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A Letter From The General

A play in Three Acts by

Maurice McLoughlin

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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ISBN 978-0-573-01231-0

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A LETTER FROM THE GENERAL

Produced by The Mercat Theatre Trust at the Edinburgh Festival on the 19th August 1961, with the following cast of characters—

(in the order of their appearance)

SISTER HENRY	<i>Lennox Milne</i>
SISTER LUCY	<i>Helena Gloag</i>
SISTER BRIDGET	<i>Morag Forsyth</i>
REVEREND MOTHER	<i>Valerie Lush</i>
SISTER MAGDALEN	<i>Jean Taylor Smith</i>
ARTHUR STILTON, the British Consul	<i>John Young</i>
RUTH STILTON, his wife	<i>Irene Sunters</i>
CAPTAIN LEE	<i>Paul Kermack</i>
FATHER SCHILLER	<i>Martin Heller</i>

Directed by GERARD SLEVIN

Setting by JOHN RUSSELL

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the Common Room of a Mission Station in an Eastern Country in the year 1950

ACT I

Afternoon

ACT II

SCENE 1 The evening of the same day

SCENE 2 The next morning

ACT III

The evening of the same day

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(See also page ii)

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A LETTER FROM THE GENERAL

ACT I

SCENE—*The Common Room of a Mission Station in an Eastern Country in the year 1950. Afternoon.*

The room is painted white and the walls are bare of decoration except for a crucifix hanging on the wall down R. There is a latticed door back C with windows R and L of it, leading to a verandah. In the distance stretches a plain in a haze of heat. Mostly the door is closed and the glare of the sun makes rigid bars of light which pierce the lattices and window blinds. Another door, down L, leads to other parts of the Mission. The room is simply furnished. A large table, used as a desk, stands at an angle RC, with upright chairs behind and L of it. A small desk is set against the wall R, underneath the crucifix. A large cupboard, filled with miscellaneous household articles stands against the wall L, above the door. There are shelves, filled with books, up R, up L and under the window L of the door up C. An upright chair is down L and there is a light, bamboo-type armchair down RC. At night, the room is lit by oil lamps, one on the desk R and one hanging from a wall-bracket above the door L.

When the CURTAIN rises, SISTER HENRY, a nun, is standing at the table RC with a pile of books beside her, which she is listing. She wears a white habit and is a woman of forty with sharp features and a thin, tight-lipped mouth. She crosses to the shelves up L, takes out some books and brings them to the table. SISTER LUCY, a plump, plain nun, appears outside the open window up LC. She is red-faced and perspires from working in the sun.

LUCY (*calling through the window*) Have you seen the pliers anywhere, Sister Henry?

HENRY. No.

LUCY. I've searched all over the Mission. I'd say one of the Ling family has taken them. (*She comes in by the door up C*) It's terrible thieves they are. (*She moves to the cupboard up L*) You didn't see them in that cupboard?

HENRY. I haven't looked in the cupboard.

LUCY. You'd never believe the rubbish that's thrown in this cupboard. (*She opens the cupboard door and a stream of miscellaneous rubbish falls to the floor*) There now, didn't I tell you? I'm not tidying that lot. (*She makes a dive into the pile*) Well, if it isn't the china salt cellar we were scouring the Mission for. Now what would that be doing in there?

HENRY. I couldn't say at all.

LUCY. It's certain you are that you haven't set eyes on the

pliers? Before I sort out this jumble? Do you know what they're like, Sister Henry?

HENRY (*turning; coldly*) Sister Lucy, I'm not given to doing odd jobs about the Mission but I can recognize a pair of pliers when I set eyes on them. Why is there all this agitation for the pliers?

LUCY. The wire in the chicken compound is in shreds. If it's not repaired you'll have the soldiers eating every chicken we've got. Ling Hu is after telling me there's another lot of them at the village.

HENRY. You'll find the soldiers will have the chickens eventually.

LUCY. You mean we shall have to go? Sure I wouldn't say that. We've not had the word to leave.

HENRY. Perhaps not. But it's obvious if we stay we shall be cut off from the villagers and the children. They came and took the orphans from us, didn't they? (*She turns to the bookshelves up R*)

LUCY. Reverend Mother says it has all happened before. It might well come to nothing.

HENRY (*turning; with feeling*) And meanwhile we stay here in splendid isolation, providing religious solace to thirty-three chickens.

LUCY. Thirty-two. There was another taken in the night. Did Sister Magdalen tell you she'd written to the General? He's the new Governor of the Province.

HENRY. Do you seriously think that Sister Magdalen's letter to General Mei Cheng will do anything but remind him of our existence and bring a firing squad to visit us?

LUCY. Sister Magdalen says he was a fine boy. He knew his Catechism better than she did herself. Sure he's her godson. Can you think of it—godmother to a General.

HENRY. A communist General who'd put a bullet through you as soon as he'd look at you.

LUCY. That we can't say. He may well be the beginning of better things for us.

