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THE HOUSE BY THE LAKE

A Play in Three Acts

by Hugh Mills

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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For
P. A. G.
with love

The House by the Lake

“The House by the Lake” was first presented by Peter Daubeny at the Duke of York’s Theatre, London, on the 9th of May 1956, with the following cast:—

COLONEL FORBES	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Frank Royde</i>
STELLA	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Jenny Laird</i>
JANET	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Flora Robson</i>
BRENDA	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Doreen Morton</i>
MAURICE	.	..	..	..	..	<i>Andrew Cruickshank</i>
COLIN	..	..	..	..	..	.. <i>Paul Lee</i>
IRIS	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Sylvia Coleridge</i>
MR. HOWARD	..	..	..	..		<i>Alan MacNaughtan</i>
NURSE THOMSON	..	..	..	..	..	<i>Annette Kerr</i>

The play was directed by JOHN FERNALD.

Décor by FANNY TAYLOR.

CHARACTERS

in order of appearance:

COLONEL FORBES

STELLA

JANET

BRENDA

MAURICE

COLIN

IRIS

MR. HOWARD

NURSE THOMSON

*The scene is the library of an old house in the country not far from London.
The time is the present.*

ACT ONE

A winter morning

ACT TWO

The same evening

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE The following afternoon

SCENE TWO A few hours later

No reference is intended, in this play, to any person, alive or dead.

The running time of this play, excluding intervals, is approximately two hours.

PRODUCTION NOTE

In repertory and amateur theatre varied choice in casting may not exist. Nevertheless, in producing *The House by the Lake* the cardinal principle of casting "against type" should be followed as closely as possible.

Janet's character, for example, has certain qualities of submissiveness and flexibility which could seem tiresome if the part were played by an actress in whose own personality these attributes were very noticeably present. If, on the other hand, Janet is played by a woman of marked strength of character, then the temperament of the actress will be found to blend with that of Janet and a three-dimensional and theatrically effective stage character will emerge.

Similarly Maurice could be an excessively unsympathetic creature if not played by an actor of considerable natural charm. Stella could become melodramatic if depicted by too hard a personality and Colin, in particular, could easily become "unbelievable" if "cast to type".

Mr. Howard, of course, is purposely written as a somewhat nebulous character. His true nature it is his business to conceal. He should be played by an actor in whom a pleasant but vague personality can be shown to hide a sharp apprehension of all that he sees going on about him.

As for Brenda, the maid, it is vitally important that she should be played, as she is written, perfectly "straight". The damage to the play's development and to its atmosphere will be enormous if Brenda is allowed to turn, even slightly, into the stock, comic servant.

As to the play itself let us take it act by act.

The main problem in the opening of Act One is to arouse the audience's interest in the information the author must give them during the first twenty minutes or so and which he does without the slightest attempt to titillate that interest by any particularly exciting theatrical device. A good pace must be obtained by the producer from the very beginning and it must be kept going. Colonel Forbes must not be allowed to become a bore and everything possible must be done to make him lovable and sympathetic. He is one of the few completely normal human beings in the play and the audience can be induced to have a fellow-feeling for him as soon as they begin to realize what a curious set of characters he has come among.

Stella has the hard task of putting over the essential facts, but her explanations will be made interesting if it is clear that she is under great emotional stress as a result of what she and her brother have decided to do that evening.

Janet's first appearance brings further explanations, but these will have an overtone of interest if Stella's attitude towards them is clearly marked and if it conveys a hint of the forces at work of which Janet knows nothing.

With Maurice's entrance the act begins to move with its own momentum and by the time he and his sister are alone together to discuss how the murder is to be carried out the play has got well under way.

Janet's decision not to go out to dinner is a striking theatrical effect and the reactions to it of Maurice and Stella should not be missed.

Colin's scene should be powerful but not overplayed and the producer should not overlook the comedy which colours the poignancy of Iris's duologue with Janet.

Comedy, too, as well as a feeling of mystery, pervades the short scene with Mr. Howard. Finally, in Janet's telephone conversation, which brings down

the curtain of this act, it is, of course, important that the audience know that Janet *might*, after all, return home early.

Act Two. This is a fast-moving straightforward act, but there is one danger against which a producer must be on his guard: the succession of embarrassments suffered by Maurice and Stella, at being prevented from disposing of the body according to plan, must never relapse into bathos and become inappropriately comic. The different events—Brenda's return and her potterings in and out of the room, Janet's unexpectedly early reappearance—must be handled with variety. For example, not all of them should happen without warning and Janet's entrance, in particular, should be anticipated by both the conspirators and the audience by some such device as "voices off" or the sound of the opening front door. Failure to achieve this will bring unwanted laughter.

Another possible cause of unintentional comedy can be the cupboard—and the whole area round the cupboard—into which the body is placed. The audience must be allowed to forget this cupboard as much as possible once the body is inside. If it is too prominently placed in the scene or too brightly lit, or if too much emphasis is placed on it by the reactions of the conspirators, the tension of the audience will release itself in titters which will ruin the scene.

