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A Question of Prudence

Shirley MacGregor

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

### A Question of Prudence

Shirley MacGregor

The thirties are making headlines in the entertainment world. Stylized acting, gentle humour, and moral attitudes are back. On Public Television, Broadway, and in the West End, original plays and musical comedies of the thirties are being revived, and many older playwrights are turning to their memoirs for inspiration. A Question of Prudence is a comedy set in that period. It has three acts, five characters -- two women and three men -- and the mise en scène is the empty stage of a London theatre.

This is a lively piece about a high-ranking playwright/director who sets the cat among the pigeons when he decides to replace his regular ingénue with a fresh new face -- and a completely amateur one at that! His leading man considers it a most imprudent move. And the lady who has been passed over, considers it an unforgivable insult to her, and an imposition on the public. For some time all hope of curing the playwright of his aberration seems vain, and the focus changes to a new problem which arises with the introduction of the new ingénue's opportunistic fiancé. But, by the time

this is resolved, our playwright is beginning to realize that he will never get the girl trained in time for opening night; and at last it looks as if everything just might turn out in a way that will benefit them all.

There are many themes running through the play. The strongest is the bond of friendship between the gay playwright and his heterosexual leading man. Some of the others are: the desperation that accompanies the process of aging; greed, jealousy, ambition, and egotism. But all are treated with a light touch. And the combination makes for some warm controversy over a reading and a rehearsal of the play within the play.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A Question of Prudence

by

Shirley MacGregor

A Question of Prudence

A comedy in three acts by Shirley MacGregor

Time: Nineteen thirty-five

Place: London, England

Members of the cast in order of appearance:

CLARENCE ENRIGHT, a celebrated playwright of fifty

MONTY MERIVALE, an actor of forty

LILY FAIRCHILD, a shopgirl of eighteen

SARAH SACKVILLE, an actress of thirty-six

FELIX PHILLPOTTS, LILY'S fiancé -- twenty-five

The voice of TUBBY, the caretaker

The action takes place on stage at the Sovereign Theatre  
in the heart of London's West End



- ACT ONE -

ACT ONE

At rise: We find ourselves on stage at the Sovereign Theatre in London's West End. There are props and dusty flats stacked up against the wall at the back. A card table with three chairs stands slightly stage right of centre. And two more chairs stand side-by-side on stage left. Members of the cast will be dressed in vivid, modish costumes in order to present a brilliant explosion of colour against the singularly drab background of a stage between productions.

CLARENCE ENRIGHT is the first member to walk on. He is in his working gear -- a pair of thick-grained green corduroys topped off by a white cable stitch sweater -- and carries a small pile of scripts. He sits down at the table, facing the audience, and begins to thumb through the top script. A few seconds later, MONTY MERIVALE saunters on. He is a Beau Brummel of the thirties, and he wears an elegant suit -- obviously tailormade for him on Saville Row -- and a flower in his buttonhole. CLARENCE rises and greets him enthusiastically.

CLARENCE

Monty dear, you'll never guess, I've found my Prudence at last!

MONTY

(Pleased.) Have you really? (He advances to the table.)  
Congratulations, old man. I'd begun to think you never would.

CLARENCE

So had I, so had I. (Resumes seat.)

MONTY

I was afraid rehearsals would never get started.

CLARENCE

So was I. (Patting the seat of the chair on his left.) Sit, Monty. I'm grateful you could come at such short notice. I wanted you to read with her right away so that you could share my ecstasy.

MONTY

No need to explain, old chap. (Sits.) Always happy to oblige.

CLARENCE

(Squeezing his hand.) You're terribly good to me, Monty. I hope you're going to be as thrilled about her as I am.

MONTY

So you've found a winner, have you?

CLARENCE

Well, I've certainly made up MY mind about her -- pending your approval, of course.

MONTY

Then she must be good. Who is she?

CLARENCE

Lily. Lily -- er -- Fairchild. (Gripping MONTY'S shoulder eagerly.) My dear chap, you can't imagine what a lovely creature she is. The part's going to fit her like a glove.

MONTY

Lily Fairchild. Pretty name. It's odd though, I can't recall hearing it before. (Pause.) You know, Clarence, I never understood why you didn't offer the part to Sarah.

CLARENCE

You will when you meet Lily.

MONTY

I know Sarah isn't sweet sixteen anymore, but she still has an enormous following, and she's done very well by you in the past. Besides, she and I have always managed to hit it off rather nicely. And then, of course -----

CLARENCE

----- and then, of course, she's been badgering you to get her the part. Is that it? (He pauses. MONTY looks a bit sheepish.) You haven't given her any encouragement, I hope?

MONTY

Well -- not exactly. She's convinced you're only holding out on her for a joke.

CLARENCE

Well, you can tell her from me that I'm NOT -- and that's final.

MONTY

(With a worried sigh.) Sarah's not an easy woman to disappoint. (Pause.) Oh well, The Redemption of Rodney Thornton or Prudence Prevails is your play, not mine. So, if that's your final decision ----- (Softening a bit.) Forgive me, Clarrie, I ought to know I can count on you to fix me up with a top-notch.

CLARENCE

Precisely. And I'm madly enthusiastic about this one. She's YOUNG, Monty, and simply brimming with innocence. That's

what we need ----- INNOCENCE! Though -- (MONTY waits, looking at him enquiringly.) there might be ah -- just the faintest hint of a snag -- no, no, no -- there'll be no difficulty in overcoming it.

MONTY

Good Lord, old thing. Hadn't you better tell me what it is?

CLARENCE

(Rising slowly and beginning to pace the stage.) Oh, very well. But I don't quite know how to explain this to a pro like you, Monty. You see, the truth is, the dear girl hasn't had that much of a past history.

MONTY

Good grief! You're not saddling me with some obscure little nonentity from provincial rep, I hope?

CLARENCE

Well -- er -- the whole thing has been what you might call an intuitive decision on my part really. (MONTY stiffens visibly.) One of those brilliant flashes of foresight I get from time to time. (Reaching for MONTY'S shoulder to press it reassuringly.) Oh, but we're on to something good with her, Monty old man, I know we are.

MONTY

Good God, Clarence! I hope you mean that! (He slumps in his chair, then sits up with a jerk.) She IS a professional, isn't she?

CLARENCE

Now, now, now, stop being so prickly.

MONTY

Well, YOU stop being so damned cryptic then. I suppose she's one of these brilliant hopefuls from RADA, is she?

CLARENCE

W-e-l-l, let's just say that she's eminently suitable for the part. She's ravishingly beautiful, and you're going to adore her. (MONTY looks skeptical.) Yes, I'm sure you're going to love her as much as I.

MONTY

(Exasperatedly.) But what ACTING experience has she had?

CLARENCE

Oh, alright, Monty dear, I'll come clean. I'm not absolutely sure she's had any at all.

MONTY

(Springing from his chair.) WHAT? You don't MEAN that, do you? (Pause.) By God! I believe you do! You're expecting ME, Monty Merivale, to play opposite a complete novice? You brought me thirty miles tonight to read a script with somebody nobody's ever HEARD of? (He mops his brow with his handkerchief.) Clarence, are you sure you haven't taken leave of your senses?

CLARENCE

(Rushing to his side to pacify him.) Oh, my dear chap, you mustn't take on so! There, there, please don't be cross.

MONTY

CROSS?

CLARENCE

She's an absolute angel. You'll be swept off your feet!

(Sits down again, a beatific smile suffusing his face.)

MONTY

Yes, I've heard all that. But can she ACT?

CLARENCE

(Waving his hands like a magician.) I shall MAKE her act.

MONTY

We're not dealing with the "Middle Wallop Little Players Group" here, you know, Clarence. This is the London stage. A move like this would be risky enough in the provinces -- but it could mean disaster here. Think of your reputation. Mmmmmmm yes, and think of mine!

CLARENCE

(Still in his happy trance.) Don't underestimate me, Monty. Wait till you meet her, then you'll understand. (Coming out of his trance, and looking at MONTY severely.) Don't forget I gave you your start in the theatre. I made you, you know.

MONTY

(Nastily.) Huh! You mean, you wish you had!

CLARENCE

Now, now, Monty. Don't be coarse.

MONTY

But look at the difference! Look at the background I had before you took me on! (Thinks for a moment, then softens his tone.) Maybe you'd better tell me the story from the beginning. How did you actually come across this girl?

CLARENCE

I was doing some shopping at Fortnum and Mason's.

MONTY

I see you picked an illustrious setting for the acquisition of your "gem." So you spotted this paragon, did you? Milling around in the crowd of shoppers? And taking a fancy to the cut of her jib, you had the audacity to sally forth and sniggle her for the role of MY leading lady -- without even ascertaining whether she knew how to ACT?

CLARENCE

For MY leading lady. Anyway, it wasn't as crass as that. I was in the linen department, intent on ordering my monogrammed sheets, when out of the blue this superlative face loomed above a mountain of rose-tinted bathtowels. One might almost describe it as a visionary experience!

MONTY

Quite. So setting logic and professional integrity aside, you stepped forward and flung your hoop over the prize, did you?

CLARENCE

Certainly not. In order to secure her attention, I was compelled to join a lengthy queue and purchase two enormous "Velvet Touch" bath blankets -- not even the right shade for my bathroom -- but never mind, they served their purpose, and -----

MONTY

You mean to say she's a shopgirl, Clarence?



CLARENCE

(Silencing him with a look.) ----- and as she was putting them on my account, I leaned across to her and said, "Do you know who I am, sweetie?" And she looked me up and down with that imperious "Prudence" look she has and said, "Is there any reason why I should, Sir?" And then I said, "I'm Clarence Enright, and I want to put you in my new play." And dash me, Monty, if she didn't snap back at me in the haughtiest "Prudence" manner, with "That's what they all say, darling. Will you kindly remove your elbows from the fluffy handtowels and allow the next customer to have his turn?"

MONTY

(Sitting down -- exasperated.) But you can't engage a shopgirl to play the Honorable Prudence Appleby, Clarence!

CLARENCE

Why not? She looked distinctly "Honorable" to me.

MONTY

A shopgirl?

CLARENCE

This is the theatre, Monty. We're all imposters here.

MONTY

Speak for yourself.

CLARENCE

I don't think I care for your tone.

MONTY

Sorry, old man. This whole thing's making me a bit uneasy, that's all.

CLARENCE

I understand. But to continue, if I may?

MONTY

Yes, yes, go on.

CLARENCE

Well, just as she had put me in my place, who but YOUR protégé, Sarah Sackville, should sail up -- simply reeking of "Fleurs de Rocaille" -- and throw her arms around me, shrieking "CLARENCE DARLING" at the top of her voice, "WHEN are you going to begin rehearsals for your new play?" Well, for once, being cornered by La Sackville proved fortuitous! Because now Lily began to pay attention.

MONTY

Then what happened?

CLARENCE

Well, when I had shaken Sarah off, I managed to convince Lily to come and have a brief tête-à-tête with me in the tea shop. God, what a magnificent appetite she has! Two toasted tea-cakes with jam, and a chocolate éclair! (Patting his stomach.) Oh, to be that young again! Unfortunately, before I could discover as much as I should have liked to, the martinet in charge of her department arrived and ordered her back to the bathtowels. I did however ascertain that she's always dreamt of being an actress -- though she'd have preferred to be a film star. But she assures me she'll accept second best ----- why, what is it, Monty?

MONTY

(Spluttering.) SECOND BEST?

CLARENCE

Oh, she hasn't learnt to think as we do yet. She also mentions a fiancé, whose wishes she'll naturally have to consult. However, she foresees little chance of opposition there, so she has consented to come here and read with you tonight.

MONTY

Big of her, I'm sure.

CLARENCE

(Looking anxiously at his wristwatch.) Promise me, Monty, you'll give her all the support you can?

MONTY

It sounds as if she's going to need it.

CLARENCE

(Flicking through the scripts with affected nonchalance.)  
Yes, well, we shall see, shall we?

There is a slight disturbance in the wings. The two men turn towards it, and an exceptionally lovely girl in a slim-fitting pastel suit and a tip-tilted hat with a veil -- which she lifts up over the brim -- trips daintily onto the stage. She hesitates, staring out into the stalls. CLARENCE and MONTY rise.

LILY

Am I on the stage? Goodness, look at all those empty seats!

(Approaching CLARENCE with a charming little gloved hand outstretched.) Hullo, Mr. Enright. I hope I'm not late? I had a little trouble getting in. That fat man downstairs

LILY (Cont.)

didn't want to let me pass. But it was alright after I remembered to show him the card you gave me.

CLARENCE

That was Tubby, the caretaker. I'm sorry about him. He guards me like a watchdog. Lots of tiresome people try to push their way in here under false pretences. (He takes her hand and presents it to MONTY.) Monty, this is the young woman I've been telling you about. Our future "Prudence." Lily Fairchild, meet Monty Merivale.

LILY

How d'you do, Mr. Merivale?

MONTY

(Gruffly.) How d'ye do?

LILY

I saw your photo outside the theatre on my way in. (Demurely.) My, but you take a nice picture.