HENRY. Have sense, Sister Lucy. You know as well as I do myself that the next thing we shall have is an order to leave the country—if we're fortunate. For myself I'd be more inclined to expect a troop of soldiers to arrest us. I can't think why Reverend Mother doesn't arrange with the British Consul for us to leave immediately, while we have opportunity. (*She picks up some books from the desk, crosses and puts them in the shelves up R*)

LUCY (*kneeling at the cupboard*) There's no use thinking about it. We'll have to wait and see.

HENRY. I didn't join the Order to be a sort of Sanctified Micawber.

LUCY. You've never liked it here, Sister Henry.

HENRY (*crossing to the table*) I've no love for any country where I have to sit idle. At least if we go suddenly the schoolbooks will be in order. I'm listing them now,

LUCY (*rising*) I wish I could find the pliers. I think I'll be asking St Anthony to find them for me.

(HENRY *sits above the table*)

He's a wonderful saint, with eyes in the back of his head. (*She suddenly pulls the pliers from the rubbish*) Look, Sister Henry—it's them—the pliers. His name had hardly left my lips and the things were in my hand. He's a wonderful man—St Anthony.

HENRY (*dryly*) I should hurry away and repair the chicken wire or you'll have him chasing all over the Province after your chickens.

LUCY (*crossing to L of Henry; shocked*) Sister Henry, you shouldn't speak in that way of a Saint of God. St Anthony is . . .

HENRY (*cutting in*) I apologize, Sister Lucy.

(SISTER BRIDGET *appears outside the window up LC. She is a young and very beautiful nun in her early twenties. She is garrulous and full of enthusiasm and wild exaggeration*)

BRIDGET (*speaking through the window*) I can't find the pliers, Sister Lucy. I should think the last fellah we had working round the place has taken them, or maybe one of the Ling family. They're terrible thieves. (*She comes in by the door up c and sees the pliers in Lucy's hand*) Ah, sure you've found them. Where were they?

LUCY. I turned out the cupboard and there they were. Shove it in again, will you, Bridget? (*She moves to the door up c*) If I don't mend the wire we'll have the chickens in Hong Kong. (*She goes on to the verandah*)

BRIDGET (*moving to the cupboard*) I hope that white cockerel gets away. He has a mean way with him.

(LUCY *stops outside the window up LC*)

Only this morning he pecked at the small hen with the white underside. (*A thought*) Why wouldn't we eat him, Sister Lucy? I must search in my Missal and find a Saint's day that calls for a chicken.

LUCY (*through the window*) 'Tis Reverend Mother's Feast Day next month. That would call for a chicken, maybe.

HENRY. If we are here next month.

BRIDGET (*eagerly*) Have we heard anything? Do we have to go?

LUCY. Of course not. Don't you think Reverend Mother would have told us?

BRIDGET. And Magdalen is after writing to the General. I'd like to see a General. My father was a great friend of Michael Collins. He had a big picture of him lying in state. It hung in the kitchen.

LUCY. He was a fine man was Michael Collins.

HENRY. He compromised and paid the penalty for compromising.

BRIDGET (*with fire*) My father says he was murdered. (*She crosses to L of Henry*) He says he was the finest man you'd ever meet.

HENRY. I wasn't discussing the man's character—only his lack of political foresight.

LUCY. Oh, let's not talk politics. They're not for us. Put that junk in the cupboard, Bridget. I'll attend to the wire. We'll not have a chicken left—although I've put a board before the hole.

(*LUCY exits L on the verandah.*)

BRIDGET crosses to the cupboard, pushes the rubbish in and closes the door.

HENRY rises and crosses to the shelves up LC)

BRIDGET. Well, the cupboard is shut. Although if anyone opens the door there'll be an avalanche. (*She turns to Henry*) You're anxious to go from here, aren't you, Sister Henry?

HENRY. Of course I am.

BRIDGET. Do you think it's the truth that they're shooting nuns and priests in some of the provinces?

HENRY (*crossing to the table*) I see no reason why it shouldn't be. I've no particular desire to stay here and find out. (*She sits at the table*)

BRIDGET (*moving down LC*) We'd be martyrs, then. Although I'm wondering if it counts if you get shot out of hand like that. I mean, you'd have no choice at all. And somehow I always think of martyrs having a white gown and fair hair, holding a flower with their faces all lit up. It's like as not they'd line up the lot of us against the chicken run and kill us with machine guns. It doesn't seem right—not machine guns.

HENRY. Maybe the General having had a good Christian education will give us a white gown and flowers.

BRIDGET. Sister Magdalen says he was the nicest boy she ever taught. (*She crosses to L of Henry*) Did she ever tell you he was her godson?

HENRY. She told me thirty times and everyone else has told me eighty times. I find it a great consolation.

