

THE BLACK CATS

**A Comedy
in 29 Scenes
by
Maurice Rowdon**

CHARACTERS

BERYL HOLMES

DON HOLMES, her husband

JOY TURNER, a workmate

JACK TURNER, her husband

MARION

THE MECHANIC

TWO WOMEN WORKERS, MEMBERS OF THE BLACK CAT CLUB etc.

* * * *

SCENE

The stage is divided into a downstage and an upstage area. The downstage area is the living room of DON and BERYL HOLMES, one door on the actor's right leading to a tiny hall and the street, another on the opposite side leading to the bedrooms. This downstage scene remains the same throughout the play.

The upstage area is used for various scenes and is raised above the downstage area in such a way that, when necessary, action can take place in both areas without masking.

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NOTE

The characters are painted and clothed a little larger than life. A little more white on the cheek than should be, or a little more red, will convey the opposite poles of excess.

They play accordingly. The action should go at a Commedia dell'Arte pace. When there is distress it is the distress of clowns. Full grotesque vent can be given to grief when it is required. The song BLACK AS A COUPLE OF CATS (see Appendix) can look and sound just this side of a Voodoo celebration.

The sound of the motor-cycles can be exaggerated to the point of burlesque. In fact the putter-putter of idling engines, the rhythm of the Black Cat song, the sound of the pulping and tinning machines at the paste factory can all be part of a composite theme, a musical imitation used in place of the real sounds; and this too can play its part in the suggestion of the tribal.

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ACT ONE

1.

A petrol station in the upstage area. We see only the pumps, two sets of two. We hear the powerful revving of cars.

BERYL HOLMES is at work on the pumps on the actor's left, JOY TURNER on those on the right. Their guns make a loud ring when re-attached to the column-hook, after serving a customer. Their platforms are raised above the cars and they have to descend steps going upstage so that cars need be simulated by noise only.

A car arrives at BERYL's pump.

BERYL: (grasping the long gun and drawing it off the hook) How many please?

DRIVER: Six of the best, duck. Can you get it in?

BERYL: I've never failed yet.

DRIVER: Well keep a good grip on it.

BERYL: That's one pound fourteen and six please.

DRIVER: Keep the change, duck.

BERYL: (as she replaces the gun) Thank you, sir.

(The car drives off)

(wiping her hands on a cloth) Why are all the Jags like that? so damn saucy?

JOY: (servicing a car) Give me the rag, duck. (as they draw near to each other) No I like the Jags. They tip.

BERYL: This one gave me seven and six. Piecan!

JOY: Thank you, sir!

(Her car too drives off)

(No custom for the moment. The GIRLS lean, slouch)

JOY: I've been watching you.

BERYL: Oh?

JOY: (nodding towards BERYL's tummy) Boy or a girl?

BERYL: No such luck! It isn't for want of trying though!

JOY: You never know!

(They are interrupted by a car driving up to BERYL's pump)

BERYL: How many please?

DRIVER: Two and a grease-up, Beryl.

BERYL: You're greasy enough.

DRIVER: All right, just the two then, straight in. Hullo, Joy.

JOY: Hullo.

DRIVER: Not divorced yet?

JOY: No.

DRIVER: Let me know when.

(The bell as BERYL hooks up coincides with the chimes of a clock on the living room mantelpiece and the scene quickly fades into ---)

2.

--- the living room in the downstage area.

DON HOLMES is taking off his shoes, still in his work clothes.

The street door opens and BERYL comes in.

DON: Hullo, duck.

BERYL: Hullo you're early. Lost your job?

DON: Put the kettle on quick.

BERYL: All right let me get in the door!

(They kiss)

BERYL: Know what joy said?

DON: No?

BERYL: Thought I was pregnant.

DON: Go on.

BERYL: I said it wasn't for want of trying.

DON: Well suppose you are?

BERYL: Don't talk daft! The doctor said it was distended stomach.

DON: Nothing to be ashamed of.

BERYL: I'd be prouder of a baby.

DON: Oh well it'll happen.

BERYL: I hope to God it does. I don't fancy feeding men with petrol all my life.

DON: Go on, it brings you a bit of pocket money.

BERYL: It brings me a lot of lip too. I tell you one thing, if I do have kids I shan't go out working all day like she does. I wonder Jack stands for it.

DON: (rising) I'll be working on the bike.

BERYL: Why does she get kids and not me?

(DON leaves via the bedrooms while BERYL gets the tea.

A ring at the doorbell)

DON: (off) That's Jack I reckon!

(BERYL goes to the door)

JACK: (off) All in bed?

(DON appears from the other side wiping his hands on a greasy rag)

DON: Come in, mate.

(JACK comes in followed by BERYL)

JACK: (crossing straight over to the disc machine) What no music?

BERYL: Cup of tea?

(Music comes on)

JACK: You on that bike again? You ought to trade it in down at my place, mate, it's never given you a decent ride.

DON: Suits me.

BERYL: Except you always break down.

JACK: (dancing) Know this one?

DON: And you never do?

BERYL: Not as a habit.

DON: Don't talk tripe.

BERYL: What about that time down Hayward's Heath ... ?

DON: Give up!

JACK: To change the subject abruptly what about some wishbones, Don?

DON: Wishbones?

JACK: Don't your chickens have wishbones?

DON: Yes.

JACK: Well what about two hundred of them?