MONTY

Thank you. (He looks at her with decreased hostility.)

CLARENCE

(Looking at his watch again.) Since it's already eight o'clock, I think we ought to get straight down to business. (He looks from LILY to MONTY.) Don't you? Right. Now, Miss Fairchild -- Lily -- you do realize that besides being the author of The Redemption of Rodney Thornton or Prudence Prevails, I am also the director, don't you? I make a habit of directing my own plays whenever I can. So you will be

CLARENCE (Cont.)

taking your instructions from me. And Monty here, will be playing opposite you. (Pause.) But before you begin to read, I would like you to do a little improvisation for me. When you're at your job, you must see scores of society girls coming in and out of your department, don't you?

LILY

The debs? Oh yes, hundreds. They're all over the place. (A little bitterly.) I'd give anything to be like them. Able to have my hair set every week, and wear all those expensive clothes without having to be careful of them.

CLARENCE

If everything turns out as I hope it will, those creatures may soon be envying you. How carefully have you observed them? D'you think you could emulate the speech and mannerisms of one of the really spoilt ones for me if I asked you to?

LILY

Ooh yes. I could do THAT alright. I do it all the time at home -- to make my mum laugh.

CLARENCE

Excellent, excellent.

LILY

You should just hear some of the things those society girls say! I'd be ashamed to use such wicked language! If I were to tell my intended all I see and hear at Fortnum and Mason's, he'd make me leave my job!

CLARENCE

Indeed? Well, I'm delighted to hear that you're such an observant young woman. And now, I should like you to give me a brief demonstration of the way these spoilt darlings comport themselves at Fortnum and Mason's. You may pretend I'm one of the family -- if it will make it easier for you.

Lily lays down her little bag, and removes her gloves, placing them on the table with a languid air. Then she strolls up and down in front of the two men -- who are now seated -- her hands resting on her hips, her chest hollowed and her stomach protruding.

MONTY

Good God! (To CLARENCE.) She walks exactly like Angelica Walthrop-Byng! I wonder if she knows her? (In a loud whisper.) I must say she does it damn well!

Lily ignores him, and undulates her way towards a chair on stage left. She pours herself into it, swinging one lovely leg across the other, and throws an arm carelessly over the back of it. Holding the back of her hand against her mouth, she feigns a yawn, and then addresses them in an ultra Oxford accent.

LILY

I'm utterly exhausted, dahlings, aren't you? Do let's have a bweather before we go any further. Has anybody got a gasper? (Pause.) Oh, a Balkan Sobwannie, how utterly divine! (She leans forward as if to be lit.) Thanks, Fweddy dahling. (Turning the other way.) The hats are simply duckie this year, Vewonica. Don't you agree? Just too too Norma Sheawer!

LILY (Cont.)

(Pushing her free hand through the curls at the nape of her neck.) Are we going to have tea heah afterwards, Fweddy? Or are you taking us to Gunters? Gunters! Oh, good egg. Piggy says she had tea there last week with Nigel Bwown, and their wum babas are absolutely scwumptuous!

MONTY

(Applauding enthusiastically.) You see? You see? Clarrie? Angela Walthrop-Byng to a tee!

CLARENCE

(Picking up two of the scripts and standing up.) Most amusing! Now let's read something from the play. (He folds back the top pages on both scripts, and holds one out to each of them.) I've folded these back to the place where I want you to begin. Lily, you will read Prudence Appleby's lines, and Monty, you will read Rodney Thornton's.

MONTY

(Running an expert eye over the page as he rises.) This is the last scene. D'you want us to read it cold? No run-down on the plot for Lily?

CLARENCE

No, no. It's very straightforward.

LILY

Shall I stand over here? (She indicates the centre of the stage.)

CLARENCE

(Nodding.) Yes, exactly there. I want you facing Monty.

CLARENCE (Cont.)

(He takes her by the elbows -- like a toy -- and arranges her while MONTY positions himself side-on to the audience in front of her.) Perfect! Stand naturally, as if you were holding a normal conversation. If you feel like moving about, let the mood of the scene guide you. And pay close attention to the stage directions.

LILY

Pardon?

CLARENCE

(Bending over her and pointing them out.) The stage directions -- these lines in italics.

LILY

Oh those. I see. (After scanning them she looks up at him.)  
Is Prudence terribly la-di-da?

CLARENCE

Yes, terribly. But you'll like her. And, by the way  
(Twinkling at her.) Prudence knows how to pronounce her "R's."

LILY

Ooh, I'd never have made HER talk like that! (Pause.) Shall I begin?

CLARENCE

Yes, fire away.

LILY

(She displays remarkable confidence when she reads, and again manifests her superb mastery of a society girl's accent and mannerisms.) "So, Lord Thornton, you intend to



LILY (Cont.)

flaunt me as your latest conquest, do you? And I gather that Claude Ecclesford intends to make me his honest bride. In which court do you suppose the ball is going to fall?" (She looks questioningly at CLARENCE.)

CLARENCE

Yes, yes, fine. Just keep on going. (He gives MONTY an impatient signal to begin.)

MONTY

(Springing into action.) "MINE. Indubitably mine. You don't imagine I'll allow myself to be bounced out of any court, to make way for some obscure Bohemian portrait painter, do you?"

LILY

"Really, Lord Thornton! I'd hardly call Claude Ecclesford obscure! He painted that famous portrait of Queen Mary."

MONTY

"Oh, did he indeed? You allude, I presume, to the controversial one, where she's wearing a tatty fur tippet, and that ridiculous hat with the tipsy pink parrot?"

LILY

"Yes, that's the one. But the poor poppet was compelled to paint over parts of it by the committee that commissioned it. They insisted that the Royal image ought not to be perpetuated in a parrot hat and Persian lamb, but in a peridot tiara and a purple robe of state."

MONTY

"Yes, yes. I recall it clearly. King George was not amused."

LILY

(By now she has got into her stride, and is enjoying herself a lot.) "And Mr. Ecclesford was devastated. He'd expected to receive an Order of the Garter at the very least, whereas -----"

CLARENCE

More impatience, Monty, more arrogance. Good, Lily. Very, very good.

MONTY

"Look here, Prudence old thing, can't we possibly go back to the bit about the tennis balls -- you know -- your decision about ME, deuce take it?"

LILY

"I cannot announce my decision over where I shall place my affections until all parties are present. Therefore I must ask you not to refer to it again until Mr. Ecclesford arrives. It wouldn't do for you to gain an advantage just because you're alone in the house with me."

MONTY

(Stiffly.) "This is hardly a political debate, my dear Prudence, and I prefer not to discuss my proposition with the rival party looking on! (Pause.) Besides, I love you, darling, and -----"

LILY

(Placing her finger against his lips.) "Enough, Sir." (She turns eagerly to CLARENCE.) Am I reading it properly?

CLARENCE

Yes, but try to speak a little louder.

LILY

(Turning back to MONTY, and addressing him in a stronger voice.) "The weather is exceptionally clement for the month of June, don't you agree, Lord Thornton?"

MONTY

(Sulkily.) "If the weather isn't clement in June, I can't imagine when it will be clement. (Pause.) Oh, Prudence darling, why can't we declare a truce so that I can tell you how much I adore you? (She turns her head away.) Oh, very well. But with a man at your feet who can offer you as much as I, WHY this insistence on dragging that damned Ecclesford into everything we do?"

LILY

"I am afraid it is the unconventional quality of what you are offering that compels me to include Claude Ecclesford. I feel that your moral attitude is more likely to improve if you are subjected to the constant repetition of his honorable intentions towards me."

MONTY

(Clutching his forehead.) "Was it ABSOLUTELY necessary to saddle me with a virtuous rival, who sports a Vandyke beard, wears a violet cassock, and exhibits all the vitality of an El Greco martyr, Prudence?"

LILY

"I prefer to remain 'Miss Appleby' while you are in this

LILY (Cont.)

frame of mind, Lord Thornton. (Pause.) As a painter, one would naturally expect Mr. Ecclesford to wear eccentric clothes. Personally, I find them rather chic."

CLARENCE motions them towards the chairs on stage left. They sit. LILY has been reading exceptionally well, and MONTY, despite his earlier prejudice, is reacting as he would to a pro. CLARENCE hovers gleefully in the background.

MONTY

"Oh, do you? And doubtless you're expecting this paragon to become the successor to Philip de Lazlo or Augustus John, are you?"

LILY

"I don't see why not. His public pardoned him after he painted out the parrot, and the committee has commissioned him to produce another portrait."

MONTY

"I tell you, my girl, I'm reaching the limits of my endurance! It's time you terminated this tomfoolery. (Picking up her hand.) Dearest, most adorable Prudence, I want so desperately to take you in my arms and make love to you."

CLARENCE

You must withdraw your hand immediately he starts getting amorous, Lily. He isn't behaving the way you want him to yet. (She does as he tells her.) Repeat that last line please, Monty.

MONTY

(Picking up her hand again.) "Dearest, most adorable Prudence, I want so desperately to take you in my arms and make love to you."

LILY

(Withdrawing her hand abruptly.) "As you did to Agatha Archibald for five months -- and Winifred Wittingstall for four -- and Millicent Martineau for three -- and Fanny Farthingale for two -- and -- and really, Rodney, you'd better stop being so uncharitable about Mr. Ecclesford. Because, although he may not be entirely agreeable to you, the rest of London considers him a man of genius and an asset to society. And you have already observed that he's simply MAD about me. (She turns her back on him, and sits with her hands folded in her lap, looking down at her shoes.) And that's all I have to say -- for the present. (There is a long pause, and then she turns her head and looks at him out of the corner of her eye.) I don't suppose you have any suggestions to offer on the subject yourself, have you?"

MONTY

"As a matter of fact I have."

LILY

(Eagerly.) "You have? And will it make me happy to hear them?"

MONTY

"I rather imagine it will."

LILY

"Very well then, you shall tell me what they are, and if I like them, and Mr. Ecclesford still hasn't arrived, I shall allow you to give me one little kiss -- here. (She points to her cheek.) No, wait, I believe I hear him coming now!"

(She rises to greet CLARENCE, who is approaching slowly from the wings, with his eyes fixed on his script.) Why, Mr. Enright! Are you going to act as Mr. Ecclesford?

CLARENCE

Only for tonight. Will you carry on, please?

LILY

"Dear Mr. Ecclesford, how kind of you to come. Lord Thornton, here is Mr. Ecclesford! (MONTY rises slightly and nods coldly at CLARENCE.) Mr. Ecclesford, I think you know Lord Thornton?"

CLARENCE

(Bowing to MONTY, and turning back to LILY.) "Indeed I do. In fact, dear lady, I have as yet to enjoy an evening of your society WITHOUT the honour of Lord Thornton's presence!"

He produces an invisible bouquet from behind his back, and, with a sweeping bow, presents it to LILY, who pretends to accept it, sniff its fragrance, and lay it on the table.

LILY

"Do sit down, Mr. Ecclesford -- no, not there -- (As he makes for a chair at the table.) here, beside Lord Thornton. (She indicates the one she has just vacated.) where I can observe you both while we converse. (Noticing the furious expression

LILY (Cont.)

on MONTY'S face.) I'm afraid the delightful anticipation of your arrival has affected poor Lord Thornton so profoundly, that he is not quite himself! (Pause.) Pray put your arm around his shoulder -- there, that's right -- and with your free hand feel his brow. I fear he is almost overcome!"

MONTY

(Angrily freeing himself from CLARENCE'S attentions, and leaping from his chair.) "I refuse to be manhandled by this -- this jackanapes! I am taking my leave immediately." (He stalks towards the wings.)

LILY

(Stopping him.) "You are allowing your temper to get the better of you, Lord Thornton. What a pity, because I'm afraid you've handed the advantage to Mr. Ecclesford!"  
(Shocked, LILY stops and turns to CLARENCE.) Goodness, Mr. Enright! I'm not going to accept Mr. Ecclesford, am I?

CLARENCE

(A little impatiently.) Of course not! Can't you see what's happening? (Pause.) Look. Thornton's a prime example of the modern demigod run amock. And Prudence, who's as pure and sweet as the driven snow, is taking advantage of his jealousy of Ecclesford to steer him back to the straight and narrow. Don't worry, you'll get the picture as you read on. Keep the ball rolling, Monty.

MONTY

Right. "The devil I have! (Rounding on CLARENCE.) Put up

MONTY (Cont.)

your fists, Ecclesford, or the only advantage you're going to get, is a pair of black eyes, and a mouthful of broken teeth!"

CLARENCE

(Rising with dignity to address MONTY.) "Much as I appreciate the honour of engaging in a round of fisticuffs with you, I'm afraid I shall be unable to accommodate you this evening. I have a delicate commission to complete. Too delicate, I fear, to complete with swollen knuckles. A portrait -- to be precise -- of the Princess Royal. However, (Producing a small diary from his pocket.) if you would care to select an afternoon -- or evening -- in July, I shall be delighted to settle any differences you feel we may have -- at that time. (He stands with pencil poised, waiting.)

MONTY

(Turning on his heel disgustedly, and walking over to the table.) "Forget it, Ecclesford. I thought I was dealing with a gentleman."