BRIDGET (*crossing above Henry to R of the desk*) Well, I shall be sorry to go even if you aren't. I like these people and the children. I don't think Reverend Mother will go without a fight. Where is she? I've hardly seen her all day. (*She picks up a book and glances through it*)

HENRY. I don't know. She has plenty of work to keep her in her room. This is the only other habitable room and it's as conducive to work as O'Connell Street.

BRIDGET. Am I disturbing you? What are you doing?

HENRY. I'm trying to make an inventory of school books and equipment.

BRIDGET. I must away and attend to the Ling family. I wish they'd keep their hut a little cleaner. One thing—no-one has

forbidden them to come to the Mission. And it's as well for they attend the crops well enough. And Ling Hu is a wonderful lad for catching fish.

(The REVEREND MOTHER enters L and crosses to C. She is a short, strong woman of sixty. Her face is yellow from years in the tropics. She has a soft, authoritative voice and light blue eyes with a magnetic quality about them. HENRY is about to rise)

REV. MOTHER. Don't bother to rise, Sister Henry.

BRIDGET *(crossing to the Reverend Mother)* Oh, Reverend Mother, there's a great hole in the chicken compound. Sister Lucy is mending it now for fear the chickens would be all over the province.

REV. MOTHER. Good. We can't afford to lose any. Were there many eggs today?

BRIDGET. Twenty-two. I'm thinking Ling Hu is after stealing some of them and that's how the hole came in the wire.

REV. MOTHER. That's likely enough, but he knows we don't begrudge him a few eggs. And it gives him such pleasure to take them subversively. The family have a great deal to put up with.

(HENRY rises and crosses to the shelves up L)

BRIDGET. I've been trying to convert them, Reverend Mother, but the old man quotes Confucius at me till I'm dizzy. Do you know, I think he's trying to convert me.

REV. MOTHER *(crossing to RC)* Now don't let him do that, Bridget. We can ill afford any deviationists. Have you attended them this morning?

BRIDGET. I was just away when you came in. *(She moves to the door up C and turns)* Is there any news, Reverend Mother? I mean—about us going?

REV. MOTHER. No, Sister Bridget. I'll surely tell you when I have definite news.

BRIDGET. No answer from the General to Sister Magdalen's letter?

REV. MOTHER. No, child. But then it's quite possible that he never received the letters.

BRIDGET *(moving C)* He'd surely answer a letter from his god-mother. Yes, I'd say he never had the letter at all. She should surely write again.

(The REVEREND MOTHER looks at Bridget)

(She hurries to the door up C) When I've tended the Lings I'll give Sister Magdalen a hand with the evening meal. She looks tired.

(BRIDGET, humming to herself, exits up C)

REV. MOTHER *(turning to Henry)* A fine girl she is, so contented in herself and her work. What are you at, Sister Henry?

HENRY (*moving LC*) I'm listing the school books and equipment.

REV. MOTHER. That's as well. In case we have to close the Mission.

HENRY. Reverend Mother, do we have to sit here until we're told to go? Isn't it possible to ask the Consul to arrange for us to close the Mission and be on the next boat down the river?

REV. MOTHER. For the moment I think we have a duty to stay here.

HENRY. But why? What are we doing here? The school is closed. Our children snatched from us and the villagers forbidden to come near us. It seems so pointless.

REV. MOTHER. You must have patience, Sister Henry. Our staying here at the moment is far from pointless. I have an excellent reason for doing so.

HENRY. Have you heard from Reverend Mother Provincial?

REV. MOTHER. Not for months.

HENRY. And what of Father Schiller? He's not been near us for three months. Is it reasonable for us to stay here caring for thirty-three chickens and without a priest to visit us? I see no sense in it.

REV. MOTHER. Conditions may not always be as they are now. Revolutions come and go but the Church of God is indestructible. You must accept my word that I know what I am doing is right.

HENRY (*moving down L*) I do, Reverend Mother. I would just like to see why it is right. (*Bitterly*) Five nuns to care for a few chickens and a family of diseased Bhuddists.

REV. MOTHER (*sharply*) I prefer you not to speak that way, Sister Henry. You must learn to guard your tongue.

HENRY (*about to flare up*) I can say . . . (*She stops*) I apologize, Reverend Mother.

REV. MOTHER. Believe me now, I have every sympathy for you. (*She crosses to Henry*) Have patience. You'll surely have great opportunities to teach again. Meantime—pray for patience. Now, if you'll leave your inventory for a minute I'd like to see a list of the children that were taken from us. Can you get the names from the registers?

HENRY. Yes, Reverend Mother. I'll do so at once.

(HENRY exits up C. The REVEREND MOTHER moves to the table and sits at it.)

SISTER MAGDALEN enters L. She is a very old nun and wears large spectacles which give her an owl-like appearance. Her voice is soft and gentle. She holds a piece of paper)

MAGDALEN (*crossing to L of the table*) It's here you are, Reverend Mother. I've searched the Mission for you.

REV. MOTHER. I've been in my room, Sister Magdalen. Sit down, won't you?

