SYBIL Oh, Arthur, why not?

ARTHUR I'd – I'd rather not, that's all.

SYBIL Arthur – are you afraid?

ARTHUR Certainly not. *(He moves up centre)* I've nothing to be afraid of. I – I simply don't approve of that sort of thing.

SYBIL *(moving below the sofa)* Oh, Arthur, you *are!*

ARTHUR I'm not, Sybil. Really I'm not.

SYBIL *(sitting on the sofa)* There's something you haven't told us. *(She weeps)*

ARTHUR There isn't, darling. *(He sits right of* **SYBIL** *on the sofa)* Really, there isn't.

SYBIL *(sobbing)* Yes, there is. If there weren't you wouldn't mind having your hand read.

ARTHUR I tell you there's nothing, Sybil – at least, there's nothing I can remember.

SYBIL *(wailing)* Oh!

ARTHUR Darling, you must realise I'm nearly thirty. I can't be expected to remember all my past life in a flash. There may be something I've overlooked.

SYBIL But if you refuse, Mother will break off the engagement.

ARTHUR Oh, no!

SYBIL She will, Arthur. That's why I came to tell you. She said if you refused she'd know at once you had a guilty conscience.

ARTHUR But I haven't a guilty conscience. I'm only afraid there may have been something I've forgotten.

SYBIL Couldn't we make sure?

ARTHUR How?

SYBIL Isn't there somebody we could ask about you?

ARTHUR There's only Baines.

SYBIL Would he know?

ARTHUR He might. He's been with me for years and years.

SYBIL Then do ring for him, Arthur, just to make certain.

ARTHUR *rises, crosses to the fireplace, pulls the bell rope, then crosses and sits on the sofa.*

I hate to seem so suspicious, darling, but I'm so afraid Mr Podgers may see something that would separate us, and I love you so much.

ARTHUR I love you, too, Sybil, and nothing is going to separate us.

BAINES *enters up centre.*

BAINES You rang, my lord?

ARTHUR Yes, Baines, come in and shut the door.

BAINES *closes the door.*

Baines, you know I'm expecting company tonight?

BAINES *(moving down centre)* Your lordship has already informed me. Your lordship's aunts – Lady Windermere and Lady Beauchamp. Your lordship's uncle – the Dean of Paddington, and— *(With an inclination towards* **SYBIL***)* Lady Julia Merton.

ARTHUR Yes, but now there's going to be somebody else. Have you ever heard of a man named Podgers?

BAINES The name is not on your visiting list, my lord.

ARTHUR *(irritably)* No, of course it isn't. He's a palmist.

SYBIL Cheiromantist.

ARTHUR Yes, that's it. Cheiromantist.

BAINES *(thoughtfully)* Cheiromantist. *(Suddenly)* Not *the* Podgers, my lord?

ARTHUR I suppose so. Then you have heard of him?

BAINES But naturally, my lord. The man is famous.

ARTHUR *(gloomily)* Oh, is he?

BAINES Hardly a week passes, my lord, without some evidence of his extraordinary powers of divination into the past, the present and the future.

SYBIL There, you see, Arthur.

BAINES Only the other day he discovered that a certain noble peer had contracted an unfortunate marriage in his extreme youth which he regretted in his maturity.

ARTHUR Well, what of it? There's nothing wrong in that.

BAINES Nothing at all, my lord, except that the noble peer in question omitted to discard his former wife before acquiring

his present one. I understand the case is to be heard at the next sessions.

ARTHUR You think he's infallible?

BAINES Without question, my lord. A wonderful man indeed. A wonderful man.

ARTHUR *(rising)* Well, you needn't look so pleased about it. He's coming here tonight.

BAINES Here, my lord?

ARTHUR *(moving down left)* That's what I said.

BAINES *(drawing himself up proudly)* I have nothing to fear, my lord.

ARTHUR I don't care about *you.* It's not your hand he's going to read. *(He moves up left)* It's mine.

BAINES *(startled)* Yours, my lord?

ARTHUR *(moving behind the sofa)* Lady Julia is bringing him with her. She wants to find out before it's too late if I shall be a suitable husband for Miss Merton.

BAINES I see, my lord.

SYBIL I couldn't help it, Arthur. She'd arranged it all before I knew.

ARTHUR It's not your fault, Sybil, I know.

SYBIL And if your conscience is clear, we have nothing to worry about.

ARTHUR Yes, but that's just the point. Is it? *(He moves to left of* **BAINES***)* Baines!

BAINES My lord?

ARTHUR *(leading* **BAINES** *down centre)* You may be able to help us, Baines. You've served me a very long time.

