

GASLIGHT®

by Patrick Hamilton

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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GASLIGHT®

First presented at Richmond Theatre, London, on 5th December 1938, with the following cast:

MRS MANNINGHAM

Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies

MR MANNINGHAM

Dennis Arundell

ROUGH

Milton Rosmer

ELIZABETH

Beatrice Rowe

NANCY

Elizabeth Inglis

Produced by Gardner Davies

CHARACTERS

MRS MANNINGHAM, about thirty-four

MR MANNINGHAM, forty-five

ROUGH, an ex-detective, over sixty

ELIZABETH, the Mannings' cook and housekeeper, about fifty

NANCY, the Mannings' maid, nineteen

TWO MEN (non-speaking)

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in a living room on the first floor of a four-storeyed house in London

ACT I Winter. Late afternoon

ACT II Later the same day

ACT III Eleven o'clock that night

Time – the latter part of the nineteenth century

ACT I

A living room on the first floor of a four-storeyed house in a gloomy and unfashionable quarter of London. The latter part of the nineteenth century. Late afternoon.

The room is furnished in all the heavily draped and dingy profusion of the period and yet, amidst this abundance of paraphernalia, an air is breathed of poverty, wretchedness and age.

*There is a fireplace right with a mirror over it and a vase on the mantelpiece. There is a door upstage of the fireplace leading to a little room, a window in the back wall centre, with blinds and curtains, and a door upstage left which leads to a passage and the (unseen) stairs, with a bell-cord hanging beside it. Also upstage left is a cupboard. There is a settee right, downstage of the fireplace, an armchair in front of the fire with a little stool beside it, and a table centre with books and other items on it and chairs beneath it. There is a bureau against the wall downstage left with a Bible on it, a chair in front of it and a lamp upstage of it. Another chair downstage left has **MR MANNINGHAM**'s hat and coat on it. There is another little table with a bottle of medicine upon it and a hook on the wall upstage where a picture has obviously been hanging until recently. The room's general lighting is by means of two incandescent gas mantles to either side of the fireplace.*

*The curtain rises upon the rather terrifying darkness of the late afternoon – the zero hour, as it were, before the feeble dawn of gaslight and tea. In front of the fire, in an armchair, **MR MANNINGHAM** is stretched out and*

sleeping heavily, a newspaper beside him. He is tall, good looking, about forty-five. He is heavily moustached and whiskered. He has a fine figure, and is perhaps a little too well dressed. His manner is suave and authoritative, with a touch of mystery and bitterness. MRS MANNINGHAM is sitting sewing on the settee, a sewing box beside her. She is about thirty-four. She has been good looking, almost a beauty – but now she has a haggard, wan, frightened air, with rings under her eyes, which tell of sleepless nights and worse.

Pause.

From the street below, in the distance, can be heard the intermittent jingling of a muffin man ringing his bell. MRS MANNINGHAM listens to this sound for a few moments, furtively and indecisively, almost as though she is frightened even of this. She rustles quickly over to the window and looks down into the street, then to the bell-cord by the door, which she pulls, then back to her sewing, which she gathers up and puts into the box, at the same time taking a purse from the box.

There is a knock at the door, and ELIZABETH, the cook and housekeeper, enters. She is a stout, amiable, subservient woman of about fifty.

MRS MANNINGHAM signals that her husband is asleep then goes over and whispers to ELIZABETH at the door, giving her some money from the purse.

ELIZABETH exits.

MR MANNINGHAM's eyes open but his position does not change a fraction of an inch.

MR MANNINGHAM What are you doing, Bella?

MRS MANNINGHAM Nothing, dear... (*She moves back to the window to look out*) Don't wake yourself.

There is a pause. She goes to her sewing box, replaces the purse in it and puts the box away, then moves to the window again.

MR MANNINGHAM (*closing his eyes again*) What are you doing, Bella? Come here...

MRS MANNINGHAM *hesitates then moves to her husband.*

MRS MANNINGHAM Only for tea, my dear. Muffins – for tea...
(*She takes his hand*)

MR MANNINGHAM Muffins... Eh...?

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes, dear... He only comes so seldom...
I thought I might surprise you.

MR MANNINGHAM Why are you so apprehensive, Bella? I was not about to reproach you.

MRS MANNINGHAM (*nervously releasing his hand*) No, dear.
I know you weren't. (*She moves back to the window*)

MR MANNINGHAM This fire's in ashes. Ring the bell, will you, Bella dear, please?

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes... (*She moves towards the bell, but stops*)
Is it merely to put coal on, my dear? I can do that.

MR MANNINGHAM Now then, Bella. We've had this out before.
Be so good as to ring the bell.

MRS MANNINGHAM But, dear – Lizzie's out in the street. Let me do it. I can do it so easily. (*She moves over to the fireplace*)

MR MANNINGHAM (*stopping her with an outstretched hand*)
No, no, no, no, no... Where's the girl? Let the girl come up if Lizzie's out.

MRS MANNINGHAM But, my dear—

MR MANNINGHAM Go and ring the bell, please, Bella – there's a good child.