Finally, the conspirators must not allow their acting to become melodramatic: their attitude, both before and after the murder must be matter-of-fact and businesslike, cool and calculating.

Act Three. The matter-of-fact and businesslike approach should prevail in the first scene of this act in so far as the acting of the detective and also of Maurice and Stella is concerned. If this is done the growing distress of Janet will be thrown effectively into relief. Maurice's attitude towards his wife, when he realizes that the knowledge she possesses must mean her removal will be frightening in proportion to the lack of colour he puts into his performance. In the final scene again the belief in his power to hypnotize effectively will disappear if the slightest trace of melodrama is allowed to creep into his acting.

The hypnotism scene must be a *tour-de-force* for the actress who plays Janet. There can be no short cuts in learning how to play it, but this can be said, that it is a long scene, and that every possibility of variety of pitch, tempo and volume must be exploited in the playing. If variety is not achieved in sufficient degree the audience will become restless, longing, as they are, to see just exactly how Maurice is going to get her to shoot herself. Once the gun is in Janet's hands, the producer is in some difficulty for the play is virtually over, bar the eleventh hour twist which the audience is expecting. The counting must not be dragged—the detective should make his presence felt as Janet says sixteen or so (earlier is perfunctory, later loses tension), and, finally, he should enter the room somewhere about the late forties or early fifties (later than this would provoke the inevitable laugh).

Finally, it should be remembered that this play is not truly a "thriller", but a play of characterization and atmosphere. The producer must not take a rushed tempo; neither must he be slow. Above all he must see that his actors perform with sincerity, and with that sense of an inner world of thought and feeling of which the words they speak are but the audible, and partial, expression.

JOHN FERNALD

THE HOUSE BY THE LAKE

ACT ONE

The scene is the living-room of MAURICE HOLT's house in the country, not far from London.

It is one of those large and rather gloomy Victorian houses and the room gives an impression of shabby grandeur. But it has a certain dignity and, many years ago, before it became so poverty-stricken, it must have been, in its dark, Gladstonian manner, very comfortable if somewhat grim.

Everything in it is old: old books on the shelves, one or two old pictures on the walls, one or two old leather chairs and a sofa.

There are very high french windows at the back leading into the garden. Outside there is snow and they are closed. The fireplace is in the right wall. Up right there is a door leading to the kitchen and other parts of the house and up left, another, leading to the hall. Near the latter, in a deep recess, there is a large, built-in cupboard with a solid, mahogany door exactly like the others. In this corner, up left, there is also a very small window.

When the curtain rises there is no one present. After a moment, however, COLONEL FORBES appears outside the french windows; quite a fine old English gentleman: tall, thin, slightly aquiline—nothing soft or flabby about him. He suggests, in fact, considerable strength of character—a formidable old boy, but gentle.

He is well wrapped up against the cold. He gently taps on the glass.

COL. FORBES. Anyone at home?

(He taps on the window again. Then he whistles, not very successfully, clears his throat and calls again.)

Hullo there!

(STELLA enters from the kitchen. She is a plump, pale woman of about thirty-eight with short hair and a tight-fitting suit. No jewellery.)

STELLA. Oh! Excuse me! One minute! I'll let you in!

(She opens the french windows, lets him in and then closes them again.)

COL. FORBES. Thank you. Good morning.

STELLA. Good morning, Colonel. I'm sorry about that.

COL. FORBES. Tried the front door. No reply.

STELLA. The maid's out. We were all upstairs.

COL. FORBES. Me own fault. Shouldn't call on people unexpectedly at eleven in the morning! But I had to pass the house. Thought I'd try me luck.

STELLA. Do sit down. Would you like some coffee?

COL. FORBES. Oh no . . . no, thanks. Never touch it. Heart, you know.

STELLA. I'm sorry. I *didn't* know.

COL. FORBES. No reason why you should.

STELLA. Is that recent?

COL. FORBES. Not very. Result of the Boat Race, 1920. Is your brother in, Miss Holt?

STELLA. He's in . . . yes. But . . . well, he's not up yet.

COL. FORBES. Ah. Ah. Then I'll call again.

STELLA. If you can wait a few minutes . . .

COL. FORBES. No, no . . . in a way it's rather a relief.

STELLA. A relief?

COL. FORBES. I'm a bit frightened of this . . . this . . . don't know what to call it really. This mission.

STELLA (*puzzled*). Mission?

COL. FORBES. Yes. Mission.

(COLONEL FORBES *stares about him, his mouth working nervously.*)

STELLA (*after a moment*). Well . . . of course I don't know what your mission is. But I can't imagine you being frightened of anyone, Colonel. Certainly not of my brother.

COL. FORBES (*letting out a deep breath*). Well . . . I am.

STELLA. Oh?

COL. FORBES. However . . . as he isn't up . . . it will have to be later.

STELLA. Well, you know he goes to bed very late. He sleeps very little. And anyway he hasn't very much to get up for . . . nowadays.

COL. FORBES. Well . . . perhaps he has, this morning. I'd like to think so.

STELLA. Would you care to tell *me* about it?

COL. FORBES. Well . . . at least you'll be able to advise me on the best approach.

STELLA. Do sit down, Colonel.