CLARENCE

(Pocketing the diary with dignity before turning to LILY.) "Well, Miss Appleby, I think it might be better if I were to postpone this visit until another time. Please forgive me, for I am sure you will understand."

LILY

"Of course, Mr. Ecclesford. And I shall speak severely to Lord Thornton after you've gone. And then I shall send him away."



CLARENCE

(Kissing her hand, then nodding coldly to MONTY.) "I bid you good evening, Lord Thornton."

He sweeps rather grandly towards the wings, where he stops, wheels around, and returns to watch the remainder of the scene.

MONTY

(Shaking his fist after his departed rival.) "I'll teach that tender-knuckled dauber to set his sights on my girl! I'll shove his paint-brush down his presumptuous throat and tint his tonsils blue, before I'll let him marry you!"

LILY

"And what if I might like to?"

MONTY

"I shan't let you."

LILY

"And how are you going to stop me?"

MONTY

"The only way I can."

LILY

"By clubbing me and carrying me off to a cave?"

MONTY

"No. By donning my top hat and tails, and marching you down the aisle. (He throws himself dramatically on his knees at her feet.) I know I'm not nearly good enough for you, Prudence, but I'll change my ways and do anything in the world for you -- if you'll only get rid of Ecclesford and

MONTY (Cont.)

say yes to me."

LILY

"Good heavens, Lord Thornton! Does this mean that you intend to cast aside your foolish fancies -- in favour of me? Whatever occasioned this amazing transformation?"

MONTY

"It was the thought of that bourgeois bounder dragging you off to his studio, and forcing you to adjust his easel for him -- and wipe his filthy palette -- that brought me to my senses. I realized that I loved you far too much to watch you being engorged by such an evil fate."

LILY

"Ah. (Suddenly giving him a tug.) Do get up, you old silly. You look quite ridiculous on the floor. (He doesn't stir. He's waiting for an answer.) What are you waiting for? I'm ready to be kissed."

MONTY

"You mean -- your answer is YES?"

LILY

"Of course it is. As if you didn't know!"

MONTY

(Amazed.) "Know? Of course I didn't! I really thought I might be losing you to Ecclesford! (He now leaps to his feet and sweeps her up in his arms.) My dearest, most beloved, Prudence -----"

He's about to plant a kiss on her mouth, when CLARENCE intervenes, clapping him firmly on the shoulder.

CLARENCE

Capital, capital! You can stop now -- both of you. Put her down, Monty. Lily, my dear, as soon as you've recovered your breath, would you mind just popping down to ask Tubby to make us all a cup of tea? I'd like to have a private word with Monty.

LILY

Of course, Mr. Enright, I'll go right away.

CLARENCE

(Looking at his watch.) Don't be too long though, I'm looking forward to that cup of tea.

LILY walks to the wings, where she waits -- almost out of sight -- listening.

CLARENCE

(Turning triumphantly to MONTY, and grasping him by the shoulder.) Well, what price Sarah Sackville now, Monty me' lad? D'you see how easy this one is to deal with?

MONTY

By George, Clarence! I think you've really managed to bring home the bacon this time! My congratulations, old boy. She's a "natural."

CLARENCE

(Wagging an admonitory finger at him.) And you the doubting Thomas! Now, go on, admit it, you doubted my judgment,

CLARENCE (Cont.)

didn't you? The very good judgment for which I'm universally renowned! And you were wrong, weren't you? Absurdly and absolutely WRONG.

MONTY

I was, old man. You've found yourself a star. A glorious twinkling star! (Pause.) She's so incredibly lovely, so entirely unspoiled, so richly intuitive, so sensitive to nuances, and so amazingly quick to pick up her cues!

Having heard all she needs to hear, with a satisfied smirk, LILY disappears down the backstairs.

CLARENCE

(Happily.) Well, I'm relieved that you've finally come to your senses.

MONTY

I think she took rather a shine to me, don't you, Clarrie? (CLARENCE looks skeptical.) No? Well, early days yet, what? (Waffling on rapturously.) You know, old chap, I'm beginning to feel a sense of responsibility towards our Lily. In fact, I'm thinking of taking the adorable little creature under my protection, and opening the doors for her expansion. Mmmmmmm, yes, I'm beginning to savour that thrill of anticipation a discoverer must feel when he's about to plant his f'ag in virgin territory.

CLARENCE

(Suddenly alert with suspicion.) Oh NO, Monty! Don't tell

CLARENCE (Cont.)

me you're about to "pounce" again, I couldn't bear it! Look, just control yourself this once, will you? Stick to being avuncular. I won't have you using the old "Merivale tactics" on this girl. Not on Lily. Please? (Pause.) Besides, what about the fiancé? (MONTY is beginning to look frustrated.) And what about Sarah, for heaven's sake? I thought you were supposed to be engaged to her.

MONTY

Oh damn! I'd forgotten about that. Our engagement's been on and off so many times, I tend to lose track. But, as you know, old man, I always manage to keep one or two irons in the fire anyway. And little Lily'd have been rather a pleasant addition -- (Catching CLARENCE'S frosty eye.) or so it seemed to me.

CLARENCE

Not this time, Monty. And, apart from anything else, aren't you getting rather a big boy to be running after little girls of that age?

MONTY

That's rich, that is! Coming from you! I'll lay a fiver, none of the little boys who take their turn under YOUR eiderdown is over twenty-two!

CLARENCE

(Loudly and angrily.) How DARE you attack me on that subject! What I do with MY private life is not the issue here! We are discussing the young woman who is about to make her début in

CLARENCE (Cont.)

my play. (Pause.) That was unworthy of you, Monty!

MONTY

Sorry, old man, but you did ask for it. (Pause.) Alright. Because you're so set on it, I'll put a curb on the romantic urges for the present. But I don't understand you any more, Clarence. I've never seen you behave like this before! You've never given a damn about the fate of lovely young things in the past -- female ones, I mean. (Anxiously.) You haven't undergone a change of inclination, have you, old chap?

CLARENCE

Oh, shut up, Monty. You wouldn't understand. You're so -- so "carnivorous." Women are all like a big meal to you. You spot a piece of tender flesh, and you think it's yours by right. (Looking sadly at MONTY.) Well, I have feelings, too. Admittedly, they're not like yours. But, if you must know, I'm developing what you might call a "nurturer's" attitude towards Lily. I want to deliver this porcelain talent of hers, gradually and gently, without chipping it as it emerges. And I want you to keep your big beefy interferences to yourself for a while, so that I can perform this feat with my own hands, and in my own time.

MONTY

I say, old man, steady on! I'm not exactly a beast of prey, you know! As a matter of fact, I have quite a reputation for "finesse" in affairs of the heart.

CLARENCE

Sorry, but I'm afraid I'd have to witness you in action before I'd believe that. A polished Lothario on stage, maybe, but a consummate "pouncer" in the dressing room. (Holding his hand up against MONTY'S spluttered protestations.) Now, now, don't deny it -- I've heard the startled victims' shrieks.

MONTY

Shrieks of delight!

CLARENCE

Never mind. You should realize that in the present case the girl is fragile and naïve. So why not let prudence prevail until rehearsals are over? Do you understand?

MONTY

NAÏVE, Clarence? Then, how d'you explain the extraordinary performance she just gave? I mean, that could hardly have come from a complete innocent ... could it?

CLARENCE

Ah! Now that's the difference between us, Monty. It's the reason why I am a playwright and a director, and you are solely an actor. You see, a girl like Lily merely absorbs and reproduces what she sees and hears going on around her. But she doesn't fully appreciate what it all means. She wasn't -- as you seem to think -- flirting with YOU, she was imitating the tactics of some seductress she's witnessed from behind the counter at Fortnum and Mason's. And, for the time being, I want her to remain an innocent receptacle for my instruction, and I don't want her physically aroused by

CLARENCE (Cont.)

you so that her emotions start exploding all over my play.

(Pause.) Later on, when I've finished with her, then you may begin whirling her around and sophisticating her.

MONTY

By Jove, Clarence! I do believe you're a more calculating devil than you think I am!

CLARENCE

Not at all. It's only that I have a proper respect for the divine spark when I spot it. After it has been given the opportunity to develop, I shall have no need to worry about it any more.

LILY

(Re-entering with a tray of tea-things.) We were in luck. Tubby had the kettle boiling ready for us. All I had to do was set the tray and bring it up. I'm not too soon, am I?

CLARENCE

No, no, no.

MONTY

(Sitting down to wait for LILY to pour the tea.) I congratulate you, Miss Fairchild. That was a first rate reading you gave. Most impressive.

LILY

Thank you ever so, Mr. Merivale. You know, it's hard to believe all this is really happening to someone like me! I can't wait to tell my intended. He's going to be ever so proud -- engaged to an actress!



CLARENCE

(Plucking a fountain pen from MONTY'S breast pocket, and turning a script over to write on.) Who d'you recommend for Lily's clothes, Monty? Schiaparelli or Balenciaga?

(Regarding her thoughtfully.) Elsa's designs are simply heaven, of course, but Cristobal gets those diaphanous, fairylike effects so well -- so what d'you think?

MONTY

(Scrutinizing LILY with his head on one side, while, crooking her little finger, she raises her cup to her lips.)

Personally, I'd be inclined to pick Norman Hartnell.

CLARENCE

(Slapping his thigh.) Of course! Absolutely right. Norman's the man. And I'll lay you ten to one, Monty, he'll put her in eggshell slipper-satin with a border of paillette and diamanté -- and a white fox cape.

MONTY

For the ball? I shouldn't be a bit surprised.

CLARENCE

Ah, so you're familiar with the scene, are you? Some of my finest epigrams went into that!

The sound of an angry skirmish is heard off stage. They all turn to look. A Woman's voice shrills, "Take your hands off me, you brute! I'm going on." Then, with the sudden relaxation of unseen TUBBY'S vicelike grip, SARAH SACKVILLE is violently catapulted onto the stage. She is a stunning woman in her late thirties, superbly dressed in vibrant colours. She shakes her clothes straight, smooths her sleeves, and prepares to advance on them with the light of battle in her eye.

CURTAIN

END OF ACT ONE

- ACT TWO -

ACT TWO

At rise: Everybody and everything is as it was at the end of Act One. SARAH stands in the centre of the stage.

SARAH

(In vibrant tones.) The NERVE of that little man! Trying to stop ME from coming up here! When I think of the performances I've given on this stage! And of all the curtain calls I've taken. (Her sentimental gaze sweeps over the audience, finally coming to rest on the little group at the table.) So? How are we all this evening?

MONTY

(Standing up nervously.) Hullo, Sare, old girl. What brings you here tonight? Come to pick me up, have you? You shouldn't have bothered, you know. I've got the Duesenberg with me.

SARAH

(Ignoring him, and advancing towards the table.) How's my Clarence?

CLARENCE

(Without rising.) This is a private meeting, Sarah dear. I instructed Tubby not to allow anybody in.

SARAH

"Anybody," perhaps, but not me, Clarence. (Turning to MONTY.) No, angel, I wasn't looking for you. (Bringing her face up close to CLARENCE'S, and fluttering her eyelids at him.) I just dropped by to read the part of the ingénue.

CLARENCE

(Rising now, with the intention of seeing her out.) That won't be necessary, Sarah, the reading is over.

SARAH

You mean you've had it without me?

CLARENCE

It never occurred to me to invite you, dear. I already had someone in mind. (He waits for her near the wings.) I wonder -- (Glancing coldly from her to MONTY and back.) HOW you managed to find out about it?

SARAH

(Standing her ground.) Someone else? I understood all the top ingénues were booked for the season. I would have been, too, if I hadn't been anticipating an offer from you.

MONTY

I warned you, Sarah, Clarence might be making other plans.

SARAH

(Quenching him with an icy glare.) As I was about to say, before I was interrupted, I would not have been available, had I not been holding out for material written by someone of YOUR calibre, Clarence dear. But since you were evidently NOT told I was free (Again she glares at MONTY.) I decided to acquaint you with the fact myself. And it now appears that I'm to be given the bird! (Pause.) Well, it's not too late. I'm prepared to let you have a second chance.

CLARENCE

I told you, Sarah dear, the role has already been cast.

SARAH

Impossible. Why, only the other day, I was given to understand you were in desperate need of an ingénue!

CLARENCE

True, but since then I have had the good fortune to find one.

SARAH

(Ignoring his reply.) And that you'd been searching high and low for weeks!

CLARENCE

(Giving up hope of her quitting, he fetches her one of the chairs from stage left.) I wasn't searching for a Sarah. I was searching for a Lily. (He holds out his hand to indicate LILY, who is sitting very still and upright with her ears pricked and her eyes popping.) A girl of tender years. An innocent child. Sarah, this is Lily -----

SARAH

(Brushing aside the introduction, and remaining on her feet.) Those are scalding words, Clarence. You would bite your tongue off if you knew how much they hurt. So, it's a question of introducing new blood, is it?

CLARENCE

It had to come sometime, Sarah.