MAGDALEN (*ignoring the invitation to sit*) I'd like you to see this.

'Tis what I'm after writing to Peter. (*She hands the letter to the Reverend Mother*)

REV. MOTHER. Thank you. (*She reads the letter*)

(*LUCY enters up c, carrying the pliers*)

LUCY (*moving down c*) Them chickens'll not get out of there so fast now. Reverend Mother, do you think we might have that white cockerel for eating on your feast day? (*She realizes she is interrupting*) Oh, I beg your pardon.

MAGDALEN. I'm after writing to Peter, again. Would you read out the letter, Reverend Mother? I'd like Sister Lucy to hear what I've written. (*She sits L of the desk*)

REV. MOTHER (*reading slowly*) "Dear Peter . . ."

MAGDALEN (*interrupting*) Do you see I call him "Peter" for he was baptized "Peter". Sure he's a General now, but 'tis only right for his godmother to call him by his Christian name. Wouldn't you say that?

REV. MOTHER. Yes, indeed. "Dear Peter. As I haven't heard from you I feel sure that you have not received my letters. We at the Mission here have not had a letter for three months. Did you know that our Mission has been cut off from the village and all our dear little children have been taken from us? We have been very happy here and I am sure that if the authorities knew the good work we have done they would let us open the Mission once more. It is twenty years now since we last met and I was delighted to hear that the Japanese had released you, and that later you were made a General of the army. I remember still the first day you came to our Mission, a bright little boy and it was my first year in your country. I feel now as if it were my country, too."

MAGDALEN. Thirty years this month, Reverend Mother.

REV. MOTHER (*reading*) "Our present Mission is not unlike the one in the North where you spent so many happy years. I do wish you could come here and meet our Reverend Mother. She has done wonderful work for your people." (*She pauses*)

MAGDALEN. Indeed you have, Reverend Mother.

REV. MOTHER (*reading*) "I am sure that if you came you would be able to tell your Government how mistaken they are to close our Mission. You must try for a visit here—it would delight me to show you around. Fondest love. Your Mother in Jesus Christ, Magdalen O'Hara."

(*There is a moment's pause as the futility of the letter sinks into the REVEREND MOTHER'S consciousness*)

MAGDALEN (*eagerly*) Do you think it's a good letter, Reverend Mother?

REV. MOTHER (*with control*) An excellent letter, Sister Magdalen. I'm sure it will please him—if he gets it. (*She hands the letter to Magdalen*)

MAGDALEN (*rising and crossing to the door L*) I had thought that we might send it to the Officer at the village.

REV. MOTHER. And why not? It's worth a try.

MAGDALEN. And when you have a minute I'd like for you to look at the kitchen stove. I'm having great trouble with it and you have a way with the thing.

REV. MOTHER (*rising and crossing to the door L*) I'll come right away.

(MAGDALEN holds the door open)

(*To Lucy*) Tell Sister Bridget not to bother in the kitchen. I can help Sister Magdalen this afternoon. I want extra food, too. We must keep our strength up.

LUCY. Talking of food—what about the white cockerel? Would we kill it for your feast day?

REV. MOTHER. No, we shall have it tomorrow.

LUCY. Sure Sister Bridget will be delighted. She has a great hatred for the white cockerel.

REV. MOTHER. Come, Magdalen, let's see this terror of a stove.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER and MAGDALEN exit L. LUCY goes to the cupboard to put the pliers away, opens the door and the jumble shoots out on to the floor. She is about to say something explosive then stops, makes a sign of the cross, kneels and starts to replace the jumble in the cupboard.*)

BRIDGET enters excitedly up C)

LUCY. I like fine the way you've put this rubbish in the cupboard.

BRIDGET (*breathlessly*) Never mind that old stuff. There's a car coming down the driveway—a man and a woman—white people.

LUCY. Didn't you wait to see who it was?

(*The sound of a car arriving and stopping is heard off*)

BRIDGET. I thought I'd better be telling Reverend Mother.

LUCY. Sure it'll be the Consul. He's the only man likely to come here. (*She rises*) I'll tell Reverend Mother. You'd better ask them in instead of standing there panting.

BRIDGET. Let me tell Reverend Mother. I don't know their names.

LUCY. Oh, sure 'tis "Bilton"—"Mr Bilton", I'm certain—or would it be "Hilton"? I disremember. Just tell them to wait a minute.

(LUCY rushes out L)

BRIDGET. Sister Lucy! (*She turns towards the door up C, stops, looks at her dusty habit, turns and brushes it with her hand*)

(ARTHUR STILTON, the British Consul, and his wife RUTH enter L on the verandah. Stilton is aged about forty-five, slightly worn and

tired looking. Ruth is in her late thirties, attractive with a dissatisfied air. She is as tall as her husband. STILTON looks in at the door up c)

STILTON (*calling*) Anyone here?

BRIDGET (*turning; startled*) Oh, come in.