COL. FORBES (*doing so*). The thing is this. I think your brother . . . well, I think I might be able to help him.

STELLA. Yes?

COL. FORBES. About . . .

(*He hesitates.*)

STELLA. About his professional situation?

COL. FORBES. That's it.

STELLA. I can't imagine how.

COL. FORBES. Miss Holt, the new Chairman of the Medical Council is Sir Gordon White. A life-long friend of mine. We were at Eton together.

STELLA. And you think?

COL. FORBES. He should be able to help if anyone can . . .

STELLA. Do you mean with a view to . . .

COL. FORBES. I mean with a view to getting your brother back on the Medical Register. That's what I mean.

STELLA (*after a moment's pause*). It's extremely kind of you to have thought of this.

COL. FORBES. Not a bit. The only question is . . . would your brother . . . well, would he resent my, my, my . . . my interfering?

STELLA. I shall have to be quite frank about this, Colonel. I think he might. Please don't misunderstand me . . . it wouldn't be because it came from you . . . it would be the same whoever it was . . . Do please believe that. But the fact is my brother's very . . .

(*She stops.*)

COL. FORBES. Sensitive. Yes. I can see that.

STELLA. It's made a horrible mess of things.

COL. FORBES. Yes. We should have to be diplomatic. Clever. And I'm not very clever.

STELLA. Also . . .

COL. FORBES. Yes?

STELLA (*with an effort*). I think it's too late anyway.

COL. FORBES. Why?

STELLA. I don't think . . . even if he had the chance . . . that my brother would be likely to practise again . . . ever. At least not in England.

COL. FORBES. He's quite young. How old is he? Forty-five or fifty?

STELLA. It isn't a question of age, Colonel. The point is that for nearly ten years he's been . . . well, let's face it . . . in disgrace. What

happened was exceedingly unjust. You don't imagine that living under such a cloud as that for so long has no effect.

COL. FORBES. Well, perhaps I'd better go and mind my own business.

STELLA. You haven't spoken to anyone, have you?

COL. FORBES. Haven't said a word. Talked it over with me wife. Came along here on her advice to talk it over with him. (*Rising.*) Seems to me that someone ought to do something. Stupid, this sort of thing.

STELLA. What made you think of this?

COL. FORBES. Well, I'll tell you. It's very interesting. I was talking to a fellow a week or two ago . . . member of my club . . . used to be a patient of your brother's. Don't know how we got on to the subject. Think I mentioned your brother was one of my neighbours down here. He talked about him for half an hour without stopping. Said he owed your brother everything he has. And he has plenty. Lovely wife . . . beautiful children . . . big position. Very happy normal type of fellow, you'd say. But apparently when your brother began to treat him he'd been for seven years in a mental home.

STELLA. Yes. I think I know whom you mean . . . though he wasn't the only one.

COL. FORBES. Seems a great pity that such a useful life as your brother's should be . . . well . . . thrown away. Thrown away.

STELLA. It's more than a great pity. It's a very great crime.

(They turn as JANET enters up right. JANET is in the forties. She is beautiful, with dark hair and dark eyes. There is something strange about her, an air of sorrow and of resignation. She has been marked by some unhappiness. But she is graceful and slender, making her sister-in-law seem hefty in the contrast. She wears a soft, close-fitting Shetland sweater and a full skirt, both black. Her only ornament is a necklace of pearls.)

JANET. Oh! Colonel Forbes! Good morning! I didn't know you were here.

COL. FORBES. Good morning, Mrs. Holt.

JANET. Do you want to see my husband?

COL. FORBES. Well, I *did*. But after talking to your sister-in-law I . . . well we . . . we, we think it might be a mistake.

JANET (*astonished*). A mistake?

STELLA. A very great friend of the Colonel's has become Chairman of the Medical Council. The Colonel was wondering whether to approach him.

JANET. About Maurice!

STELLA. Naturally.

COL. FORBES. Of course I was going to ask your husband first. But Miss Holt thinks I shouldn't do anything.

JANET. *Why* do you think he shouldn't?

STELLA. You know Maurice as well as I do, Janet. He would hate it.

JANET. I wonder if you're right about that.

STELLA. I'm sure I am.

JANET. In any case I don't think this is a thing that *we* should decide.

I think the Colonel should talk to him. I think *Maurice* should decide.

STELLA. Well, of course, Janet dear. But you always do think Maurice should decide everything.

JANET (*with a smile*). You see, Colonel? I'm the perfectly dutiful, submissive wife. My sister-in-law laughs at me.

STELLA. However, I wasn't striking at Maurice's authority, Janet. I was only trying to protect him from something that I think might hurt him uselessly.

JANET. Still, it's a vitally important decision, Stella. Suppose we discovered years from now . . . when it was too late . . . that we'd done the wrong thing. (*To COLONEL FORBES.*) You think this might make it possible, really, for him to work again?

COL. FORBES. It *might*. I wouldn't say more than that.

JANET. Oh, my God, if only that were possible. Colonel Forbes, do you know *why* he was struck off the Medical Register?

COL. FORBES. Vaguely. Don't know the details, of course.