MRS MANNINGHAM *gives in, and rings the bell.*

What do you suppose the servants are for, Bella?

MRS MANNINGHAM *does not answer. There is a pause.*

Go on. Answer me. What do you suppose servants are for?

MRS MANNINGHAM *(shamefacedly, and scarcely audibly, merely dutifully feeding him)* To serve us, I suppose, Jack...

MR MANNINGHAM Precisely. Then why—?

MRS MANNINGHAM But I think we should consider them a little, that's all.

MR MANNINGHAM Consider them? There's your extraordinary confusion of the mind again. You speak as though they work for no consideration. I happen to consider Elizabeth to the tune of sixteen pounds per annum. And the girl ten. Twenty-six pounds a year all told. And if that is not consideration of the most acute and lively kind, I should like to know what is.

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes, Jack. I expect you are right.

MR MANNINGHAM I have no doubt of it, my dear. It's sheer weak-mindedness to think otherwise. *(Pause)* What's the weather doing? Is it still as yellow?

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes, it seems to be denser than ever. Shall you be going out in this, Jack dear?

MR MANNINGHAM Oh – I expect so. Unless it gets very much worse after tea.

There is a knock at the door. **MRS MANNINGHAM** *hesitates. There is another knock.*

Come in.

NANCY, *the maid, enters. She is a self-conscious, pretty, cheeky girl of nineteen.*

MRS MANNINGHAM *hesitates to tell NANCY why she rang the bell.* **NANCY** *looks at the Mannings.*

NANCY Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought the bell rang...

MR MANNINGHAM Yes, we rang the bell, Nancy... *(Pause)* Go on, my dear, tell her why we rang the bell.

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh... Yes... We want some coal on the fire, Nancy, please.

NANCY looks impudently at MRS MANNINGHAM, and then, with a little smile and toss of the head, goes over and puts coal on the fire.

MR MANNINGHAM *(after a pause)* And you might as well light the gas, Nancy. This darkness in the afternoon is getting beyond endurance.

NANCY Yes, sir. *(She gets the matches, with another barely discernible little smile, and lights the two incandescent mantles during the following)*

MR MANNINGHAM rises, stretches himself, and stands warming his legs in front of the fire. He watches NANCY as she lights the second mantle.

MR MANNINGHAM You're looking very impudent and pretty this afternoon, Nancy. Do you know that?

NANCY I don't know that at all, sir, I'm sure.

MR MANNINGHAM What is it? Another broken heart added to your list?

NANCY I wasn't aware of breaking any hearts, sir.

MR MANNINGHAM I'm sure that's not true. And that complexion of yours. That's not true, either. I wonder what mysterious lotions you've been employing to enhance your natural beauties.

NANCY I'm quite natural, sir. I promise you.

During the following, NANCY moves to the window, lowers the blind and draws the curtains, then lights the lamp left.

MR MANNINGHAM But you do it adroitly, I grant you that. What are your secrets? Won't you tell us the name of your chemist? Perhaps you could pass it on to Mrs Manningham – and help banish her pallor. She would be most grateful, I have no doubt.

NANCY I'd be most happy to, I'm sure, sir.

MR MANNINGHAM Or are women too jealous of their discoveries to pass them on to a rival?

NANCY I don't know, sir... Will that be all you're wanting, sir?

MR MANNINGHAM Yes. That's all I want, Nancy – except my tea.

NANCY I'll be coming directly, sir.

NANCY *exits.*

MRS MANNINGHAM (*after a pause, reproachfully rather than angrily*) Oh, Jack, how *can* you treat me like that?

MR MANNINGHAM But, my dear, you're the mistress of the house. It was your business to tell her to put the coal on.

MRS MANNINGHAM It *isn't* that! It's humiliating me like that. As though I'd do anything to my face, and ask for *her* assistance if I did.

MR MANNINGHAM But you seem to look upon the servants as our natural equals. So I treated her as one. (*He picks up his paper and sits down on the settee*) Besides, I was only trifling with her.

MRS MANNINGHAM It's strange that you can't see how you hurt me. That girl laughs at me enough already.

MR MANNINGHAM Laughs at you? What an idea. What makes you think she laughs at you?

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh – I know she does in secret. In fact, she does so openly – more openly every day.

MR MANNINGHAM But, my dear – if she does that, doesn't the fault lie with you?

MRS MANNINGHAM (*after a pause*) You mean that I am a laughable person?

MR MANNINGHAM I don't mean anything. It's you who read meanings into everything, Bella dear. I wish you weren't such a perfect little silly. Come here and stop it. I've just thought of something rather nice.

MRS MANNINGHAM Something nice? What have you thought of, Jack?

MR MANNINGHAM I shan't tell you unless you come here.

MRS MANNINGHAM (*going over and sitting on the little stool beside him*) What is it, Jack? What have you thought of?

MR MANNINGHAM I read that Mr MacNaughton – the celebrated actor – is in London for another season.

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes. I read that. What of it, Jack?

MR MANNINGHAM What of it? What do you suppose?