(STILTON and RUTH come into the room. RUTH scrutinizes the room as if it were a personal affront)

Won't you sit down, Mr Hilton?

STILTON. Thank you, Sister. My name is "Stilton".

BRIDGET (*losing all her poise*) "Stilton"! Now would you think anyone could forget a name like that? Why, you've only got to think of che— (*She stops*) I'll tell Reverend Mother you're here, sir.

(BRIDGET, embarrassed, rushes out L)

STILTON. Well, I'm damned!

RUTH (*moving to L of the table*) Is this where I'm expected to stay, Arthur? (*She carefully scrutinizes the armchair down RG, sits, takes a compact from her handbag and attends to her make-up*)

STILTON (*moving down c*) My dear Ruth, where else can you stay? It will only be for a couple of nights at the most. My God! I'll be glad to leave this country.

RUTH. You won't find me weeping at the thought. Why couldn't we go when the others left?

STILTON. Because it's my job to stay put until I get orders to leave.

RUTH. And I suppose it is my job to stay put with you.

STILTON. I think so. Why didn't you go last month if you were so anxious to leave?

RUTH. On that stinking train? No, thank you.

STILTON. You didn't expect me to let you go with McGregor in his car, did you? There's been quite enough between you and McGregor without any encouragement from me.

RUTH. He didn't ask me to go.

STILTON. He was waiting for me to suggest it and I didn't. I told him you would be leaving with me on the boat. (*He takes a flask from his pocket and drinks*)

RUTH (*watching him closely*) You'll make an excellent impression on the Reverend Mother reeking of spirits.

STILTON. I've already met her. She's surprisingly tolerant of human failings. You could tell her of McGregor—and Hastings.

(RUTH gives Stilton a vicious look but says nothing)

(*He takes another swig*) Yes. You'll find the Reverend Mother an intriguing combination of wisdom and innocence. So is Sister Magdalen, with more emphasis on the innocence. *She's* been here God knows how many years. General Mei Cheng was a prize pupil in her Mission School—so rumour has it.

RUTH. She must have been highly competent if her converts turn into Communist Generals. It's a wonder the Government want to close the place.

STILTON. You know the line—"Opium of the people". (*He wanders to the open door up c, leans against the door-post and looks off L*) Thank heaven they're going to be allowed to leave unharmed. Damned awkward when they shoot these missionaries out of hand.

RUTH (*sarcastically*) Very trying for the Consul. Reports to make and so on.

STILTON. You needn't be so damned sarcastic. It is awkward. "Why didn't you do something about it?" they ask. What the hell can the Consul do?

RUTH. Make a report.

STILTON. Thank God this is the last Mission in the Province. The sooner they're out safely the better.

RUTH. Didn't Mei Cheng arrest that German priest a couple of days ago?

STILTON. Father Schiller? Yes, but he's not my pigeon.

RUTH. Don't worry. I didn't intend to lose any sleep over him.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER enters L. RUTH rises and puts her handbag on the desk R*)

REV. MOTHER (*moving LC and extending her hand*) I'm pleased to see you, Mr Stilton.

STILTON (*moving to R of the Reverend Mother and shaking hands*) How do you do, Reverend Mother? This is my wife.

REV. MOTHER. Won't you sit down—both of you. (*She moves the chair L to LC and sits*)

(*RUTH resumes her seat. STILTON sits L of the table*)

Now, I don't suppose for a second this is a social call.

STILTON. Not exactly. The fact is, I've got some rather bad news for you.

REV. MOTHER. Yes?

STILTON. I'm afraid it's come to the point where you must close the Mission and leave. I've made arrangements to go by the river boat myself. It leaves in three days—and for your Community to come with me.

REV. MOTHER (*thoughtfully*) You have?

STILTON. Yes. I'm very sorry—but there it is. To be quite honest, I can't see any useful purpose in your staying here. I've made orders to close the Consulate so it is my duty to advise you to quit.

REV. MOTHER. And supposing I don't want to quit?

STILTON. What any of us wants doesn't arise. It's a question of being sensible. You may be sure the Foreign Office don't close the Consulate without good reason. You know the policy of this Government towards foreigners.

REV. MOTHER. Don't forget that I have to obey orders, Mr Stilton. I've had no instructions from my Mother General.

STILTON. I don't suppose your superiors have been in touch with you for the last three months, have they?

REV. MOTHER. They have not.

STILTON. Then how can they understand the situation here? (*He rises and moves to R of the Reverend Mother*) I'm on the spot at the Provincial capital. I can tell you that if you wait for instructions from outside you'll wait for ever.

REV. MOTHER. This sort of thing has occurred before. It'll pass.

STILTON (*firmly*) The Consulate has never been closed before. You can take it from me, the Revolution is over and the Government firmly in the saddle. There will be no change for a year or so—by then your Community will be wiped out.

REV. MOTHER. Wiped out?

STILTON (*pressing his point home*) Yes. Shot dead—after being tortured. It's happened in the North. (*Suddenly*) Didn't you wonder why you hadn't seen Father Schiller for weeks?