JANET. But there are no details. It was the simplest thing in the world.

STELLA. Janet, is there any need to go into all . . .

JANET. But of course there is! If he's going to talk to Maurice! (*To COLONEL FORBES.*) The whole disaster was caused by Maurice's and Stella's brother, Colin.

STELLA. Step-brother.

JANET. You haven't met him, I think.

COL. FORBES. No.

JANET. He's a financier. He lives in Grey Towers, that big house on the other side of the lake. You can see it from here. My husband was treating a patient . . . a woman . . . who was very rich. Her name was Mrs. Hoyle. A widow. He allowed her to invest some money in a company his step-brother was forming. And when I say "allowed her", I mean it. She was very insistent indeed. She was passionately devoted to investing money in private companies. Unfortunately this one went wrong. She lost two thousand pounds.

She was worth two *hundred* thousand. But she didn't take it quite so sportingly as she might have done. She brought a legal action against my husband and since he also had shares in this company it was easily made to look very bad. A psychiatrist who influences a patient to invest in . . . well, you can see.

STELLA. Incidentally, my brother had used hypnosis in treating her . . .

JANET. You can imagine the headlines—defenceless widow swindled by hypnotist, etc. Since then of course he's been disgraced and not allowed to work. Mrs. Hoyle died about a year ago. She left nearly two hundred thousand pounds for the foundation of homes for lost cats throughout Europe.

(BRENDA enters from the hall. BRENDA is the maid. She is tall and thin and quite elderly. She has white hair and blue eyes and she speaks very gently and musically with a slight Irish accent. She is wearing a coat over her white apron.)

BRENDA. I'm sorry to trouble you, ma'am, but a gentleman is at the front door.

JANET. Who is he, Brenda?

BRENDA. He says his name is Mr. Howard, ma'am.

JANET. Mr. Howard? I don't know a Mr. Howard. What does he want?

BRENDA. I don't rightly know, ma'am. He asked for Mr. Holt and when I said he wasn't up he asked could he speak to you.

JANET. I'll come and see. Brenda, would you go upstairs and ask Dr. Holt to come down? Colonel Forbes would like to see him.

BRENDA. Surely, ma'am.

JANET. Excuse me. One minute.

(JANET goes out to hall and BRENDA up right. COLONEL FORBES takes his coat off.)

STELLA. Well, there we are.

COL. FORBES *(smiling)*. Mrs. Holt seems to know her own mind.

STELLA. Oh. On the contrary.

COL. FORBES *(puzzled)*. I beg your pardon?

STELLA. A mind of her own is exactly what Janet does not have. You'll see. All she wanted, you know, was not to decide anything without asking him. That would have upset her very much.

COL. FORBES *(with a twinkle)*. I must tell my wife about that!

STELLA. You find it abnormal. She was once very ill, you know.

COL. FORBES. She looks very well now. A little pale, perhaps.

STELLA. Oh, it wasn't a physical illness. Janet was what is called a manic depressive. She was unhappy to the point of suicide.

COL. FORBES (*horrified*). She tried to commit suicide? Mrs. Holt? But I . . . I can't believe that. She seems such a sweet person.

STELLA. Sweet people aren't barred from being unhappy.

COL. FORBES. You mean she really tried to kill herself? Or just threatened to?

STELLA. Well, she was found unconscious in a room full of gas with the door and the windows sealed on two different occasions. I suppose you wouldn't call that a mere threat?

COL. FORBES. Good God! I'd no idea. But . . . aren't you afraid she'll do it again?

STELLA. Not at all.

COL. FORBES. What, what . . . what was the cause of it?

STELLA. Well, a sort of profound anguish—melancholia. Due to all sorts of miseries when she was young.

COL. FORBES. And it's over?

STELLA. Yes. It's over.

COL. FORBES. Completely?

STELLA. Completely. She's cured.

(MAURICE enters up right. He is wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown. The moment one sees him one realizes that STELLA is right and that he will probably not work again. But in this derelict there are signs still of the splendid man he was.)

MAURICE. Good morning, Colonel. Forgive me for receiving you like this. I didn't know which day you were coming.

COL. FORBES. You didn't know I was coming at all!

MAURICE. Oh yes. I expected you.

COL. FORBES. How's that? I sent no message.

MAURICE. As a matter of fact I expected you several days ago.

COL. FORBES (*astonished*). You did? But why?

MAURICE. I'll even tell you why you're here. Which will save you a lot of discomfort . . . since you're feeling so nervous about it.

You've come to, well, to ask if you can do something to help me.

COL. FORBES (*after a moment*). Has my wife been talking to you?

MAURICE. No.

COL. FORBES. What else do you know?

MAURICE. Oh, nothing much. Except that you want to speak to Sir Gordon White about me.

COL. FORBES. Well I'm damned!

(*He looks at STELLA, bewildered. Then at MAURICE again.*

MAURICE *stares at him gravely.*)

Well, you're quite right. But how do you do it?