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh, Jack dear. Do you mean it? Would you take me to see MacNaughton? You wouldn't take me to see MacNaughton, would you?

MR MANNINGHAM I not only would take you to see MacNaughton, my dear. I am going to take you to see MacNaughton. That is, if you want to go.

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh, Jack! What heaven – what heaven!

MR MANNINGHAM When would you like to go? (*He refers to the newspaper*) You have only three weeks, according to his advertisement.

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh – what perfect heaven! Let me see. Do let me see!

MR MANNINGHAM (*showing her the advertisement*) There. You see? You can see him in comedy or tragedy – according to your choice. Which would you prefer, Bella – the comedy or the tragedy?

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh – it's so hard to say! Either would be equally wonderful. Which would you choose, if you were me?

MR MANNINGHAM Well – it depends – doesn't it – upon whether you want to laugh, or whether you want to cry.

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh – I want to laugh. But then, I should like to cry, too. In fact, I should like to do both. Oh, Jack, what made you decide to take me?

MR MANNINGHAM Well, my dear, you've been very good lately, and I thought it would be well to take you out of yourself.

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh, Jack dear. You have been so much kinder lately. Is it possible you're beginning to see my point of view?

MR MANNINGHAM I don't know that I ever differed from it, did I, Bella?

MRS MANNINGHAM Oh, Jack dear. It's true. It's true. All I need is to be taken out of myself – some little changes – to have some attention from you. Oh, Jack, I'd be *better* – I could really try to be better – you know in what way – if only I could get *out* of myself a little more.

MR MANNINGHAM How do you mean, my dear, exactly, *better*?

MRS MANNINGHAM You know... You know in what way, dear. About – all that's happened lately. We said we wouldn't speak about it.

MR MANNINGHAM Oh, no – don't let's speak about that.

MRS MANNINGHAM No, dear, I don't want to – but what I say is so important. I *have* been better – even in the last week. Haven't you noticed it? And why is it? Because you have stayed in, and been kind to me. The other night when you stayed in and played cards with me, it was like the old days, and I went to bed feeling a normal, happy, healthy human being. And then, the day after, when you read your book to me, Jack, and we sat by the fire, I felt all my love for you coming back, then, Jack. And I slept that night like a child.

All those ghastly dreads and terrible, terrible fears seemed to have vanished. And all just because you had given me your time, and taken me from brooding on myself in this house all day and night.

MR MANNINGHAM I wonder if it is that – or whether it's merely that your medicine is beginning to benefit you?

MRS MANNINGHAM No, Jack, dear, it's not my medicine. I've taken my medicine religiously – haven't I taken it religiously? Much as I detest it! It's more than medicine that I want. It's the medicine of a sweet, sane mind, of being interested in something. Don't you see what I mean?

MR MANNINGHAM Well – we *are* talking about gloomy subjects, aren't we?

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes. I don't want to be gloomy, dear – that's the last thing I want to be. I only want you to understand. Say you understand.

MR MANNINGHAM Well, dear. Don't I seem to? Haven't I just said I'm taking you to the theatre?

MRS MANNINGHAM Yes, dear... Yes, you have. Oh, and you've made me so happy – so happy, dear.

MR MANNINGHAM Well, then, which is it to be – the comedy or the tragedy? You must make up your mind.

MRS MANNINGHAM (*with exulting solemnity*) Oh, Jack, which shall it be? Which *shall* it be? (*She rises and shows her pleasure with delighted gestures*) It matters so little! Do you understand that, my husband! I'm going to the play! (*She kisses him*)

There is a knock on the door.

Come in.

NANCY *enters, carrying a tray with tea things on it, including salt for the muffins. There is a pause as she brings the tray to the fireside, right.*

No, Nancy, I think we'll have it on the table today.

NANCY (*still with impudence*) Oh – just as you wish, madam.

There is a pause as NANCY puts the tray in the centre of the table, arranges the cups and moves the books, et cetera, to one side.

MRS MANNINGHAM (*from her place at the mantelpiece*) Tell me, Nancy – if you were being taken to the play, and had to choose between comedy and tragedy, which would *you* choose?

NANCY Me, madam? Oh – I'd go for the comedy all the time.

MRS MANNINGHAM Would you? Why would you choose comedy, Nancy?

NANCY I like to laugh, madam, I suppose.

MRS MANNINGHAM Do you? Well – I daresay you're right. I must bear it in mind. Mr Manningham's taking me next week, you see.

NANCY Oh yes? I hope you enjoy it. I'll bring out the muffins directly.

NANCY *exits.*

MRS MANNINGHAM *puts out her tongue at NANCY.*

MR MANNINGHAM *sees this.*

MR MANNINGHAM My dear – what are you doing?

MRS MANNINGHAM The little beast! Let her put that in her pipe and smoke it.

MR MANNINGHAM But what has she done?

MRS MANNINGHAM Ah – you don't know her. She tries to torment and score off me all day long. You don't see these things. A man wouldn't. She thinks me a poor thing. And now she can suffer the news that you're taking me to the theatre.