BAINES Man and boy, my lord, for twenty years. Ever since that terrible day in the gun room, when your lordship's

father inadvertently removed himself by cleaning a loaded sixteen-bore sporting gun.

SYBIL Oh, how dreadful!

BAINES *(crossing to* **SYBIL***)* It was indeed, miss. The gun room required complete redecoration. The mishap occurred after his lordship had returned home from duck shooting. His late lordship was excessively fond of the sport, although he could never hit anything, owing to an unfortunate obliquity of vision caused by his being a diplomat in the foreign service during his early years. I am told it was a pretty sight to see the ducks playing without fear around him.

ARTHUR *(impatiently)* Never mind your reminiscences, Baines, we're wasting time. They'll be here soon.

BAINES I beg your pardon, my lord, I was carried away. *(He moves to left of* **ARTHUR***)* You suggested I might be of service, my lord.

ARTHUR Yes. Now, in order to meet this crisis which may presently be upon us, I'd like to know if you can recall any reprehensible actions I may have committed during the last twenty years, and which might confound me when this redoubtable Mr Podgers arrives.

BAINES You wish to know now, my lord?

ARTHUR *(annoyed)* Yes, of course I do. *(He moves down right)* I've only got about ten minutes.

BAINES I will consider, my lord. *(He considers deeply and wanders up centre)*

ARTHUR *and* **SYBIL** *wait anxiously.*

ARTHUR Come on! I haven't been as dastardly as all that.

BAINES *(with slight reproach)* I confess I cannot recall anything which might be termed a misdeed, my lord. *(He moves centre)*

SYBIL *(joyfully)* Nothing at all?

BAINES No, miss. A few peccadilloes, that is all.

ARTHUR *(moving above the table right centre)* Podgers doesn't count peccadilloes?

BAINES Oh, no, my lord. Forgery, larceny, burglary and bigamy are the things he unhesitatingly exposes.

ARTHUR Well, I can confidently say I've never committed any of those. *(He moves to right of* **BAINES**. *Anxiously)* Er – you don't think...? *(To* **SYBIL***)* Excuse me, darling. *(He whispers to* **BAINES***)* Could he?

BAINES Oh, no, my lord. There would be insufficient space on the hand for those.

ARTHUR *(looking cheerfully at his hand)* Yes, there isn't much room, is there? *(He crosses to* **SYBIL***)* Well, darling, it seems to be all right. My past, Baines can vouch for, my present is an open book, and my future is in your hands.

SYBIL *(rising)* Oh, Arthur, I'm so glad. I felt sure we had nothing to worry about. I always knew you were thoroughly noble.

ARTHUR Darling!

SYBIL *(to* **BAINES***)* When I came in just now, completely unchaperoned, he only kissed me once. Wasn't that honourable?

BAINES *(moving down right centre)* It was indeed, miss, though some might say it implied a want of initiative.

A knock is heard from the front door.

SYBIL Arthur, they're here. And I'm caught.

ARTHUR Wait in the morning room, darling. Then when Baines has shown them in, you can slip out.

BAINES *exits up centre.* **ARTHUR** *and* **SYBIL** *cross to right centre.*

SYBIL You may kiss me again, if you like.

They kiss.

Oh, Arthur, were you as heavenly when you were little as you are now?

ARTHUR Oh, I was sweet!

SYBIL I must go. *(She moves to the door up right and turns)* Don't let them frighten you.

SYBIL *blows* **ARTHUR** *a kiss and exits up right.* **ARTHUR** *moves to the fireplace,*

BAINES *enters up centre and stands right of the doorway.*

BAINES *(announcing)* The Dean of Paddington.

The **DEAN OF PADDINGTON**, **ARTHUR***'s uncle, enters up centre. He is a spry old gentleman, of some absence of mind.*

BAINES *exits up centre.*

ARTHUR *(moving up centre)* Good evening, Uncle. *(He shakes hands with the* **DEAN***)* I'm delighted to see you.

DEAN How are you, Arthur my boy? Upon my word, you're looking well. Did you have a good honeymoon?

They move down centre together.

ARTHUR I'm not married yet, Uncle.

DEAN You're not? Are you quite sure?

ARTHUR Quite sure, Uncle.

DEAN That's an extraordinary thing! I felt sure I married you last month – I mean – I performed the ceremony. *(He moves below the sofa)*

ARTHUR Perhaps it was Lord Goring, Uncle.

DEAN Goring? Yes, that's it. Goring, of course. Feller with a blank sort of face and no brains. That's what made me think of you. *(He sits on the sofa)* Well, my boy, and when is the happy day?