MAURICE. I read about Gordon White's appointment a month or two ago. And then . . . about a fortnight ago . . . you mentioned that you knew him very well. I wondered why, but I didn't think about it until Sunday night, when we were at your house and you mentioned him again, dragging him into the conversation with great difficulty. Your wife immediately left the room for no very good reason. And then . . . though you made a desperate effort to do so . . . you didn't manage to say anything. So of course I began to wonder what was in your mind. That was all. It was very simple.

COL. FORBES. Was it?

MAURICE. Then—once I realized what was coming—I tried to decide when to expect it. I said to myself "The colonel is a slow starter but not a man to run away from anything. In a day or two he'll probably come round here to beard the lion in its own den. And," I said to myself, "he'll come during the morning because—when he's finally ready—he'll want to get it over as early in the day as possible". Unfortunately of course I couldn't know which day. I didn't want to get up unnecessarily early in the morning for perhaps a week. (*With a rather pathetic gesture of apology for his appearance.*) So you'll have to excuse . . . this.

(*JANET comes back.*)

JANET. Ah, there you are, Maurice. Has Colonel Forbes told you what he has in mind?

MAURICE (*unsmiling as ever*). Yes, my dear. He's told me.

JANET. And what do you think?

MAURICE. What do I think?

JANET. What are you going to do?

MAURICE. Nothing.

COL. FORBES. The idea doesn't . . . I mean . . . it doesn't displease you?

MAURICE. Oh, it's nothing to do with that. It's out of the question, that's all.

JANET. Are you sure?

MAURICE (*shaking his head*). It's impossible. I couldn't.

JANET. But surely, Maurice—

MAURICE (*very loudly and tormentedly*). No!

(*There is a long, embarrassed pause. No one moves. A rather surprising change occurs in JANET. Her lips tremble and her hands*

fidget nervously together. She is a little like a child who has been harshly rebuked.)

JANET. I'm sorry, Maurice.

MAURICE. It's all right.

JANET. I didn't mean to annoy you.

MAURICE. All right, all right.

JANET. Please forgive me.

MAURICE. Yes, my dear—don't worry.

JANET (*quite distressed*). No, but forgive me, Maurice. Say it. (*She seems totally unconcerned by the presence of the others and only desperately anxious to get back into MAURICE's good books.*)

MAURICE. I forgive you, Janet, it was nothing.

JANET (*very meekly*). Yes, but kiss me. Forgive me properly.

MAURICE (*takes a step to JANET and kisses her forehead*). Now Janet, there. It doesn't matter.

JANET (*as before*). Thank you.

MAURICE (*as though to a child*). Forget all about it.

JANET. Yes, Maurice.

MAURICE (*turns to COLONEL FORBES*). Excuse the domestic scene, Colonel. We're all a little bit on edge in this house at times. And thank you, incidentally, for your very kind . . . offer.

COL. FORBES. Will you think it over?

(MAURICE *shakes his head*.)

It's a pity. I think I could pull something off.

MAURICE. I'm afraid it's too late for them to change their minds now. They had their own way—they turned me out. They wanted to ruin me—they said so—and they did.

COL. FORBES. Oh, come now . . .

MAURICE (*with a rather painful attempt at a smile*). I used to be full of all sorts of idealistic notions! I used to tell myself that my job was to try to understand people so well . . . that I could help them to understand themselves a little better. And then this happened and I had a shock. I suddenly realized that I didn't understand people at all! I could find nothing but greed, vindictiveness, jealousy . . . meanness, cruelty, fear. Not in people who were ill. In people who were very well—and busily engaged in curing others! Well, we won't go into all that again. As far as Harley Street's concerned I'm not interested. And I never shall be.

COL. FORBES (*after a moment*). Are you sure?

MAURICE. Colonel Forbes, there are too many people in the profession who know. I've faced their vindictiveness. (*Sarcastically.*) I'm afraid their kindness would be *too* much.

COL. FORBES. Holt. You don't think this attitude is . . . rather weak?

MAURICE. Not at all. I deal with the world as it deals with me. People want to be tough? All right, I can be tough. It's a kind of strength.

(COLONEL FORBES *picks up his coat.*)

COL. FORBES. And all this was the fault of your step-brother?

MAURICE. Who told you that?

JANET. I did, Maurice. We were talking . . . before you came down.

MAURICE. Well, yes . . . it was.

COL. FORBES. It must be terrible for him.

MAURICE (*amazed*). Terrible for *him*? Good heavens! He doesn't give a damn.

COL. FORBES. He doesn't give a damn?

MAURICE. It didn't do him any harm, Colonel. Except financially. And he soon recovered from that.

COL. FORBES. I didn't mean financially.

MAURICE. No. I know you didn't. You meant the appalling remorse of having caused so much unhappiness. Well, there's no remorse. That's why I say he doesn't give a damn.

STELLA. He could have saved the situation anyway. He could have thrown in the resources of another of his companies to save the one that was in trouble.

MAURICE. All right, Stella.

STELLA. Oh, why not say it? (*To COLONEL FORBES.*) Of course that would have risked the second company as well! He felt that wouldn't be quite fair to the shareholders!

MAURICE. Quite. Well . . . never mind.

STELLA. Some years later we discovered that the shareholders in the second company were simply himself and his wife!