REV. MOTHER. What do you know about Father Schiller?

STILTON. Very little except that he was arrested a few days ago. He may be dead by now.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER rises and moves up C*)

(*More gently*) I'm sorry to break the news so harshly, Reverend Mother, but I'm trying to show there's no time to lose.

REV. MOTHER (*turning to face Stilton*) Do you know why Father Schiller was arrested?

STILTON. He was Father Schiller, a priest and a foreigner. The present policy is to make the arrest and think of the reason afterwards.

REV. MOTHER. You made no enquiries?

STILTON. Of course not. He's nothing to do with me. Father Schiller is a German.

RUTH. If they didn't shoot him at once he'll be deported.

REV. MOTHER (*crossing to L of Ruth*) Did you know Father Schiller, Mrs Stilton?

RUTH (*sharply*) No.

REV. MOTHER. He's given his life for this country. It seems a poor reward to be arrested on a trumped-up charge as though he were a criminal. He's done nothing but good for the people here. Don't you see that, Mr Stilton?

STILTON. I'm afraid my views wouldn't count for very much even if I made a protest. My duty at the moment is to see that you and your Community are conducted to safety without any trouble. So I should advise you to be ready when the boat arrives at the village.

REV. MOTHER. Of course I'm grateful to you for coming here.

STILTON. It is my duty. You know that. I want to ask you a

favour. I have to go to a village up the river to warn an English writer. He must be made aware of the situation, not that I think he will take much notice of me—but it is my job. I'd like you to let Mrs Stilton stay here until I return.

REV. MOTHER. We shall be delighted for her to stay.

STILTON. I ought to be back by tomorrow but it's not the sort of country to take her under present conditions.

REV. MOTHER. We'll do our best to make her comfortable and that isn't easy at present. We've lost our native helpers, but there's plenty of accommodation. I hope it doesn't prove too primitive for Mrs Stilton.

STILTON. You won't mind for a couple of days, will you, Ruth?

RUTH. Anything would be preferable to a long drive over those roads, but if the Reverend Mother would be put out at all . . .

REV. MOTHER. We can manage well enough. (*She crosses to the chair LC and returns it to its original place*) I'll have Sister Lucy prepare a room for you.

RUTH. You said you'd lost your native helpers, but didn't I see some of them in a hut just off the drive-in?

REV. MOTHER. They're the Ling family. The authorities don't want the likes of them. They're glad to leave them here.

(HENRY enters up C)

HENRY (*seeing the visitors*) I apologize, Reverend Mother. I didn't know there were visitors.

REV. MOTHER. Come in, Sister Henry. This is Mr Stilton, the Consul, and his wife. Mrs Stilton is going to stay with us for a day or two. Perhaps you'd entertain them while I search out Sister Lucy. She'll prepare a room.

RUTH. Please don't go to any great trouble.

REV. MOTHER. It's no trouble at all. (*To Stilton*) Sister Henry taught the older children at our school.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER exits down L*)

HENRY. What news have you for us, Mr Stilton?

STILTON. Bad, I'm afraid, Sister. I've just told the Reverend Mother that I want her to be gone in a couple of days.

HENRY. I'd say it was the obvious thing to do.

RUTH (*interested*) You don't share the Reverend Mother's reluctance to leave?

HENRY. I've no desire to leave my work. But at the moment we aren't doing any. I'd be surprised if they'd let us open the Mission again. Would you say it was possible, Mr Stilton?

STILTON. I'd say it was most unlikely and I think your attitude is most sensible, Sister Henry. Perhaps you can persuade the Reverend Mother to take the same view. I'm leaving myself and the Consulate is being closed. That should give you an idea of what we expect.

HENRY. Reverend Mother already knows my views, but if she really decides to stay, then I can do nothing but obey her.

RUTH. Now why? I can't understand. You're a free agent, aren't you? (*She smiles*) If she told you to jump off a cliff, would you do it?

HENRY. That's a contingency that isn't likely to arise.

RUTH. I think I'd sooner jump off a cliff than be in your position.

HENRY. But surely if you say we must go, there's no option, Mr Stilton.

STILTON (*crossing to the table*) I can't make you leave, Sister. It's my duty as Consul to make you aware of the situation, and advise you. I've even made arrangements for you to go.

HENRY. And Reverend Mother still says we stay here?

RUTH. She certainly doesn't jump at the idea of going. (*She rises, moves to the desk R and picks up her handbag*) By the way, they've put your Father Schiller in prison.

HENRY. They've arrested him? Why? (*She moves down L and faces front. Bitterly*) There's no need to ask why. I suppose in due course he'll sign a confession to heaven knows what devilry, and be shot.

STILTON. That seems to be the procedure in the North and you know how they get the signatures.

(*There is a silence*)

I'll collect your cases, Ruth, from the car. (*He moves to the door up c*) I'm sorry I have such bad news, Sister Henry. If you make the Reverend Mother see reason you'll be doing us all a favour.