ARTHUR Next Thursday, Uncle, and would you mind seeing if you've made a note of the date? It would be rather awkward if you weren't there. *(He sits in the armchair right centre)*

DEAN Don't you believe it, my boy. There are plenty of husbands who'd be only too grateful if the clergyman hadn't turned up on their wedding day. Still, I don't suppose you feel like that, do you? *(He takes out a diary)*

ARTHUR Not at the moment.

DEAN *(consulting his diary)* Ah, yes, here we are. Safe and sound. Thursday, the twenty-fourth, marrying Arthur between Lord Jedburgh and Lady Stoke.

ARTHUR I'd rather be married singly, if you don't mind, Uncle.

DEAN Oh, you needn't worry, my boy. They won't interfere with you. They're being buried.

ARTHUR *(rising)* Buried!

DEAN Yes. Old Jedburgh is being sent home pickled from India. It'll cause quite a stir. You ought to feel yourself honoured.

ARTHUR Well, I hope you won't think me eccentric, Uncle, but I did rather want my marriage to be a cheerful occasion.

DEAN My dear Arthur, there's nothing cheerful about marriage. The sooner you learn that, the better. As a matter of fact, I always recommend a funeral before a wedding. It puts all the parties in a proper frame of mind. *(He takes out his watch)* Is nobody else coming? *(He rises, crosses to the fireplace and compares his watch with the clock)*

ARTHUR Auntie Clem and Aunt Margaret. They seem to be a little late. *(He crosses to the window and looks out)*

A knock is heard from the front door.

DEAN Thought I'd be the last. Spent half an hour at Frolland's looking at a beautiful little eighteenth-century clock they have there. Perfect period specimen.

ARTHUR *(moving left centre)* Still adding to your collection, Uncle?

DEAN 'Fraid so, my boy. Not likely to stop until I die.

BAINES *enters up centre and stands right of the doorway.*

BAINES *(announcing)* Lady Windermere, Lady Clementina Beauchamp.

LADY WINDERMERE *and* **LADY CLEMENTINA BEAUCHAMP** *enter up centre.* **LADY WINDERMERE** *is a beautiful woman in her forties.* **LADY CLEMENTINA** *is a delightful woman of about sixty. Both are in evening gowns.*

BAINES *exits up centre.*

LADY WINDERMERE *(moving to right of* **ARTHUR***)* Arthur, my dear, you look uncommonly well for a man about to be married.

ARTHUR *kisses* **LADY WINDERMERE.**

ARTHUR So I've been told, Aunt Margaret.

LADY WINDERMERE *crosses to the* **DEAN.** **LADY CLEMENTINA** *moves to* **ARTHUR.**

Auntie Clem, how good of you to come. *(He kisses her)*

LADY WINDERMERE *(to the* **DEAN***)* Ah, Robert! *(She sits on the chair down right)*

The **DEAN** *stands above* **LADY WINDERMERE** *and they talk together.*

LADY CLEMENTINA *(to* **ARTHUR***)* Nobody but you could have brought me out so late, dear boy. I'm an old woman, now.

ARTHUR *(leading* **LADY CLEMENTINA** *to the sofa)* You look as young and beautiful as ever.

LADY CLEMENTINA *sits on the sofa, at the right end of it.* **ARTHUR** *sits on the right arm of the sofa.*

LADY CLEMENTINA Nonsense! I'm a poor rheumatic creature with a false front and a bad temper. If it weren't for dear Margaret who sends me all the worst French novels she can find, I don't think I could get through the day.

ARTHUR Auntie, you mustn't talk like that just when I'm about to be married.

LADY CLEMENTINA I shall wait and see you made happy, dear boy, then I shall die in peace. Oh, that reminds me. Before I do that, will you let me have five hundred pounds?

ARTHUR Oh, Auntie, you haven't been gambling again?

LADY CLEMENTINA Surely you don't grudge me my poor pleasures? I haven't had a penny from you for six weeks, Arthur. After all, I'm a sick woman. I must have some little amusement.

LADY WINDERMERE It's too bad of you, Clementina. Arthur will have a great many expenses after he's married.

LADY CLEMENTINA *(with a charming smile)* I know. That's why I'm asking him while he can still afford it. You won't refuse me, will you, Arthur?

ARTHUR *(good-humouredly)* Oh, very well, I'll send you a cheque tomorrow. *(He pats her shoulder, rises and moves up left)*

LADY CLEMENTINA That's a good boy.

DEAN And how is Frederick, Clementina? *(He moves to the armchair right centre and sits)* Is he feeling better?

LADY CLEMENTINA I hope so, Robert. There's not much point in dying if you still have the gout.