SARAH

(Tossing her head defiantly, before turning to look at LILY.) So this is your blue-eyed girl, I suppose? (She stares long and hard at her, measuring her potential as an adversary. Then she wheels on CLARENCE with a feline smile.) Why,

SARAH (Cont.)

Clarrie, what a perfectly ADORABLE child! I see EXACTLY what you mean! She can barely have left her mother's knee! So, whose little sweetie pie is she? Yours, darling? (Spinning around to address MONTY.) Or yours, angel? (Returning to CLARENCE.) Oh, but I forgot, she couldn't be yours, darling, could she -- because you don't play with little girls, do you? So she must be Monty's property, mustn't she?

LILY

(Sharply.) Hey! What d'you mean by that?

MONTY shakes his head rapidly in denial, and CLARENCE swoops on SARAH with an angry scowl.

CLARENCE

That's enough, Sarah. OUT.

SARAH

(Putting her hand up to her mouth in mock dismay.) Oh, have I said something I shouldn't? Naughty, naughty me! (Evading CLARENCE and strolling over to LILY.) So you're little Miss Innocence, are you? (To the others.) I must say she looks every inch the part. (To LILY.) You're almost too good to be true, dearie! Well, they'll educate you here. You won't keep that wide-eyed look for long. This is the theatre -- not fairyland. At least, not the sort of fairyland you're expecting.

LILY

(With extreme dignity.) How would you know what I'm

LILY (Cont.)

expecting, and what I'm not expecting? And if it's that awful, why is it so hard for you to give it up, Miss -- er -----?

SARAH

Sackville, Sarah Sackville. You'll find that out when you've devoted thirteen years of your life to drawing-room comedies, as I have!

MONTY

Come off it, Sare, for heaven's sake. Can't you see that Clarence has had enough?

CLARENCE

Yes. Jealousy doesn't become you, dearie. It's playing havoc with your looks. (There is a hostile pause. He addresses LILY.) Since Miss Sackville shows no apparent sign of leaving, you'd better be properly introduced. Sarah Sackville, meet Lily Fairchild. (They shake hands, SARAH with dramatic condescension, LILY with genteel aversion.) As you have just seen, Lily, Sarah is a virtuoso performer. It takes many, many years of application to put on a show like she does. She never ceases to amaze me with her craft!

LILY smothers a giggle, and SARAH darts her a very unpleasant look.

MONTY

(Looking anxiously at SARAH.) You've had a good innings with Clarence, Sare. Surely you can put up with skipping one play?



SARAH

Don't try to soft-soap me. I know the score. This is what's called "the THICK end of the wedge."

MONTY

(Putting his arm round her waist.) Well then, how about a nice cup of tea? Is there any left in the pot, Lily?

LILY

I don't know, I'm sure. But if there is, it's tepid.

SARAH

(Freeing herself.) Doesn't matter. I don't want any, anyway. (To LILY.) What have you been in before? I seem to know your face.

LILY

Well, as a matter of fact, I was working at -----

CLARENCE

(Cutting in hastily.) No, no, no. You couldn't possibly have seen Lily anywhere. She's a complete newcomer.

LILY

(Catching on.) Yes, that's it, I'm just a newcomer, Miss Sackville. (Conversationally.) I daresay someone like you -- with all YOUR experience -- must have a lot of tips to pass on to a beginner like me?

SARAH

TIPS? If I had any I certainly wouldn't pass them on to you! Why should I? Get Clarence and Monty to give you your tips. They're your guardian angels, not I.

LILY

(Miffed at this violent repulse, tosses her head.) Well, I must say!

SARAH

(Bitterly.) The only thing I can suggest to a newcomer, is: hang on to your youth and hang on to your looks, and when you're in danger of losing them, make a fuss and PUSH. Push like mad, or these bastards'll roll right over you.

LILY

(Shocked.) Me push? Ooh, I'd never push. Pushing isn't ladylike! (Smugly.) Besides, it doesn't seem to be doing you very much good.

SARAH

Of ALL the bloody cheek! (Leaning forward and peering hard at her.) I'm SURE I've seen you somewhere before. But it wasn't in a play. Now, WHERE could it have been?

CLARENCE

(Irritably.) It must be your imagination -- or possibly you've seen somebody like her. Anyway, it's not important.

SARAH

No. I'm sure it was her. (Snapping her fingers suddenly.) I've got it! It was in the linen department at Fortnum and Mason's the other day -- where I ran into you, Clarence. (Turning to LILY.) I remember you perfectly. You were standing behind the counter with a pile of pink bathtowels in front of you. Good heavens, you're not an actress at all. You're just a little shopgirl! (She slaps her thigh with her

handbag and chortles unrestrainedly.) How frightfully funny!

LILY

(With dignity.) I'm sure I can't see anything to laugh at.

SARAH

Can't you, duckie? Well, you could if you were me. It's the best joke I've heard for years. (Thoughtful pause.) Though it may not be such a joke for you, of course. Clarrie's going to have to make you work like a dog. I presume you've got some training from somewhere, have you? (She sees LILY look mutely at CLARENCE.) Ah, so you haven't (Turning to CLARENCE.) I knew there was something ridiculous going on. But I had no idea it was this ridiculous! Good God, Clarence, you're not mad enough to suppose you can palm HER off on your public as a professional, are you?

CLARENCE

For God's sake, Sarah! When are you going to give up?

SARAH

My poor Clarence, whatever have you got yourself into? Have you made the transition from fairy to fairy godmother now? Do you imagine that by waving your magic wand you can change Cinderella into a princess overnight? Is that what you imagine? (Rounding on MONTY.) And, as for you, you silly goose, I suppose YOU imagine yourself in the role of her pretty Prince Charming, do you?

MONTY

I say, old girl, don't you think you're overdoing things a bit?

CLARENCE

Poor Lily, you must think you've landed in a madhouse!

LILY

(In an injured tone.) I've never HEARD anyone speak so unkindly! So what if I am young and new to everything? I'm sure I'll manage to pick things up!

SARAH

Yes, I'm sure you will. And doubtless, Monty among them.

LILY

Goodness! What a spiteful thing to say! As if I'd do a thing like that! I've got a fiancé of my own, thank you very much!

CLARENCE

Good for you, Lily. That's telling her. (To SARAH.) How dare you come in here and spew out your spleen on us! Anyone would think I'd sold you the rights to a leading role in all my plays!

SARAH

Well, isn't that what you've done for Monty?

CLARENCE

Good God, no! I've GIVEN them to him.

SARAH

What on earth has HE done to deserve such unlimited bounty?

CLARENCE

Not that it's any business of yours, but Monty is the most celebrated matinée idol in London. And that makes him my greatest asset. A condition that stands for as long as he

CLARENCE (Cont.)

can hold his stomach in. (MONTY looks at that area of his anatomy with justifiable pride, and then at CLARENCE with just a shade of anxiety in his eyes.) Nobody else around here is indispensable to me, nor ever will be.

SARAH

Hah! Presumably Monty will have to remain twenty-nine then, for the next thirty years? (To MONTY.) Better watch your gut, hadn't you, sweetie pie?

CLARENCE

Sarah, Sarah, Sarah! Simmer down, dear. I know we all consider Monty a bit of a duffer. (Patting his friend's arm affectionately.) But -----

MONTY

A duffer? What d'you mean, "a bit of a duffer?" (He jerks his arm away and straightens his sleeve.) If it weren't for the brilliance of my interpretations, your plays would never have got anywhere!

CLARENCE

BUT -- as I was about to say before I was interrupted -- he's bloody good at his role. And he does look amazingly youthful on the stage. And apart from anything else, audiences adore him. (Smiling at MONTY.) He has the gift of universal appeal.

SARAH

God, Clarence, how maudlin can you get?

CLARENCE

BUT -- and I grant you this, Sarah -- he is limited. Now, don't get upset again, Monty, you know this is true -- you've said it often enough yourself. He's limited to drawing-room comedies. (Craftily to SARAH.) HE always will be. YOU'RE not. YOU'VE come of age. Why, YOU could graduate to tragedy now, if you wished. It's time for YOU -- with your unrestricted capabilities -- to diversify. To unleash your boundless talents upon a breathlessly waiting world! Audition for Cleopatra -- or Gertrude. Perhaps even -- Lady Macbeth! The world of drama is your oyster, my dear. (He winks conspiratorially at MONTY.) Begin to prize it open.

SARAH

Haven't you left out Kate the Shrew?

CLARENCE

Now, now, now! I wasn't being vindictive. You're wilfully misunderstanding me. I said "tragedy."

SARAH

Yes, well, all in good time, Clarence. All in good time. You see, at the present stage of my career I still happen to believe there are one or two ingénues left in me. They ARE my forte. You drilled me well in THEM.

CLARENCE

Alright. Perhaps I can appeal to your generosity then, (Pause.) Little Lily here is new, but she shows a lot of promise -- just as you did when you were her age -- so don't you think she deserves a chance? Just as you did years ago?

CLARENCE (Cont.)

Besides she's exactly what the part calls for -- one of Cowper's "pretty buds unblown" -- and well, one can hardly say that about you, dear, can one?

MONTY

The old boy's got a point there, old girl.

SARAH

You just shut up, Monty Merivale. And you stop right there, Clarence Enright. You don't imagine I'm going to let you fob me off with that ridiculous old cliché about "newcomers deserving to be given a chance" do you? (Pause.) Because, unless they've done their drill like the rest of us, they're nothing but dilettantes. And they deserve nothing.

(Indicating LILY.) If you want a girl of eighteen to act in your play, make sure she started her training when she was twelve! None of us, unless we've earned it through sweat and tears, has the right to tread these venerable boards! (She stamps her foot on them proprietorially.) You MUST be a professional first.

CLARENCE

(Looking uncomfortable because she has pricked a nerve.)

Well -- er -- I -- look, Sarah dear, don't you think you're becoming a bit melodramatic?

MONTY

You know, Clarence, she's got something there. I've often heard you say -----

CLARENCE

(Impatiently.) You're behind the times, both of you. Overnight success is the big thing today. We have to move ahead faster now, give 'em new blood. (Pause.) Yes, "being flexible" is what it's called.

SARAH

"Being flexible" indeed! Don't make me laugh! As if you knew anything about "being flexible!" Why, you're the least flexible man I've ever come across! But, I'll tell you this, it's because of your inflexible determination to maintain high standards, that you and Monty are still at the top. It's called PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE -- and never underestimate its exquisite gloss. A West End audience'll never forgive you if you try to cheat them out of it.

MONTY

You know, Clarence, I think she's right about that.

SARAH

You see, Clarence, when men like you continue to produce work of such remarkable quality, you FORCE audiences to become discriminating.

CLARENCE

(Thoughtfully.) Mmmmmmm, yes, I suppose we do in a way. (He glances rather worriedly at LILY.) Ah, but then -- (His face softens.) There's always that one exception to the rule.

SARAH

Oh well, believe what you want to believe. I wash my hands of you. (She turns to look at LILY.) YOU never have much to



SARAH (Cont.)

say, do you, duckie? You just sit there looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. I wouldn't have let ME get away with this much, if I'd been you!

LILY

Well, you're not me are you, Miss Sackville? I was taught to keep out of arguments. They only get you all hot and bothered.

SARAH

Where d'you learn these expressions? From a book of party manners?

CLARENCE

You're just young and shy, aren't you, Lily? And I hope you'll stay like that. But you'll have to get used to a lot of bitchery from older women. There's a great deal of that in the theatre.

SARAH

You'll find it's quite popular among older men of a certain persuasion, too!

MONTY

Steady on, you two! Neither of you is in your dotage yet!

SARAH

I can take any slings and arrows Clarence cares to hurl at me. I learnt to defend myself at an early age. But I don't understand you, Lily. If you really want the part, why don't you wade in and show some fight? Watching you sitting around, mincing your words, with your hands folded in your lap and

SARAH (Cont.)

your ankles crossed, is beginning to give me the pip!

LILY

I'm sorry if I irritate you, Miss Sackville. But I'm not going to be drawn into a quarrel. Why should I? (Complacently.) I've already GOT the part. You knew that almost as soon as you came in. (Looking around at everybody a bit peevishly.) So I can't understand why we had to have any of this fuss in the first place.

SARAH

(Momentarily floored.) Well, that's that then.

LILY

Right. So there's no need to concern yourself, is there?

CLARENCE

You see, Sarah? It's all settled. I've found exactly what I want in Lily. It wasn't done as a snub to you. There'll be other times.

SARAH

Don't worry about it, Clarence. I'm not made of eggshell china. (Pause.) Anyway, I've had my little say -- for now.

CLARENCE

Huh! I'd have called it launching a diatribe!

SARAH

If you don't mind -- I'll just take one of these along with me to browse through. (Dodging CLARENCE'S attempt to stop her, she leans across the table and nicks one of the scripts.) Goodnight Miss Prunes and Prisms, I haven't finished with you

SARAH (Cont.)

yet. (She moves towards the wings.) Goodnight you two, I'll be back to see you soon.

CLARENCE

You bloody well won't.