(*STILTON exits up c. RUTH takes a cigarette case and matches from her handbag*)

RUTH. You don't mind if I smoke?

HENRY. Not at all.

(*RUTH lights a cigarette for herself*)

RUTH. You won't have one?

(*HENRY shakes her head*)

Not allowed to, I suppose? You'll have to get used to me. I don't mix with nuns a lot. In fact I'd never spoken to one until a month ago. (*She pauses*) What are you thinking about?

HENRY (*turning to face Ruth*) When did they arrest Father Schiller?

RUTH. A couple of weeks ago, I think.

HENRY. Your husband couldn't do *anything*?

RUTH. It was hardly his job. Schiller was a German.

HENRY. You don't sound terribly concerned about Father Schiller.

RUTH. I'm not. The only good Germans are dead ones.

HENRY (*acidly*) Isn't that a little out of date?

RUTH. If it's the truth it's never out of date. I don't expect you to share my views but don't try to correct them.

HENRY. I hadn't that intention.

RUTH. That's fine. As long as we understand one another. (*She sits in the armchair*) They tell me that one of your alumni is governing the Province, Mei Cheng.

HENRY. He was one of Sister Magdalen's pupils many years ago. Do you know the General?

RUTH. I met him when he came to see us about closing the Consulate.

HENRY. Did he force you to close it?

RUTH. No, that was orders from the Foreign Office. Mei Cheng said it was all the same to him whether we closed it or not. For my part he can have his stinking country.

HENRY. You don't like it here, Mrs Stilton?

RUTH. Do you?

HENRY. I like my work wherever it is.

RUTH. But you'd enjoy it a damned sight better if it weren't here?

HENRY (*moving to the window up LC*) I didn't say so. (*She gazes out of the window*)

RUTH. You people are beyond me. You allow yourself to be ordered about by whoever they like to put in charge of you. Even if they have the most hare-brained schemes.

HENRY. You'd be surprised how few hare-brained schemes our Superiors have.

RUTH. Well, attempting to stay here under the circumstances doesn't strike me as terribly bright. Still, that's your affair. Sixty Reverend Mothers wouldn't keep me off that boat in a couple of days.

(*STILTON enters up C carrying three suitcases which he places on the ground LC*)

STILTON. I'll leave most of my things here, Ruth. They can pick the trunks up at the village.

RUTH (*rising and moving below the table; crossly*) Are you leaving the trunks at that barracks?

STILTON. Yes.

RUTH. They'll probably all be stolen when you come back.

STILTON. I don't think so. The Commanding Officer seemed quite civil.

RUTH. That's their stock-in-trade here—civility. They could hang you up by your feet and look civil about it.

STILTON. We'll have to chance it.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER and LUCY enter L*)

REV. MOTHER. Ah, the bags. Sister Lucy would have helped you with them.

STILTON. I'm leaving now, if you don't mind, Reverend Mother. I want to get to this chap by tomorrow morning.

REV. MOTHER. You'll be driving through the night?

STILTON. Yes, but I'll be all right. I've got my official permit for the journey. Think again, Reverend Mother. I hope you'll have decided to leave and be ready to go when I return. (*He crosses to Ruth*) Good-bye, Ruth.

(*STILTON gives Ruth a formal kiss, then exits up c. The REVEREND MOTHER follows him as far as the door, then turns and moves down c*)

REV. MOTHER. Sister Lucy will take you to your room, Mrs Stilton.

(*The sound is heard of a car starting up and driving away. LUCY picks up two of the cases and moves to the door L*)

We usually have a meal after Office.

RUTH. Office?

REV. MOTHER. We have our prayers—our Office—at six-thirty, and a meal at seven. Unless you care for a meal now?

RUTH. No. Seven will do. You don't mind if I skip the prayers?

REV. MOTHER. Do what you like, Mrs Stilton. Sister will show you the refectory—the dining-room. Come here if you want to read or sit quietly. It is the only room with any comfortable chairs just now. Use it as you will.

RUTH (*crossing to the door L*) Thank you very much.

REV. MOTHER. I've given you the room Father Schiller used to have when he came here.

RUTH. Oh, yes. Well, I'll try not to be any trouble.

REV. MOTHER. We shall make allowances for you, Mrs Stilton.

(*RUTH gives the Reverend Mother a sharp look, but her face remains guileless.*)

LUCY *exits with two cases L.*

RUTH *picks up the remaining case and follows LUCY off*)

(*She moves to the table*) I'd say Mrs Stilton was an unhappy woman.

HENRY (*gazing out of the window*) She has no unhappiness about leaving here. (*She turns*) So Father Schiller has been arrested? (*She moves to the door L and closes it*)

REV. MOTHER (*sitting above the table*) Yes.

HENRY. That means we shall be next—unless we leave with the Consul.

REV. MOTHER. Only God knows that.