MAURICE (*angrily*). Stella!

STELLA. Well, it's true!

MAURICE. I'm sorry all this dirty linen should be washed in front of you, Colonel. It's not very pleasant for you.

(*A moment's pause. Then COLONEL FORBES holds out his hand.*)

COL. FORBES. Come and see us again soon.

MAURICE. With pleasure. Janet, will you ring for Brenda?

COL. FORBES. You too, Miss Holt.

STELLA. Thank you, Colonel.

(JANET goes to the fireplace and rings the bell. COLONEL FORBES puts on his coat.)

MAURICE. I see they're still skating out there on the lake. Isn't it becoming rather dangerous? It was beginning to thaw yesterday.

COL. FORBES. I'm going to stop them tomorrow.

MAURICE. In nineteen sixty-four they left it a little late, I seem to remember.

COL. FORBES. In nineteen sixty-four I wasn't Chief Constable! (He shakes hands with JANET.)

(BRENDA appears from kitchen no longer wearing her coat, and crosses with COLONEL FORBES to hall door.)

Well . . . thank you all for receiving me damned interference with so much restraint!

JANET (as he goes). Good-bye, Colonel. My kind regards to Mrs. Forbes.

COL. FORBES (disappearing). Thank you. Good-bye, Miss Holt.

(BRENDA sees COLONEL FORBES out, returns, closing hall door, crosses to kitchen door and goes out, closing it behind her.)

JANET. What a kind man.

MAURICE. Very.

JANET. I don't understand why you're so worried about the skating, darling. That's twice you've mentioned it.

MAURICE. I don't think so.

JANET. You said yesterday that you didn't think Colin and Iris ought to walk across the ice to get from their house to this one.

MAURICE. Well we . . . don't want an accident, do we? Whatever our personal feelings may be about each other.

JANET. Has Colin agreed to the sale of the mill?

MAURICE. No.

JANET. What are you going to do?

MAURICE. Well, Janet, I rang him up this morning and offered to increase his share of the proceeds a little.

JANET. At the expense of ours?

MAURICE. Of course.

JANET. How much of our share did you offer him?

MAURICE. A thousand. I thought that might tempt him into closing with the offer.

JANET. Did it?

MAURICE. No.

JANET. But Maurice, dear, what *does* he want? The mill remains idle, rotting. Twenty thousand pounds! He's raving. Does he hope someone will offer more for it?

MAURICE. I don't know what he hopes. He goes on saying, as he always has done "I don't think we should sell".

JANET (*angrily*). He's doing it to spite you. He knows you need your share. That would be enough to make him refuse to sell.

MAURICE. I don't think there's much you can tell me and Stella about our dear stepbrother, Janet. We've had a lifetime of it.

JANET. I should like to talk to him.

MAURICE. I'd rather you didn't.

JANET. I might be able to persuade him . . . to touch him in some way. Don't you think so, Stella darling?

STELLA. I'm afraid I don't!

MAURICE. In any case I don't want you to try, Janet.

JANET. Then of course I shan't.

MAURICE. I'd like you to leave us now—I want to talk to Stella.

JANET. For long?

MAURICE. Just a few minutes.

JANET (*with a little sigh*). Very well.

(*She goes to the hall door. There she turns.*)

Will you let me know when I can come back?

MAURICE (*patiently*). You can come back in a few minutes, Janet.

JANET. By the way, a man called. Looking for Colin. A Mr. Howard.

Was that about it?

MAURICE. About what?

JANET. Well, about the sale of the Brocklebank Saw Mills.

MAURICE. I've no idea. What did he say?

JANET. Nothing. I told him it was the house on the other side of the lake.

MAURICE. Probably someone to whom Colin owes money.

JANET. Oh, how clever of you! That's exactly what he looked like!

(*She withdraws, in her strange, submissive way. Left alone,*

MAURICE and STELLA stare at the door for a moment and then adopt a tone both secretive and tense.)

MAURICE. All right. Now let's go over it all once again. And *think*, Stella. Think of every possible hitch.

STELLA. We've thought of everything.

MAURICE. We can't be too careful. Colin will come at about eight o'clock. (*Very thoughtfully*.) Eight o'clock. There's no danger of his

bringing Iris. He hates her to be there when we're talking business. And, anyway, she's going to a whist drive. She won't be home before eleven.

(A moment's pause.)

STELLA. We shall have finished dinner by nine. I'll leave the table first. I'll prepare the coffee in here. Keep him in the dining-room until I call you.

MAURICE. How much of the stuff have you got?

STELLA. Two grains.

MAURICE. Where is it?

STELLA. Upstairs. I'll put it into my bag before dinner and bring it down.

(Another moment of silence. MAURICE looks about, thinking, planning. STELLA keeps her eyes fixed on him.)

MAURICE. Janet won't get back from the Davidsons' before ten-thirty. What about Brenda?

STELLA. She's going to the pictures. They come out at ten-fifteen. I've inquired.

MAURICE. Ten-fifteen.

STELLA. She gets the ten twenty-five bus. It puts her down at the gate at quarter to eleven.