SARAH

Wait and see. (Halting in front of him.) Just one thing, Clarence. D'you remember the day I graduated as RADA'S most promising student? You were in the auditorium, and I came straight to you and asked you for a chance. You said, "Don't be in such a hurry, Sarah. Come back and see me after you've done a couple of years in rep." And then you said, "Per ardua ad astra, my child, per ardua ad astra." And because I thought you were the greatest man I'd ever met, those words have been my inspiration ever since.

SARAH exits. The two men slowly resume their seats at the table with LILY. CLARENCE feels the teapot.

CLARENCE

This tea is stone cold.

MONTY

What was all that about "Per ardua ad -- whatsit?" You never said anything like that to me!

CLARENCE

It's just something about hard work being the only way to attain the stars. (Pause.) Well now, what d'you say we get back to business? What else have we got to discuss?

CLARENCE (Cont.)

Costumes -- and oh yes, the rehearsal schedule. That will be at nine o'clock sharp every morning except Sunday, starting tomorrow. On Wednesdays from nine until three I'll be dealing with the two of you on your own. (Looking at LILY.) How d'you feel about it all, Lily? Excited?

LILY

(Doubtfully.) Yes -- at least, I think so. It's just that Miss Sackville makes it all sound so difficult.

CLARENCE

You mustn't allow people like Sarah to frighten you. Monty and I have confidence in you. You should try and be a bit more self-assertive.

LILY

I don't know how! I was brought up to behave like a lady, and -----

MONTY

(Cutting in.) Personally, I felt rather sorry for Sarah tonight. She's worked her heart out to get where she is. It's a pity you find her so abrasive, Clarence, because she's a good actress, and she worships you.

CLARENCE

If she does, she has a bloody unpleasant way of showing it.

MONTY

She's a damned attractive woman, too, when she gets going. Lots of spirit.

CLARENCE

I'm glad you enjoyed her, Monty.

MONTY

I admire her for speaking up as she did. (Musingly.) And I rather liked that thing she had on tonight, didn't you?

There is the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. They halt, and TUBBY'S loud voice is heard outside: "There's a young gen'leman 'ere, Sir, wot sezee's come ter fetch Miss Fairchild." CLARENCE looks enquiringly at LILY.

CLARENCE

Are you expecting someone?

LILY

(Happily.) Oh, that must be Felix -- Mr. Phillpotts -- my intended.

CLARENCE

(Loudly.) Alright, Tubby, send the gentleman up.

The footsteps retreat, and TUBBY can be heard further off saying, "Roighty-ho, young feller, go along up then." Now lighter footsteps are heard ascending, and FELIX PHILLPOTTS enters. He is a boldly good-looking youth, rather flashily dressed in a too bright blue suit. He carries a bowler hat (slightly small) in one hand and an umbrella in the other. LILY jumps up eagerly and runs to greet him. CLARENCE and MONTY remain seated at the table observing the scene.

LILY

Why, Feel! (Straightening his tie and flicking some dandruff off his collar.) I didn't think you would come! (In his ear.) Try and remember not to drop your aitches, dear. (Propelling

LILY (Cont.)

him forward.) Come on, I'll introduce you.

FELIX

(Disentangling himself from her.) I can mannige, Lil. Now, I ask you, guvnors, would I let this beautiful little girl travel all acrost London in the dark on 'er little ownsome? Nevvah! I'm a gentleman I am!

LILY

(Proudly introducing FELIX.) This is my fiancé, Mr. Phillipotts. He's come to take me home. He's ever so considerate to me, aren't you, Felix? This is Mr. Enright, the gentleman who wrote The Redemption of Rodney Thornton or Prudence Prevails. (Nudging FELIX.) You remember -- the play I told you I was going to be in.

FELIX

Ah, so you're the one wot wrote that, are you? Bit of a mouthful, ennit?

MONTY

Yes? Why did you give it two titles, Clarence?

CLARENCE

As both were so patently effective, I couldn't bear to part with either. (He shakes hands with FELIX.) How do you do?

LILY

And this is Mr. Merivale. Mr. Merivale, my intended, Mr. Phillipotts. (They shake hands.) Mr. Merivale's a famous actor, Felix.

CLARENCE

You should be proud of Lily, Mr. Phillpotts, she's a very good actress. (He stares hard at FELIX'S outfit.) Are you by any chance a member of our profession too?

FELIX

The oldest in the world, aye?

CLARENCE

No, no, that's another one! Are you in a hurry, my dear young man, or would you care to sit down for a few minutes?

FELIX

Thanks, don't mind if I do. Call me Felix -- or Feel -- if you like. More pally, don't you know? (As LILY sits she pulls him down beside her onto the chair CLARENCE brought for SARAH.) Naow, I wouldn't act on the stage, not if you was to offer me a tharsand nikkah. I'm a manniger (Leaning back expansively.) That's wot I am.

CLARENCE

Really? And what do you manage?

FELIX

Funny you should ask that. Because I'm on the lookout fer somethink wot needs mannigin' right now. (Impatiently to LILY, who is nudging him to sit up straight.) Give over, Lil, there's a good girl.

CLARENCE

I see. (Pause.) I would like to be able to help you. But I don't know what line you are in.

FELIX

Oh, this and that, you know. I'm not fussy. Lil an' I'd intended goin' inter business togevvah. The way I look at it, wiv that la-di-da accent she picked up from them 'igh falutin' berkes at the shop, 'an my business acumen, we'd of made a good team. (Pinching her cheek.) She's tryin' ter learn me ter talk proper, ain't you, luv? We was savin' up ter start our own little place like -- 'airdressers maybe. But now, wiv 'er goin' on the stage an' all, well I've gotter fink again, aven't I?

CLARENCE

Yes, I suppose you have.

FELIX

No offense, of course, Guv, but the way I sees it, you an' your Mister Merivale 'ere -- is more'n a little in my debt.

CLARENCE

In your debt? I'm not quite sure I follow you.

FELIX

(Looking him up and down knowingly.) An' you better not neiver! (Pause.) But ter get back ter me point. The way I sees it, I'm makin' you a present of my little Lil. (There is an awkward pause.) Well, I am. An' it's ter me own disadvantage.

CLARENCE

I would hardly say that!



FELIX

Well, it is. (Pause.) Because, where's all me 'opes an' dreams gone now? Where's me little 'airdresser's shop? (He looks sorrowfully at LILY -- who is beginning to look slightly uncomfortable -- then back to CLARENCE.) Ezzackly! Dahn the toilet. Now I ask you, gents, could any man make a bigger sacrifice?

CLARENCE

(Looking at his watch and rising.) Look, Mr. Phillipotts, sympathetic as I am to your predicament, I find that after all it is getting a little late. So why don't we postpone this discussion until we have more time at our disposal?

FELIX

(Remaining seated.) I'm a broken man. (He spreads out his hands pathetically.) Look at me! Me life's smashed ter smivvereens.

LILY

(Gathering up her bag and gloves hurriedly, her mouth set grimly.) For goodness sake, Felix! Poor Mr. Enright doesn't want to be bothered with your troubles at this time of night! I'm sorry, Mr. Enright, I don't know what's come over him. (Crossly to FELIX.) If I'd known you were going to carry on like this, I wouldn't have let you come! (She yanks at his sleeve, but he doesn't budge.) Come ALONG, Feel.

FELIX

(Shaking LILY'S hand off.) Lay off, Lil, there's a good girl. We'll go when I say so, see? (He turns to CLARENCE, who is

FELIX (Cont.)

standing close to the wings, frowning impatiently.) So you fink a lot of our Lily, do you, Mister Enright?

CLARENCE

(Ignoring him.) Don't forget to take your copy of the script with you, Lily. (She picks it up, stuffs it in her bag, and recommences tugging at FELIX'S sleeve.) And please read it through carefully before you come tomorrow. I hope you realize that, although this has been a most auspicious beginning, you are still going to have to work extremely hard.

LILY

Yes, Mr. Enright. Come on Feel. Let's say ta-ta now, shall we? Mr. Enright looks ever so tired. I've enjoyed myself ever so much tonight, Mr. Enright. And I'm going to work ever so hard tomorrow.

CLARENCE

That's the spirit! You're going to do very well. So, off you go then. Take your fiancé with you. Read the play properly, and let me see you here at nine o'clock sharp.

LILY

Yes, Mr. Enright. Goodnight, Mr. Merivale, it's been ever so nice. (MONTY rises and comes forward to see her out.) Say goodnight, Feel.

MONTY and CLARENCE  
together

Goodnight, Lily.

FELIX

(Catching her by the hand.) Whoa there, Lil. (Addressing CLARENCE.) And wot mode of transport might you be expectin' 'er ladyship ter turn up in tomorrer mornin', Mr. "E?" A taxi, all expenses paid, may we 'ope?

CLARENCE

(Extremely irritated.) Miss Fairchild will be receiving a very handsome wage packet for her services, Mr. Phillipotts. So, if that's the way she wishes to spend it, it is up to her. (Pause.) And I should prefer that you call me Mr. Enright, if you don't mind. (Very firmly.) Now I would like to wish both of you a very good night.

FELIX

Righty-ho, MISTER Enright, old chep. An' don't you forget to treat my fiongsay respeckful neiver. (With a sweeping bow.) Bongsoir, gentlemen.

LILY and FELIX exit. CLARENCE takes MONTY by the arm and steers him back to the table. They both sit down.

CLARENCE

I didn't care very much for that young man, did you?

MONTY

Well, she didn't find HIM at Fortnum and Mason's! Looks like a very slippery customer to me. It's a shame she couldn't hook herself something better than that!

CLARENCE

They probably grew up on the same street. Handsome devil,

CLARENCE (Cont.)

though. I suspect that's the main attraction. Could become something of a nuisance if he intends to accompany her back and forth all the time.

MONTY

I suppose she is the right girl for the part, is she, Clarence?

CLARENCE

Good God! What on earth do you mean? You witnessed her performance!

MONTY

Yes ... I know I did. (He gets up again and stands behind his chair holding onto the back of it, looking uncomfortable.)

It's just that I've never seen you take such a longshot as this before.

CLARENCE

(Rising too, and facing him across the table.) I thought we had both agreed that she was perfect for the part, and it was all settled.

MONTY

Yes ... yes, it was.

CLARENCE

Well then! (Holding out his hands palms upward.) What are we worrying about? I thought she was superb. I was quite carried away by her looks and her ability -- and I could see that you were too -- she gave a healthy transfusion of sincerity to our tawdry world of pretense.

MONTY

That's all absolutely true. But, well, I'd better say this, Clarence, I'm afraid it may be a bit more than she can pull off.

CLARENCE

Why should it be? I believe in her. That ought to be enough for you. When have you ever known me to make a mistake?

MONTY

(Miserably.) That's just it. I don't want you to make one now. (He subsides into his chair again.)

CLARENCE

(Coldly.) Are you saying that I don't know what I'm doing?

MONTY

No, no, no, of course not! It's only that I have this uneasy feeling that we're getting in out of our depth. Well -- it's what Sarah said, really -- all that stuff about not knowing the drill like the rest of us -----

CLARENCE

AH! So we have Sarah to thank for this change of heart, have we?

MONTY

Partly, yes. But what I'm trying to say is: supposing Lily can't learn lines? Or what if she tires easily? And what if she suddenly gets stage fright? And what if -- God forbid -- she takes it into her head to upstage me? I mean, dealing with all this is second nature to a professional, but to a newcomer -----

CLARENCE

(Firing up at him angrily.) Don't you think you can rely on ME to look after all that?

MONTY

Of course, of course, old man. But it's going to double your work for you.

CLARENCE

Rubbish! Good heavens, Monty, I never thought you were such a volatile character! Why, less than an hour ago, you were drivelling on lasciviously about planting flags in virgin territory. Had you forgotten that? And now look at you. You're too easily led. If it isn't one woman who's got you by the nose, it's another.

MONTY

And nobody's got you by the nose, I suppose?

CLARENCE

I BEG your pardon? (He considers MONTY, then puts an arm round his shoulder.) You know what your trouble is, Monty? Your trouble is that you have an ambivalent nature. You go from one wild enthusiasm to another. (MONTY emits a small sigh, before adopting an attitude of polite attention.) You are now caught up in the idea that I may not be able to supply our charming Lily with the professional underpinnings she's going to need to sustain her throughout the many months of a long run -- in the short time we have left for rehearsal. Am I not right? (MONTY nods.) BUT -- and this is a very big BUT -- you underestimate the man you are dealing with! You

CLARENCE (Cont.)

have allowed yourself to be diverted from the fact that THIS (Jabbing his breastbone with his forefinger.) is Clarence Enright! Therefore, nobody has to worry. Because I can pull it off. (Pause.) I think that more or less puts your dilemma in a nutshell, doesn't it?

MONTY

(Carefully covering a yawn.) In a nutshell, old boy. Absolutely in a nutshell.

CLARENCE

It'll be easy. She has the divine spark. I'm convinced of it.

MONTY

(Wearily.) I'm sure you're right, old man. I'm sure you're right.