HENRY. I know it. Are we going to wait here, Reverend Mother? Are we going to wait here to be murdered?

REV. MOTHER. You sound very melodramatic, Sister Henry.

HENRY. Being murdered is melodramatic, or would you call it an anticlimax? (*She moves to L of the table*) Reverend Mother, I have no wish to die. It's not fear in me, don't think that, but I've years of work in me yet. I don't want to be taken out and shot by the chicken run—not when a boat is waiting to take me to safety and

the chance to start my work over again. (*Earnestly*) Won't you see, it's different for yourself and Sister Magdalen. Your work is nearly done. But if I stay here and die, half my life will be gone to waste. I want to do what you've done yourself—leave something behind me.

REV. MOTHER (*quietly*) And what shall I be leaving behind me, Sister Henry? (*She looks sadly around the room*)

HENRY: But you've done great work here. The people might be forbidden to come to you, but they'll not forget what you've done for them. When the cholera epidemic was on them, will they forget your help then?

REV. MOTHER. Sister Henry, if what I am planning is successful, we shall leave with the Consul.

HENRY. Whatever plans you may have, Reverend Mother, I think it would be better to leave with the Consul. He will be in a difficult position should we stay.

REV. MOTHER. Did he ask you to persuade me?

HENRY. He did. But you know I agree with him.

(BRIDGET enters excitedly up c)

BRIDGET (*moving down c*) Reverend Mother! Reverend Mother! There's a great stream of soldiers coming down the road to the Mission. They're stopping at the drive-in.

(HENRY crosses to the window up LC and looks out)

REV. MOTHER. Soldiers?

BRIDGET. And there's an officer in a little car at the gate. Will I go out?

REV. MOTHER. No. Better to wait.

BRIDGET. Sure, they can't eat me, but they'll be after the chickens, maybe. They'd eat *them* all right.

REV. MOTHER. They may not be for here at all. Just take a look, then, Sister Bridget.

(BRIDGET moves to the door up c)

(*She rises*) No. I'll go myself.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER exits up c*)

BRIDGET. Has the Consul fellow gone?

HENRY (*crossing to the table*) He has, but he's returning. His wife is staying here. (*She sorts the books on the table*)

BRIDGET. She looks a fast one all right.

HENRY. That's not a charitable remark, Sister Bridget.

BRIDGET (*unperturbed*) Maybe not, but it's true. Mind, I didn't say she *was* fast. Do you think the soldiers have come to whip us off?

HENRY. The Consul says we are to leave on the boat in a day or so. He has permission for us to go.

BRIDGET. Then it's off we'll be all right. (*She moves down L*)

Poor Reverend Mother and Sister Magdalen. They've been here so long.

HENRY. And what would be the use of us staying, anyway, and Father Schiller arrested, too.

BRIDGET. They've taken him? (*She sits on the chair L*) God have mercy on him. Why would they arrest a fine man like that? Is it the General has done it?

HENRY. Who else? Isn't he the Governor?

BRIDGET (*upset*) But this is a dreadful thing for Sister Magdalen and her the General's godmother. She'll die if she hears. We'll not tell her. 'Twould break the poor soul's heart.

HENRY. She'll find out sooner or later.

(*The REVEREND MOTHER enters up C. BRIDGET rises*)

REV. MOTHER (*calling through the doorway*) In here, Captain Lee. (*She moves RC*)

(*CAPTAIN LEE enters up C. He wears the uniform of a Communist Army Captain. He is a tall man of about thirty-five. He has a hard-bitten face and an offhand manner. He is an Englishman and speaks with a London accent*)

(*She eyes Lee with distaste*) This is Captain Lee. He has some instructions for us.

LEE. Not instructions. (*He leans against the door post*) I wanted to make sure you know how things stand. No need for any trouble.

BRIDGET. Faith! It's an Englishman you are. What in the name of God are you doing in that outfit? Are you a spy, then?

LEE. Never mind my uniform. I've come to tip you off—your pal has escaped.

HENRY. What do you mean?

LEE. The Jerry—Father Schiller.

BRIDGET (*delighted*) He's got away? That's grand news!

LEE (*crossing to Bridget*) Not for long it won't be. When we do catch up with him he'll wish he'd sat tight in his cell. (*He crosses to L of the table*) The point is, we shouldn't be surprised if he makes a bee-line here when things quieten down. So we're putting a guard round the place.

REV. MOTHER. We're supposed to be leaving in a day or so.

LEE. So they tell me, and until you go the guards stay put. Don't worry, you won't get hurt—providing you keep in line.

HENRY. We knew nothing of Father Schiller's arrest until the Consul was after telling us today. His wife is staying here.

LEE. Then you knew he'd escaped?

HENRY. We didn't even know he'd been arrested, until today. I just told you. Why would they arrest him, anyway?

LEE (*with a wry smile*) He's been charged with acting as a spy for the Imperialist Powers against the People's Republic.

REV. MOTHER. What nonsense!

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