MAURICE *(after a moment's thought)*. We're going to say he never turned up. What about the plates?

STELLA. I shall say I'm not well. I shall eat nothing. Three places will have been laid and only two of them used.

(Another pause.)

MAURICE. Now. About the rest. The pathways have all been swept. And there'll be no footprints on the ice anyway.

STELLA. Is it thawing still?

MAURICE. A little.

STELLA. What was the forecast?

MAURICE. A general thaw beginning this morning. It's perfect. The impression will be that he went through the ice on the way here. Just an ordinary accident.

STELLA. What about the pick-axe?

MAURICE. I'll leave it ready by the lake. At half-past ten or eleven no doubt Iris will telephone to ask when to expect him. If everything goes according to plan that will be the first inquiry. After that we must expect more and more questions. But we have only one answer to give. We waited for an hour and then had dinner. Will there be

anyone in . . . over there . . . after he and Iris have left? Is it Maisie's night out?

STELLA. That is the only thing I can't be sure about.

MAURICE. Why not?

STELLA. It isn't her night off—officially. But as neither Colin nor Iris will be there she might easily go out.

MAURICE. You must ring up in case she's there. At nine o'clock. While you're making the coffee. We wouldn't sit here waiting without doing that. Talk normally. Say we can't think why he isn't here. What time did he leave . . . and so on. Put the gramophone on. Something loud. Keep it playing until you're ready for us. When the music stops I'll bring him in. I think that's all.

STELLA. There's one possibility we haven't considered, Maurice.

MAURICE (*quickly*). What?

STELLA. The possibility that Colin will come here tonight to *agree*.

MAURICE. To agree?

STELLA. To the sale of Brocklebank's.

MAURICE (*after a moment*). Well?

STELLA. He may.

MAURICE. Well of course he may!

STELLA. And in that event . . . ?

(*She stops.*)

MAURICE (*sarcastically*). In that event what? Let him go home after dinner? With our blessing? And then settle down to another ten years of this? Could you?

STELLA (*softly*). No.

MAURICE. Nor could I. I'm at the end. (*With a touch of desperation.*)

I must have . . . somehow, from somewhere . . . money for Janet. And there's no other way of getting enough. Strange how this problem always comes back to Janet. You and I could go to the other end of the world and make a fresh start . . . on almost nothing. We *must*, Stella, we *must*. I have a right to that, surely. To work again . . . to function. It's insane otherwise. But as long as Janet and I are roped together . . . no . . . Janet must stand on her own feet.

STELLA. I don't think Janet *wants* to stand on her own feet.

MAURICE. Of course she doesn't want to . . . but that doesn't mean she won't be able to . . . once she has no choice. Good God, if I were dead Janet would marry someone else within a year . . . and settle down to a healthy, normal life, I'm sure of it. And the same

thing would happen if you and I could only go away . . . once we were out of reach . . . gone for good. But I can't go away and leave her with insufficient means . . . that's out of the question.

STELLA (*very softly and thoughtfully*). After I leave the table . . . coffee . . . telephone call . . . you'll have to keep him talking for five or six minutes.

MAURICE. We shan't move till the music stops.

STELLA. I think . . .

(*Hearing a sound MAURICE holds up his hand and interrupts her.*

They listen. After a second JANET comes back.)

JANET. Is it all right, now?

MAURICE. Of course, Janet.

STELLA (*casually*). Darling, what time do you have to be at the Davidsons' tonight?

JANET. Oh . . . I don't think I'm going.

(*They both turn to her in some astonishment.*)

MAURICE. Why not?

JANET. Did you want me to go?

MAURICE. I said why have you changed your mind, Janet?

JANET. Well, I decided that as you and Stella weren't going it didn't interest me. I'd rather be with you. Aren't you pleased?

MAURICE. It isn't that, Janet dear. I think Stella and I must talk to Colin alone.

JANET. But why, Maurice? I know all about it and Colin *knows* I know all about it. Why keep me out of it?

MAURICE. I just don't like you to be involved in things like this, darling. It's a sordid, depressing family affair. It's for me and Stella to deal with. For our sins we've been dealing with Colin all our lives. We're used to it.

JANET. Yes, and he's always got the better of you. It might be a good thing if I joined in. Anyway, I can't go now. I've told Joyce not to expect me.

STELLA. But when did you do that, dear?

JANET. This morning. After breakfast. I rang her up.

MAURICE (*very gently*). Well now, Janet. You must ring her up again. (*Taking her hands in his.*) Tell her you've changed your mind once more. She won't be surprised. You often do that. And you'll go there to dinner as arranged. And Stella and I will have had a dreary evening and you'll come back at bedtime and make us laugh. You see?

JANET. But I don't want to do that.

MAURICE. Are you sure you don't?

JANET. Positive.

MAURICE. I think you're wrong.

JANET. Surely I ought to know what I want to do, darling.

MAURICE. But you said yesterday you were looking forward to it. It's always fun there, you said. Good dinner. Amusing people. Probably some lovely music.

JANET. Well, yes . . . I would have enjoyed it, of course.

MAURICE. And what about Roland Young? Isn't he going to be there after all?