CLARENCE

Of course I am. Why, it'll be child's play with her. I predict halcyon days ahead. (Helping MONTY up.) Just leave everything in my hands, old chap. (He leads his friend gaily off to the wings.) You go home now and get a good night's sleep. I'm certainly going to. (He reaches over and turns off the light at the back.) We're in for calm seas and smooth sailing, you mark my words.

The stage gradually darkens as the two of them make their way off. And their footsteps can be heard retreating down the stairs at the back.

END OF ACT TWO

- ACT THREE -



ACT THREE

At rise: We are again on stage at the Sovereign Theatre. The table and chairs are back where they were when the play began. It is nine forty-five the following Wednesday morning. CLARENCE, in a pair of Oxford bags, is pacing the stage impatiently. An old school tie is visible in the vee-neck of his long-sleeved white pullover. He keeps looking at his watch. After a couple of seconds, footsteps are heard galloping up the stairs two at a time, and MONTY bursts in panting loudly. He is cheerfully arrayed in white flannels, a striped blazer, and a cricket cap, which he removes and hangs on the corner of a chair. CLARENCE halts abruptly, and turning his wrist, displays the face of his watch to MONTY.

CLARENCE

(Accusingly.) Have you any idea what time it is?

MONTY

Terribly sorry, old man. Eleonora got a puncture on the way in.

CLARENCE

Who on earth is Eleonora?

MONTY

You know, old chap, the Duesenberg!

CLARENCE

Oh, THAT monster! What else can you expect from a female?

MONTY

(Looking around the empty stage enquiringly.) Speaking of females, what have you done with the fair Lily?

CLARENCE

She's not here yet. (Staring angrily at his watch.) And it is now exactly nine forty-six. What d'you make of that?

MONTY

Damned inconsiderate, I'd call it.

CLARENCE

Yes, so that makes the two of you damned inconsiderate. You KNOW Wednesday's the day I coach my leads.

MONTY

Of course I do. And I've accounted for myself. (Pause.) No-one WANTS to get a puncture!

CLARENCE

Very well, I absolve you. And I apologize. In any case, it's Lily I'm anxious about. She can't afford the delay.

MONTY

Oh well, she'll probably turn up in a minute.

CLARENCE

Probably. (His eyes finally lighting on MONTY'S outfit.) Good Lord! Why on earth are you dressed up like that?

MONTY

(Looking down proudly at the knife-pleats in his whites, and fingering the fine cloth of his lapel.) Don't you like my rig-out? I think it's rather spiffy, myself. Return match against Digby-on-the-Marsh at four. Should win. I'm bowling in the first over.

CLARENCE

(Sarcastically.) Are you really? Well, the way things are

CLARENCE (Cont.)

going, you'll be lucky if you're bowling in the last!

MONTY

Dear me. I hope you're wrong. (Pause.) Oh damn! I left my bat and pads sticking out of Eleonora's dickey. Think they'll be safe?

CLARENCE

Don't worry. Tubby'll watch them for you. He can't take his eyes off that machine of yours.

MONTY

True. He has made rather a pet of the old Duse. (Pause while he sits down at the table. CLARENCE continues to pace the floor.) Tell me, Clarence, what's your honest opinion of Lily's progress?

CLARENCE

(Stopping.) I have great confidence in Lily. You can rest assured that everything is going to turn out well. (Pause.) Of course, she may be a little slow at learning her lines, and her voice could do to be a fraction louder -- but then, what right have we to expect anything more at this stage?

MONTY

Do I detect a slight diminution of the original optimism?

CLARENCE

Most decidedly not.

MONTY

Well? Aren't you going to ask me what I think?

CLARENCE

I wasn't. But you look as if you're determined to tell me.

MONTY

Yes. Well I have a strong suspicion that I'm going to have to carry her through most of the play.

CLARENCE

You're a born pessimist, Monty. Banish such thoughts from your mind! (Eagerly.) Listen? Here she comes.

CLARENCE'S relief is conspicuously evident as fresh footsteps are heard mounting the stairs. However, it is not LILY who enters, but FELIX who saunters on, wearing the same flashy suit and bowler hat, and twirling his umbrella non-chalantly. He takes his bearings from the back of the stage for a moment. CLARENCE grasps MONTY frantically by the elbow.

CLARENCE

(Sotto voce.) Good God! How did HE get in?

MONTY

Why didn't Tubby stop him?

CLARENCE

(Bitterly.) Too busy buffing Eleonora's bonnet, I shouldn't wonder.

FELIX

Mornin' gents. (Tucking his umbrella beneath his arm, and doffing his hat in both directions.) Mister "E." Mister "M."

CLARENCE

(Ignoring FELIX entirely, and rushing over to the wings aflame with irritation.) Tubby -- TUBBY! ("Yerse," comes a distant reply.) The rules are, NO visitors during rehearsal

CLARENCE (Cont.)

hours! ("Sorry, Mister Enright, Sir. But you let 'im up Monday and Tuesday, so I didn't fink there was no 'arm.")

CLARENCE turns impatiently to FELIX.) I'm getting very tired of these interruptions, Phillpotts. Is Lily with you? (Craning his neck to see.)

FELIX

FEEL. Call me Feel. Feelin' a bit out of sorts today, are we?

CLARENCE

Unless you've brought Lily with you, I must ask you to leave. We're busy.

FELIX

(His eye roving the stage for signs of vital activity.) Busy? Ah yes, I can see that. I mean, that's quite clear, that is. Extremely busy I should say! (He looks at MONTY and winks.) My, my, Mister Merivale, don't WE look natty? (Pantomiming the motions of a backhand serve.) Anyone fer tennis?

MONTY

(Staring down at his cricketing apparel.) Tennis?

CLARENCE

Look here, where's Lily?

MONTY

Yes. Where is Lily?

FELIX

(Turning from one to the other slowly.) Enquirin' after me fiongsay, was you?

CLARENCE

Where is she? What have you done with her? She has no business being this late!

FELIX

Ah well, that's because I told 'er to take a bit of an extra kip this mornin'.

CLARENCE

You told her to do WHAT?

FELIX

(Nonchalantly.) Told 'er to take a bit of an extra kip.

CLARENCE

And she LISTENED to you?

FELIX

Oh, yes. Lily listens ter me, alright. She 'as ter now. An' when I tells 'er a vallible piecer property like 'erself needs a bit of extra beauty sleep, she goes ahead an' takes it, see? (He produces a flashy gold turnip watch from his breast pocket and examines it.) No need ter bust yer britches, she'll be along soon. (Replacing it.) Nice piecer tin that is. Picked it up this mornin'. Part of me expectations.

CLARENCE

Extra BEAUTY sleep? Why, that's monstrous! Who d'you think you are -- interfering with MY regulations, and telling members of MY company to take time off for BEAUTY SLEEP?

FELIX

(Wagging a playful finger at him.) Ah, but in my position I

FELIX (Cont.)

can, see?

CLARENCE

I'll wait for you to elucidate that statement, and then I want you OFF my stage. (He advances towards FELIX threateningly, while MONTY begins to close in on the other side.) RIGHT off it -- for good.

FELIX

(Grinning at them both.) Now, now, gen'lemen, no need fer 'ostility. (He spreads out his hands placatingly.) I've only come ter see as me fiongsay gets a fair shake. Surely there ain't no 'arm in that?

MONTY

A FAIR SHAKE? (Clapping him on the shoulder like a policeman.) Look here, Phillpotts. We can't have this sort of thing you know. You'd better come along with me. (He begins to propel him towards the wings.) Come quietly now.

FELIX

Take yer flippin' 'ands orf! There's no call fer none of this. (Jerking himself free and rubbing his shoulder.) Why don't you wait till you've 'eard me out? You'll change yer tune then.

MONTY

(Latching on to him again.) We don't intend to wait for anything. We just want you out of here, that's all.

FELIX

(Shaking himself free again.) 'Old yer 'orses, mate!

FELIX (Cont.)

(Plumping himself down on one of the spare chairs.) I 'aven't told you 'oo I am yet, (Crossing one leg over the other, leaning back, and tilting his small bowler back on his head with the tip of his umbrella.) 'ave I?

MONTY

We know who you are already. You're a bloody little nuisance who can't see when he's not wanted.

FELIX

(Unperturbed.) I'll 'ave you know, you are now haddressin' Miss Lily Fairchild's MANNIGER! So you better start listnin' ter me wiv a bit more respeck!

CLARENCE

Manager? Does Lily know anything about this?

FELIX

Course she does. 'Er's the one wot give me the job.

CLARENCE

WHAT?

FELIX

The idea come to us bowf last night. All the plans fer 'er itinnery 'as ter go frough me now, see?

CLARENCE

I don't believe it.

FELIX

Wot? You callin' me a liar, then?

MONTY

(Stepping in strategically.) Certainly not. He's just amazed



MONTY (Cont.)

that she would agree to such a thing.

CLARENCE

But she doesn't NEED a manager! She hasn't even begun!

FELIX

Don't give me them apples! I knows all them prima dollies up on the stage 'as mannigers. Clevvah toffs wot looks arter their int'resses. Sees as everythink's on the up-an'-up like. (Pause.) I want a little word wiv the bloke wot pays the wages too, while I'm at it. Get fings squared off wiv 'im. It ain't neiver of you lot, is it?

MONTY

Of all the confounded cheek! Do we LOOK like payclerks?

FELIX

Oh, HEXCUSE me, I was forgettin' meself! I s'pose toffs like you's too 'igh an' mighty to 'andle filfy lucre. So, if it ain't one of you lot, 'oo is it wot keeps their eye on the spondulics?

CLARENCE

Do you realize, if you carry on like this, you could put an end to Lily's career before it begins? Think about that!

MONTY

(Advancing with the intention of collaring FELIX for the third time.) Yes. And think about it while you're on your way out.

FELIX

(Staying put.) Look, gents, can't we keep this friendly like?

CLARENCE

(Motioning MONTY back.) Why don't we let him go and see Waldheim? (The flicker of a smile hovers around his lips.) Waldheim's conversant with all the financial arrangements.

FELIX

Waldheim?

CLARENCE

(Winking at MONTY.) Yes, I don't see why not.

MONTY

Waldheim, by God! Isn't that flying a bit high? Won't he be -----?

CLARENCE

(Cutting in quickly.) Exactly. I'll write down the address for you. (He takes a small notebook out of his pocket and scribbles in it.) And his telephone number.

FELIX

'Oo's this 'ere Waldheim then?

CLARENCE

(Tearing out the page and handing it to him.) Our producer.

FELIX

Ah. Now yer talkin'. (Gratified, he looks at the address.) Where's this then? Misselthingummy Manor, 'Igh Wycombe, Bucks? 'Asn't 'e got an office around 'ere?

CLARENCE

Unfortunately, he's seldom in town. You'll have to ring up his secretary for an appointment, and take the train out to see him.

FELIX

You 'avin' me on or somethink?

CLARENCE

Not at all, he's semi-retired. He works from his house.

FELIX

Right. Well, I'll take my business there then.

CLARENCE

Good. That's just what you should do.

MONTY

Yes, and buck up about it too.

FELIX

(Rising.) Done! I'll go an' give 'im a ring. (Strolling towards the wings.) I s'pose there's a telephone on the premises, is there?

CLARENCE

There's one in Tubby's room. Don't you want your hat and umbrella?

FELIX

Nah. Leave 'em there. (Over his shoulder as he exits.) I'm comin' back ter watch Lily do 'er stuff.

CLARENCE

(Snatching up the two articles and pursuing him with them.)  
No, you're NOT! (He's too late; FELIX is already half-way down the stairs. He returns them to the chair.)

MONTY

(Laughing.) Good try!

CLARENCE

Damn his eyes.

MONTY

Old Waldheim was quite an inspiration.

CLARENCE

(Brightening.) Yes, he was, wasn't he? That dragon of a secretary of his'll give our young friend the run-around. If I know her, he won't get beyond the waiting-room for a month!

MONTY

(Chuckling.) And when he does, he'll feel the toe of Waldheim's boot up his arse! Mmmmm. I hope Old Waldheim won't think we set him on him!

CLARENCE

(Looking at his watch.) I wish to God Lily'd hurry up.

MONTY

I should give her a piece of my mind, if I were you.

TUBBY'S voice is heard from below, saying, "I'm sorry, Miss, but I can't let you up. It's more than me job's worf." CLARENCE dashes across the stage -- shouting back over his shoulder at MONTY:

CLARENCE

What on earth's the matter -- why's he trying to stop her?

(Reaching the top of the stairs.) It's ALRIGHT, Tubby.

Send the young lady up. I'm waiting for her. (Giving a sigh of relief, he returns to centre stage to wait.) Thank God!

SARAH now comes bounding in breathless and smiling. CLARENCE'S jaw drops. Intense frustration clouds his brow. His shoulders sag.

SARAH

Well, that's better! I thought I was going to have to fight my way in again! (She stares at CLARENCE in surprise.) Goodness! You do look glum. (Gazing around the stage.) I thought you'd be half-way through the play by now. Where's your little ingénue? Catching up on her beauty sleep? (CLARENCE glares at her frostily.) Perhaps I can help out, can I? D'you need an extra person to read, or something?