DEAN 'Pon my soul, is he dead?

LADY CLEMENTINA I trust so, dear. You buried him.

DEAN Extraordinary!

LADY WINDERMERE *(looking about her)* Arthur, you've done wonders with this room. It looks perfectly beautiful.

BAINES *enters up centre, carrying a tray with glasses of sherry. He serves the company, starting with* **LADY WINDERMERE.**

ARTHUR *(moving centre)* I want you to see the rest of the house as well. It's entirely Sybil's doing. She chose every one of the decorations.

LADY WINDERMERE Did she? Then she must have considerably better taste than her mother. No taste whatever in clothes or people, Have you seen her latest lion?

DEAN Who's that?

LADY WINDERMERE A perfectly dreadful little man named Podgers. Calls himself a cheiromantist.

LADY CLEMENTINA What on earth is that?

LADY WINDERMERE Palm reader. Fortune teller.

ARTHUR Then you know of him, Auntie?

LADY WINDERMERE I not only know of him, I have actually had to meet him. I simply couldn't avoid it. He's asked everywhere, People seem quite mad to have their hands read nowadays.

LADY CLEMENTINA Is that the man who predicted the Belton disaster?

LADY WINDERMERE The very same. He foretold a marriage and a death both within the same week. And curiously enough, Lady Belton eloped with her daughter's dancing master, and Lord Belton died three days afterwards – of joy or grief, I forget which.

BAINES *exits up centre.*

ARTHUR *(moving above the table right centre)* Do – you think he's any good, Auntie?

LADY WINDERMERE *(rising and placing her glass on the mantelpiece)* Oh, as to that, I should hesitate to say. He

has made some extraordinarily accurate – guesses, shall we call them. But I have no patience with this rage for digging up what has been nicely buried. Far better to leave things as they are. People find out things quite soon enough for themselves. *(She looks in the mirror over the mantelpiece and pats her hair)*

DEAN I quite agree.

LADY WINDERMERE *(turning)* I was delighted to come here tonight, Arthur, knowing this to be the one place in London where one could be quite certain of not meeting him.

BAINES *enters up centre and stands right of the doorway.*

BAINES *(announcing)* Lady Julia Merton. Mr Podgers.

LADY WINDERMERE Really, Arthur! This is too much! *(She moves down right.*

The **DEAN** *rises.*

LADY JULIA MERTON *and* **MR PODGERS** *enter up centre. One feels instinctively that* **LADY JULIA** *is closely related to* **LADY BRACKNELL**. **PODGERS** *is a stout little man, with gold-rimmed spectacles. Both are in evening dress.*

BAINES *exits up centre.*

ARTHUR *(moving up centre*; *nervously)* Good evening, Lady Julia.

LADY JULIA *(pausing on the threshold; severely)* I was under the impression you would be alone tonight, Arthur. I particularly wanted to talk to you, and now I find you surrounded by half London.

LADY WINDERMERE I'm sorry if we give you that impression**,** Lady Julia. You may rest assured that I, for one, will not be staying much longer.

ARTHUR *(crossing to right centre)* Oh, Aunt Margaret, please don't break up my little party. *(To* **LADY JULIA***)* I'm sure you must have misunderstood me.

LADY JULIA It is unlikely. I am seldom wrong. However, I will overlook your error. *(She crosses to left centre)* Arthur, this is Mr Podgers – Mr Podgers – Lord Arthur Savile.

PODGERS *(moving centre)* A great pleasure, my lord.

ARTHUR *puts out his hand, then remembers and hurriedly withdraws it.*

Permit me to congratulate you. I have heard your happy news.

LADY JULIA *sits left of* **LADY CLEMENTINA** *on the sofa.*

ARTHUR Thank you. Let me present you to my guests, Mr Podgers – Lady Clementina Beauchamp—

PODGERS *bows.*

—Lady Windermere—

LADY WINDERMERE *(coldly)* We have met. *(She sits on the chair down right)*

ARTHUR —and my uncle – the Dean of Paddington.

PODGERS *crosses below* **ARTHUR** *to left of the* **DEAN.**

DEAN So you've taken a night off from your – what-d'you-call-it – fortune telling, Mr Podgers?

PODGERS Pardon me, if I correct you, Mr Dean, but I do not tell fortunes. I read the past, the present and the future from the palm of the hand.

ARTHUR *moves to the table up left centre and stands listening.*

LADY CLEMENTINA But how exciting that must be.

PODGERS Not so much for me, perhaps, my lady, as for my – er…

LADY WINDERMERE Victims?

PODGERS *(with a bow)* I was about to say "consulters", Lady Windermere.

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