JANET. I imagine so.

MAURICE. Well . . . but you wanted to meet him.

JANET. Yes. Yes, I did.

MAURICE. And you do still. Don't you?

JANET. I . . . it would amuse me, yes. Only . . .

MAURICE. Only what, my dear?

JANET. Well, I don't know . . . I thought I didn't really care terribly . . . and I thought you might prefer me to stay.

MAURICE. No, no. I've told you what I would like. I'd like you to enjoy your evening and then come and tell me all about it. I should love that. Be so amusing.

JANET. It is a good idea. How stupid I've been.

MAURICE. It doesn't matter. Just ring up.

JANET. Do you think I can? Again?

MAURICE. But of course.

JANET. Yes. I suppose I can. Very well. I will.

MAURICE. I should do it now.

JANET. I can't yet. Joyce was just going out. She won't be back until lunch-time.

(*STELLA is looking into the garden.*)

STELLA. Good heavens! Here's Colin! (*She opens the french windows.*)

MAURICE (*in surprise*). Colin? What's he doing here at this time of the day?

(*After another moment COLIN comes in from the garden. He is a striking-looking individual but not very pleasing. Short, slight and prematurely bald, he has a clever face; clever but devoid of kindness. He is dressed rather formally, and not at all suitably for the country, in striped trousers, a black coat and Homburg hat.*)

COLIN. Good morning, all!

JANET. How are you, Colin?

COLIN. I'm well, Janet. I trust you are.

MAURICE. What do you want?

COLIN. All right, Maurice. Try to sound a little more genial. (*He takes out a cigarette case and offers JANET a cigarette. She accepts and he lights both hers and his with his lighter.*)

JANET. Is Iris not with you?

COLIN. She'll be here in a few minutes. We're lunching in Town. I was in a hurry to talk to you so I came across the lake.

JANET (*taking the cigarette*). Thank you. Maurice thinks it's getting dangerous . . . you ought to come round by the road.

COLIN. It's very kind of Maurice to think of my safety.

MAURICE. You must look very curious fidgeting across the ice in those clothes. Like some singular beetle nervously crossing a bathroom floor.

COLIN. That is a very affectionate and brotherly remark, Maurice, and I want you to know that I appreciate it. However, let me come to the point. I believe you're acquainted with Colonel and Mrs. Forbes.

MAURICE. Slightly.

COLIN. Slightly? Surely Janet and Mrs. Forbes are quite good friends.

JANET. Yes, I know her.

COLIN. Do you like her?

JANET. Very much.

COLIN. Good. And I'm sure she likes you. Now. It so happens that Mrs. Forbes is on the Council.

MAURICE. What is all this leading up to?

COLIN. Would you like to ask her to do something for me, Janet?

MAURICE. No. She would not.

COLIN. Let Janet answer for herself, Maurice . . . for once. You don't even know what I'm asking yet.

JANET. What is it?

COLIN (*to MAURICE*). When you know what it is you may be in favour. I rather suspect you will be.

MAURICE. Why?

COLIN. You remember the shares I gave you in the Majestic Cinema in the High Street?

MAURICE. Gave?

COLIN. Well . . . the shares I enabled you to acquire. Shall I put it that way?

MAURICE. What about them?

COLIN. Still holding them, aren't you?

MAURICE. I can't sell them. I wish I could.

COLIN. There's still a chance they may be worth something one day, Maurice. But not if the Council grants a licence next Monday morning for the construction of a much bigger cinema with a café and dance hall bang on the opposite side of the street. And I happen to know that such a licence is being asked for.

MAURICE. *How* do you know?

COLIN. Never mind. I do.

MAURICE. And you think that Janet and I can help to get it stopped. Is that it?

COLIN. Well, Janet's a friend of Mrs. Forbes. And Mrs. Forbes is on the Council. Seems a pity if one has influence not to use it.

MAURICE. It's a shame you didn't come a little sooner. Colonel Forbes was here. You could have persuaded *him* to ask Mrs. Forbes. He'd have been only too pleased, I'm sure. He's the Chief Constable, you know.

COLIN. Come now, don't start preaching, Maurice. Business is business.

MAURICE. Well, Janet, do you see what's required of you?

JANET. But it's simply monstrous. You mean you want her to try to stop these people getting their licence just because it's to your advantage?

STELLA. Really, Colin! Can't you ever do *anything* straightforward?

JANET. But even if I *would* ask her she'd never do it.

COLIN. But I'm trying to help you all. Maurice has an interest at stake.

MAURICE. And you thought that would make us rush to the rescue, did you?

COLIN. I didn't think it would make you all stand there moralizing, I must admit.

MAURICE. Well, you'd better go and think up something else.

COLIN. No, Maurice. It's you who'd better do that. And by this evening if you don't mind.

MAURICE. Why?

COLIN. I've got much more in this than you have, Maurice. I'm in it to the tune of twelve thousand pounds. And unfortunately my partner has even more to lose. I have to be able to ring him up to-night—tonight, notice, not tomorrow—and tell him that Mrs. Forbes has been approached. Not will be, notice, has been. Other—

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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