CLARENCE

Look here, Sarah, I thought I told you -----

MONTY

(Catching at his sleeve.) Might not be a bad idea, old chap. Put the wind up the little girl a bit, and give me a chance to go over my lines.

SARAH

Marvellous! I've brought my script. (Waving it at them.) Quite a pleasant little piece, Clarence. Though I've known you to write better.

CLARENCE

(Stung.) Why, Sarah! I always thought you loved my plays!

SARAH

It's just that lately your style seems to be getting a little rusty.

CLARENCE

(Picking up the gauntlet.) Now, look here, Sarah -----

MONTY

(Stepping in.) Stop it you two, you're wasting time. We need to rehearse.

SARAH

(Removing her jacket, and tossing it on a chair.) Alright.

So which scene are we doing?

MONTY

The scene on the terrace outside the ballroom -- isn't it, Clarence?

CLARENCE

(Looking anxiously towards the wings.) If we waited a minute or two longer, she might get here. It's not very kind to do this.

MONTY

So what d'you care? She's upset your whole morning for you.

CLARENCE

Oh, alright then. Sarah, you go and stand over there.

(Indicating the furthest point on stage left.) And Monty, you know where to go.

SARAH takes her place. MONTY ambles across to stage right where he looks over the top of his script at her as, glancing provocatively over her shoulder, she turns to leave.

MONTY

(Taking a step forward.) "Please don't go."

SARAH

(Stopping, and turning round.) "Hullo. You're Lord Thornton, aren't you?"

SARAH'S transformation into Prudence is spectacular. Her demeanour is suddenly gentle and girlish, and she appears miraculously to have shed ten years.

MONTY

"Yes. Rodney Thornton's the name. I don't think we've been introduced."

SARAH

(Smiling, as he moves nearer.) "No, we haven't. I'm Prudence Appleby."

MONTY

(Taking her outstretched hand.) "Were you on your way to meet someone?"

SARAH

"I was, but I'll go in with you if you'll ask me to dance."

FELIX re-enters unseen by the others. He stands watching SARAH suspiciously.

MONTY

"You've been very booked up."

SARAH

"I know. (Raising her hand to indicate the sky.) It's a lovely night, isn't it?"

MONTY

"I hadn't noticed how lovely it was -- until I saw you."

CLARENCE

Beautiful, beautiful. That's exactly what I had in mind.

MONTY

It runs like clockwork with Sarah doing it. (He stoops to kiss her hand.)

FELIX

(Stepping out of the shadows and declaring his presence.)

'Ullo, 'ullo, 'ullo! Wot's all this then? (Indicating SARAH with his thumb.) Wot's SHE doin' 'ere?

CLARENCE

QUIET PLEASE. We're having a rehearsal.

FELIX

(Advancing.) Oh no we ain't. Not wivout Lily! (He tweaks the script out of SARAH'S hand.) Them's Lily's words she's readin' I reckonize 'em.

SARAH

What on earth d'you think you're doing? GIVE that to me!

(She snatches at her script, but FELIX holds it high above her head.) Monty, deal with this idiot, will you?

MONTY attempts to retrieve the script, but FELIX whips it behind his back.

FELIX

'Ere, give over you two. I'm Lily's manniger, an' I don't 'old wiv none of this!

CLARENCE

MR. PHILLPOTTS! I must ask you to desist. Miss Sackville is



CLARENCE (Cont.)

merely deputizing for Lily. If Lily had been here as she should, it would not have been necessary. Have you never heard the expression, "The show must go on?"

FELIX

No, I ain't.

CLARENCE

Well, it must. So now will you kindly go away and leave us to get on with it? (Puzzled.) Anyway, what are you doing back so soon?

FELIX

I couldn't get frough. The line was busy. I'll 'ave ter wait.

MONTY

Not here, you won't. You can wait downstairs.

He escorts FELIX firmly out through the wings. When he returns, he is carrying SARAH'S script which he hands to her.

There you are, my dear. I don't think he'll trouble us any more.

CLARENCE

Good work. Now perhaps we can get on.

SARAH

Who WAS that?

CLARENCE

That was Lily's fiancé.

SARAH

Good heavens! Are you employing the whole clan? This one

SARAH (Cont.)

acts like the comic turn!

CLARENCE

Yes, well, it's a long story. You can hear it some other time. I'd like to get on with the play now.

SARAH

Certainly.

SARAH and MONTY resume their former positions centre stage. SARAH slips visibly back into her "Prudence" persona as she begins to read.

"Do you attend many of these affairs, Lord Thornton?"

MONTY

"Rodney -- please. I have to. You see, it's expected of me."

SARAH

"Ah yes, now I recall, you're the man The Tatler is calling 'the season's most eligible bachelor'. You must be in great demand among the mamas."

MONTY

(Straightening his tie and looking down modestly.) "Oh, you mustn't pay any attention to that -----"

SARAH

"Oh but I wasn't! I was far more struck by an item my maid showed me in The News of the World. It ran something like this: 'Lord Thornton, often nicknamed Rodney the Ravisher, or the Park Lane Paramour -----'"

At this point light footsteps are heard tearing up the stairs, and everyone turns to look as LILY rushes in. She is got up to look like

Greta Garbo in one of her more vampish roles.  
It is evident she is highly distraught.

MONTY

Good Lord, it's Lily! Whatever's the matter?

CLARENCE

(Almost simultaneously.) Lily!

SARAH

Good God, I should never have recognized her!

LILY

(Excitedly.) Felix is lying at the bottom of the stairs! I think he's hurt. Can somebody come and help him?

CLARENCE

Great heavens! Whatever next? (Pause.) What about Tubby? Isn't Tubby there?

LILY

No. He's outside in the street gazing at a car.

CLARENCE

(Bewildered.) Well, we'd better do something then. Monty, you -----

MONTY

(Reassuringly.) Yes, of course I'll go.

He makes speedily for the staircase, and descends at the gallop. LILY anxiously follows him. SARAH and CLARENCE are left standing face to face in the middle of the stage.

CLARENCE

He's brought nothing but trouble, that young man.

SARAH

I shouldn't worry. I don't suppose it's anything serious.

(Pause.) Look, Clarence, I know it's not the ideal moment to bring this up, but as it's probably the last time we'll be alone together, I want you to answer a serious question. What ARE you going to do about Monty when he's all washed up as a matinée idol?

CLARENCE

(Staring at her in disbelief.) Why would I discuss that with you?

SARAH

(Hotly.) Because, if the way you've treated me is an example of the way you treat your friends, then I think he ought to be warned.

CLARENCE

(Startled by the passion in her voice.) D'you mean to imply that I'm not interested in Monty's welfare?

SARAH

No. But, because I AM, I would like to be assured that the same thing won't happen to him.

CLARENCE

Well, you needn't concern yourself any further. I HAVE got plans for Monty in his maturity. But I have no intention of telling either of you what they are before I'm ready.

SARAH

If you're his friend, you'll tell him now. He needs to know.

They are interrupted by a series of bumps and groans on the stairs. MONTY enters supporting FELIX on his arm. A frightened LILY brings up the rear.

MONTY

He's not badly hurt -- I'm sure of it. (Responding to an anxious look from CLARENCE.) Why, Clarrie! You don't think I had anything to do with it, do you? On my honour, he was perfectly fine when I showed him out! (Addressing LILY.) I merely collared him, escorted him to the top of the stairs, shook my fist at him, and left him to make his own way down.

LILY

You mean YOU were responsible for his accident?

MONTY

Good gracious, no! You don't understand. He was making such a bloody nuisance of himself we -- (Assisting FELIX to his chair.) simply had to show him the door. That's all!

LILY

(After casting a disdainful look at MONTY.) Are you really alright, Feel? (She sits beside him.) Poor duck.

FELIX

No. (Whining.) 'Ee was rough (Pointing accusingly at MONTY.) very rough. You shoved me 'ard -- an' arter you turned yer back I went all dizzy like. That's 'ow I come ter fall down them stairs -- when you wasn't lookin' -- see?

MONTY

Rot. You're making it up.

CLARENCE

I think I'd better check him over -- just in case.

He advances towards FELIX, and bends over him to feel his arms and legs for broken bones. MONTY holds him still by the shoulders.

FELIX

(Squirming.) 'Avin' a nice time, are you?

CLARENCE

Shut up. (Straightening himself.) You know, Phillpotts, I'm inclined to agree with Mr. Merivale. Miss Sackville and I would have heard the bump if you'd fallen.

SARAH

But we didn't, because there wasn't one.

FELIX

Look 'ere, you ain't doctors. You wasn't even watchin'.  
(Pulling up his trouser leg and examining his calf.) See them -- them spots? Where d'you fink they come from?  
(Leaning back.) You tell 'em, Lil. You're me witness. You saw me lyin' on the ground. (Pointing at MONTY.) 'E's the one wot done it. An' I'll 'ave 'im up fer dammiges! (MONTY throws back his head and emits a scornful laugh.) You'll be laughin' on the ovver side of yer face, mister, before I've finished wiv you!

MONTY

Piffle!

LILY

(Staring at FELIX in horror.) Oh Feel! You'd never?

FELIX

Oh, wouldn't I!

LILY

You'd better not! I want to stay an actress, see? (She reaches out and slaps his face.) You're just pulling a fast one, that's what you're doing!

FELIX

Hey! Come off it, cow. I ain't doin' no such fink!

LILY

COW indeed! (She strikes him again, only this time harder.) Take THAT, Felix Phillpotts! That'll teach you to lie and call me names!

CLARENCE

(Intervening before FELIX can retaliate.) Be quiet, both of you! Sit still, Lily. (She calms down gradually, and he stands in front of them looking grave.) I think it's time we three had a little talk. (SARAH and MONTY quietly withdraw to the table and sit down.) Phillpotts told me you made him your business manager. Is that true?

LILY

(Uncomfortably.) Yes -- I suppose so. But HE'S the one who thought of it.

CLARENCE

Really, Lily, don't you think it's a bit soon to be needing a manager? You're not even known yet. There's a possibility you might never be. (Pause.) When, and IF, you become famous, THEN you can begin to think about things like that.

CLARENCE (Cont.)

But at this stage, you are answerable to me, and to me only. I am the director and I make the rules. You know, truly great actresses rarely arrive late for rehearsals. Not only is it considered discourteous to the director and inconsiderate to the rest of the cast, but it is an unprofessional way to behave.

LILY

(Her eyes round with remorse.) Oh, Mr. Enright! I never meant any harm -- honestly I didn't. (Giving FELIX a series of sharp little pushes.) It was your idea, Felix. Go on, tell him. TELL Mr. Enright!

FELIX

OW! Get yer flippin' 'ands off me. (He shoves her away.) Why should I get the blame for everythink? You was eager -- an' don't go sayin' you wasn't -- (LILY attempts to cover his mouth with her hand. He shoves it aside.) Hey! Get yer bleedin' 'and out of me mouf -- you cunt.

CLARENCE is profoundly shocked. SARAH snickers. And MONTY gets up to help CLARENCE deal with the situation. But CLARENCE motions him back to his chair.

LILY

How DARE you use a dirty word like that to me -- in front of all these people!

She turns her back on him abruptly. Then, biting her trembling lip, simply wrenches her engagement ring off her finger, wheels around and slams it



into his hand. After this she sinks her head in her lap and bursts into a peal of agonized sobs. CLARENCE makes an awkward attempt to comfort her, and she looks up at him miserably.

He's gone and RUINED my chance to be an actress!

CLARENCE

Wait, wait, wait! Nobody said anything about ruined chances. Look, why don't you go down to the cloakroom and dry your eyes. When you're calmer, you can come back and we'll carry on with the rehearsal. (LILY looks gratefully up through her tears, totters to her feet, and fumbles her way to the wings.) And while you're down there, see if Tubby can find you a pair of shoes you can stand up in -- and will you PLEASE remove that frightful hat -- and wipe that stuff off your face? I can't possibly work with a Prudence who looks like Mata Hari!

LILY

(Halting in her tracks and turning to face him, rivulets of black mascara running down her cheeks.) I was trying to look like a glamour girl, Mr. Enright! (Pulling her hair up into a birdsnest, as she tries to take off her hat without first removing the hatpin, thereby sending SARAH into a paroxysm of ill-concealed laughter.) We -- I mean I -- thought you'd be pleased!

CLARENCE

Oh, Lily, Lily, Lily. How can you be so mistaken about everything? I suppose that outfit was Phillpotts' idea, was it? (She nods.) I thought so. You have better taste. It's completely wrong. The last thing I want you to be is a vamp!

CLARENCE (Cont.)

I want the return of that fresh, sweet child I met last week. (SARAH pulls a face.) If you hope to act for me, you'll have to stop listening to your fiancé. You can only dance to one tune, you know, and it's up to you to choose which one it is.

LILY

I'll do just what you say, Mr. Enright. I promise I will.

CLARENCE

Of course you will. Away you go now, and tidy yourself up.

(LILY exits, and CLARENCE turns his attention to FELIX.)

Alright, Phillpotts, your turn now. I would like to make it clear to you that it is not you and Lily who are doing ME a favour, but I who am doing YOU one. With all the talent in London, including (Nodding in SARAH'S direction.) Miss Sackville's, to choose from, I decide to pick YOUR fiancée -- an inexperienced little girl from behind a pile of bathtowels -- to play the lead in my BRILLIANT new play. (He eyes SARAH as he says this. FELIX breathes on the engagement ring, polishes it on his sleeve, and eases it reverentially into his breast pocket.) And what do you do? Instead of being grateful for your girlfriend's extraordinary luck, you repay me by filling her head up with ideas of self-aggrandizement!

FELIX

Wiv WOT? (Squinting sadly down into his pocket.) Five bleedin' pounds dahn the drain. An' we never even done no pettin'.

CLARENCE

Don't interrupt! With ideas of self-importance. And then, being the despicable wretch you are, you spotted a magnificent opportunity to line your own pockets through her good fortune! But even that was not enough! You had to try and exploit poor Mr. Merivale too!

FELIX

'Oo, that ol' toffee nose? So wot if I did? 'E can afford it. 'Ave you seen that car of 'is? S'worf a mint! (MONTY rises angrily, but SARAH hauls him back and he subsides into his chair again.) Besides, wot's wrong wiv me tryin' ter get somethink out of this? Why should Lily 'ave it all?

CLARENCE

I give up. It's useless trying to teach you anything. You'd better just get your things together and go.

MONTY

(Loudly, and standing up to say it.) AND DON'T COME BACK!

FELIX

(Getting up slowly and putting his hat on.) That's friendly, I must say! (Eying CLARENCE.) Alright, I'm leavin'. But you can keep yer precious Miss Goldilocks an' welcome! There's a lot more fish in the sea -- an' bettah!

He picks up his umbrella, glances witheringly at the three of them for a moment, then, raising his right hand slowly and deliberately, he thumbs his nose at them.

Toodle pip then.

He turns on his heel and saunters out whistling. The lights dim briefly to mark the passage of a few hours. When they come up, it is three o'clock in the afternoon and the rehearsal is nearing its close. LILY, now sans makeup and wearing low-heeled shoes, is standing facing MONTY in the middle of the stage peering at her script. She appears frayed and anxious. MONTY, who is working without a script, is still in excellent shape. CLARENCE is darting about directing them busily, but he doesn't look very happy. SARAH, still at the table, is sitting back enjoying every minute.

LILY

"Words cannot express what I think of men who have no respect for their family name! I had an uncle once whose total disregard for propriety almost cast a blot on the family escutcheon."

CLARENCE

Turn your head to the audience when you say that, Lily. Otherwise they won't be able to hear you properly. And toss your head -- haughtily.

LILY

Sorry, Mr. Enright. (Doing as she's told.) "I had an uncle once whose disregard for propriety almost cast a blot on the family escutcheon." (To CLARENCE.) Was that alright? Or had I better start again?

CLARENCE

No. Just remember next time.

LILY

"In the middle of a highly successful parliamentary career, and a truly advantageous marriage -- (Inadvertently moving upstage, she forces MONTY to stand with his back to the

LILY (Cont.)

audience.) he suddenly felt compelled to commit an act of indiscretion!"

MONTY

She's upstaging me again, Clarence. Tell her to stay where she was.

CLARENCE

(Wearily.) If you keep doing that, Lily, all the audience is going to see is Monty's backside. And they won't be able to hear him.

LILY

Oh dear! Did I do it again? I'm ever so sorry.

MONTY

(Moving around to get better exposure.) "What on earth did he do?"

LILY

Pardon? Oh goodness, I've lost my place! (After hunting for her lines, she begins to recite in a tired, toneless voice.)  
"He dashed across to Dover, and disappeared for days. The ensuing Saturday, he was seen to surface in Paris on the left bank of the Seine. He was described as wearing scarlet silk pyjamas -- and (Looking up.) a nightcap on his head."

Unseen by the others, SARAH rolls her eyes upwards in professional dismay.

CLARENCE

(Determined not to get upset.) That's "In his HAND," Lily.

LILY

Oh help, I forgot! (Looking back at the script.) "And a nightcap in his hand."

MONTY

"In his hand? Why not on his head?"

LILY

"You could hardly expect him to balance a jeroboam of champers on his head!"

MONTY

"No, I daresay not -- at an uncle's age. And was that the extent of his iniquity?"

LILY

"No, he was barefoot and blotto too, and bolstered on both sides by a pair of breathtaking beauties from the Folies Bergère!"

MONTY

"Indeed? And were they also barefoot?"

LILY

"Oh yes. (Unconsciously edging herself round to face the audience full on.) Barefoot -- and BARE everything else too!"

MONTY

"Ah, that's different. Were they apprehended?" (He shuffles his feet crossly, in an effort to give his profile to the audience.) CLARENCE!

CLARENCE

You're doing it again, Lily. You're upstaging Monty. (Rearranging her.) There. And you're delivering your lines

CLARENCE (Cont.)

like an automaton! What's come over you?

LILY

(Wretchedly.) I don't know, Mr. Enright. But I'm getting DREADFULLY tired. D'you think we could stop soon?

CLARENCE

Yes. I think perhaps we'd better. I can't possibly achieve anything with you in that state. Anyway, I'm just about ready to drop, myself. (Pause.) Thank you, Lily, you can go home now -- and get some of those lines into your head. And thank you, Monty, I'd like you to wait.

MONTY

Don't forget my cricket match!

CLARENCE

(Looking at his watch.) It's only three. You have an hour.

LILY

(Touching CLARENCE'S sleeve.) I'm sorry, Mr. Enright, I wasn't very good today was I? I'll try and be better tomorrow.

CLARENCE gives her shoulder a vague, dismissive pat and turns his attention to something in the script. LILY goes disconsolately to the table to get her bag, and while she's tucking her own script inside it, she notices SARAH is watching her intently.

SARAH

(Leaning forward and placing her hand over LILY'S.)

Congratulations, dear. I want to wish you luck.

LILY

(Snatching her hand away.) There's no call to patronise me,

LILY (Cont.)

Miss Sackville.

SARAH

Sarah. (Standing up.) No, I'm not. Really I'm not. Before you got tired you were very good. I've been a bitch to you, haven't I? Well, I want to apologise. You've got the makings of an actress. It's going to take time, but it's there.

LILY

(Brightening up.) Goodness! D'you really mean that?

SARAH

Yes, I do.

LILY

Gracious! Well, thank you, Miss Sackville -- I mean -- Sarah, I did try. (Turning to the others.) Goodnight, everybody.

ALL

Goodnight, Lily.

LILY exits with a lighter step. CLARENCE goes over to address SARAH at the table.

CLARENCE

What made you say that? You were laughing at her. I saw you.

SARAH

I know I was, and I'm sorry. But she wasn't all that bad, I was surprised. Her only trouble is she can't keep it up. Give her a couple of years and she'll be good.

MONTY

We haven't got a couple of years.



SARAH

Well, maybe not quite that long. Anyway (Smiling.) with Merlin the magician in charge, who knows what can happen? (She begins to powder her nose in preparation for departure.)

CLARENCE

I only have eight weeks.

SARAH

(Nonchalantly.) Oh yes, I'd forgotten. That IS going to be awkward, isn't it? (She pops her compact into her bag.) Well, I have to be off. I have an appointment with John Gielgud to discuss a part at the Old Vic. (She slips into her jacket.) Your idea about diversifying looks as if it's going to pay off.

MONTY

(Offering his hand in congratulation.) Why, that's wonderful, Sarah. I knew you had it in you.

CLARENCE

Did you say, with GIELGUD?

SARAH

Yes, I did.

CLARENCE

(Putting his arm around her in an avuncular fashion.) When I suggested diversifying, I didn't mean you should rush headlong into anything, Sarah dear.

SARAH

Oh, I'm sure I've made the right decision. You did me a favour when you inferred I was getting a bit long in the tooth for

SARAH (Cont.)

ingénues. All that sort of thing is over for me. I'm actually very grateful to you for making me see it. (She gives him a little peck on the cheek.) There, everything's forgiven and forgotten. And now that I know you're so admirably suited, I can begin to "unleash my boundless talents on that breathlessly waiting world!"

CLARENCE

Mmmmmmmmm.

MONTY

Look here, old chap, I've got to get a move on. So if you want us to talk, can we do it soon?

CLARENCE

Just a moment, Monty. (Contemplating SARAH anxiously.) You'll be in touch?

SARAH

Of course. But I simply have to fly now. One doesn't keep John waiting. (Blowing them a kiss, she flitters towards the wings.) 'Night, darlings, best of luck with the play. (As if suddenly remembering, she reaches into her bag and pulls out her script. She tosses it to CLARENCE with an apologetic smile.) So sorry, sweetie. I almost took it with me!

CLARENCE

(Following her and handing it back.) Please keep it. (She exits, and he wanders over to the table, pulls out a chair, and sinks into it.) Eight weeks, Monty!

MONTY

I know. We're in a bit of a pickle, aren't we?

CLARENCE

What went wrong? She was alright yesterday?

MONTY

She was alright today -- some of the time.

CLARENCE

Have I pushed her too hard?

MONTY

No, it wasn't that.

CLARENCE

Am I going to have to look for someone else?

MONTY

I'm afraid that's about the size of it.

CLARENCE

What am I going to do with HER then?

MONTY

I shouldn't worry about that too much, old man. You'll get a chance to use her eventually.

CLARENCE

Ah. So, like Sarah, you think she'll turn out alright in the long run? (MONTY nods comfortingly.) But how am I going to tell her?

MONTY

That's up to you, old man.

CLARENCE

It'll be difficult. Difficult. (Pause.) But she had the

CLARENCE (Cont.)

divine spark, Monty. I still think she might have done it.

MONTY

(Firmly.) No, Clarence. Under less pressured circumstances -- maybe. But, as you have said so many times yourself, only twenty-five percent of all true greatness stems from the divine spark -- all the rest comes from pure, hard, labour.

CLARENCE

I said that? (Pause.) But all the same -- (Wistfully.) with Lily, we might have touched the stars.

MONTY

(Moving to his side and giving his arm a comforting squeeze.)  
And so we shall, old thing, so we shall. But you must use your influence to get her into a good repertory company for a couple of years first. You'll be doing her the greatest service in your power if you do that.

CLARENCE

(Cheering up.) Think so?

MONTY

I do. And I think she'll agree to it more readily than you expect.

CLARENCE

I did so want to train her myself.

MONTY

You haven't time to be an acting instructor, old bean.

CLARENCE

You know, I thought it was rather gracious of Sarah to

CLARENCE (Cont.)

acknowledge Lily's talent in the end. (Pause.) She has her finer moments sometimes. You could do worse than marry her.

MONTY

I probably shall soon. She may not be the starry-eyed, petal-cheeked virgin Lily is, but well, we've been through a lot together.

CLARENCE

(Rising.) And she has your best interests at heart.

MONTY

(Surprised.) Why d'you say that?

CLARENCE

(Confronting him, and placing a hand on each of his shoulders.) She's insisting that I tell you the truth about your future in my plays.

MONTY

(Stricken.) Oh Lord!

CLARENCE

(A little ashamedly.) I do admit to having felt that a little uncertainty kept you on your toes as an actor. But I ought to have told you the truth sooner, and I'm sorry.

(MONTY turns from him and grips the back of a chair to steady himself.) We all outgrow our youthful roles, old man. Even I. So I'm afraid there won't be many more boyish bounders waiting to be tamed by débutantes coming up on your agenda -- nor, for that matter, on mine. (Just as MONTY is trying not to look as if the bottom has dropped out of his world,

CLARENCE (Cont.)

CLARENCE'S face breaks into a wonderful smile.) You see, I intend to embark on a new kind of play altogether. In future I shall be writing vehicles for a handsome male protagonist who is rejoicing in the prime of life!

MONTY

MY GOD, Clarence! You might have told me that before. I've been worried stiff! (Relief floods his face.)

CLARENCE

Oh ye of little faith!

MONTY

Well, I mean to say! A chap needs to know these things!

CLARENCE

I know, I know, I know. But look ahead, old man. Think of the new worlds we have to conquer. Think of the sport!

MONTY

SPORT? Good God -- my cricket match! (He snatches his cap from the chairback and pulls it on his head.) Look, I'm going in your direction first. Want a lift in Eleonora?

CLARENCE

(Reaching for the scripts on the table, and slipping one into MONTY'S pocket and one into his own.) That'd be nice.

MONTY

(Linking his arm in his, and marching him towards the wings.) So, what about The Redemption of Rodney Thornton or Prudence Prevails? Rehearsal off for tomorrow?

CLARENCE

Possibly. Possibly not.

They turn and take an affectionate gander at the old stage before leaving. CLARENCE feels for the light switch at the back and turns it off. The stage darkens as they exit. CLARENCE'S voice is heard on the stairs.

You see, old man, for the first time in my life, I may have to go down on my knees and do a bit of begging.

MONTY

Ah yes. My condolences, old chap. Well, keep your chin up.

FINAL CURTAIN