DON: Two hundred? I could try.

JACK: It's a new gag for the club. And I thought you might like to do the raffle this week, Beryl.

BERYL: Why, Joy gone on strike?

JACK: She's renounced raffles for life she says. (pulling out a map) And here's the itinerary for Saturday. Down the by-pass. Then I thought we might pull in here.

BERYL: Oh yes.

JACK: And we should be down at Lewes by three. We're meeting up with the Moles down there ---

(The scene abruptly sinks into darkness as the roar of motor cycles rises to a crescendo and ---)

3.

--- the upstage area is alive with helmetted figures, the members of the Black Cat club. BERYL and JACK are there.

DON comes in late.

JACK: How was it, mate?

DON: Piston rods. Not turning over first thing.

JACK: No music?

(In reply there is a blare of music from one of the portable radios)

DON: I got them wishbones.

JACK: Lovely man! What do we owe you?

DON: Nothing.

JACK: Lovelier still!

DON: (addressing whichever of the CATS will listen) You don't think I pay for anything that comes out of that factory do you? I see that two or three chickens week end up in our oven, don't you worry about that!

JACK: All right, Cats!..Crawley first call, let's have you!

(They leave one by one. But DON is having trouble)

DON: Half a mo', mate! Stalled.

BERYL: Oh--- !

DON: Well --- !

(He kicks the engine over but there is no result)

I stripped her down last night too!

BERYL: Well I'm going ---

DON: Do what you like! I reckon the feed's not right.

BERYL: You and your feed! It's your tank not your feed.

DON: What?

BERYL: Your tank needs topping up! (screams above her engine) Your tank, your tank!

DON: Here ... !

(She speeds off. In the silence he disconsolately kicks his engine over.

As he does so JOY fades in before him in the upstage area)

JOY: Kick it, that's right. You show her your tank's all right. And your piston rods too. Have a dance with me tonight? (she smiles at him)

(His machine comes to life, and JOY fades quickly.

He speeds off and everything is darkness again)

4.

To the sound of a deafening dance number the upstage area comes to life in the form of a Black Cat Club dance.

DON approaches JOY.

DON: Like a dance, mate?

JOY: Oh all right.

DON: You should learn to ride.

JOY: One in the family's enough.

DON: I had trouble with my pistons today.

JOY: Oh yes?

DON: Had to kick her over more than once.

JOY: Oh.

DON: Beryl said she thought it was my tank but I said no.

JOY: Every week-end!

DON: Eh?

JOY: Nothing.

DON: Well it makes a change, getting out.

JOY: It don't for me.

DON: We was at Crawley, nice run.

JOY: I wouldn't even go pillion, I told him so. He can stick his pillions.

DON: Beryl says she likes the wind in her face.

JOY: Oh.

DON: You're not doing the raffle this week then?

JOY: No.

DON: Nice crowd tonight.

JOY: I reckon it don't do Beryl any good, all that shaking about, I reckon that's why she don't conceive.

DON: You try and tell her that.

JOY: She's mad for speed, your Beryl, isn't she?

DON: Well she touched ninety on the by-pass this morning.

JOY: I'd be blue with terror.

DON: I had to kick her over.

JOY: Who?

DON: My bike.

JOY: Oh.

DON: My piston rods --- I had 'em all down ---

JOY: Oh yes.

DON: How are Jack's?

JOY: Eh?

DON: Jack's piston rods --- are they all right --- ?

JOY: How the bloody hell should I know?

DON: Oh.

(The dance ends and he leaves her in disappointment.)

JACK (holding a box) goes in his capacity as MC to the centre of the floor under a spot)

JACK: It's no secret, Cats, that one of us works in a chicken paste factory. And it's no secret that chickens have wishbones. What simpler, I thought, than to ask this chicken paste machinist to supply us with some wishbones. So take your pick and the winner of each wishing couple divides bones with every other, until one lucky couple is left on the floor.

(He hands round the box and the snapping of wishbones begins to the soft strumming of a slow number.

The scene fades)

5.

The living room in the downstage area comes to life as someone switches on the light, entering from the street. It is DON followed by BERYL.

The hypnotic bass rhythm is still there, like a memory of the dance. It sounds like a sultry jungle beat now.

It continues during their conversation.

DON: You were narky this morning weren't you?

BERYL: What's that?

DON: Don't your feed give a bit of trouble now and then?

BERYL: No it doesn't!

DON: Because you've got half a dozen mechanics round you all day that's why! Which one is it keeps your carburettor unclogged, the thickset one or the Welsh bloke with the dazzling black eyes?

BERYL: Oh you make me sick, Don Holmes! I'm fed up with always being left behind while you kick it over, I wonder you haven't worn your right leg to a stump.

DON: Christ we do go out for fun. It isn't a race. We go for the air.

BERYL: I like to get there too.

DON: I told you before I had the rods down last night ---

BERYL: Oh shut up about your rods! I heard you telling Joy,

DON: Here's your Egg Flip.

BERYL: I don't want my Egg Flip. All these bloody rituals, if it isn't Egg Flip it's a cup of tea sharp at six, we never seem to let go --- !

DON: Let go? Well Christ what were you doing down the by-pass this morning? Even Jack turned pale.

BERYL: Oh I don't enjoy it, you needn't worry about that.

DON: You don't enjoy it?

BERYL: No.

DON: Why do you do it then?

BERYL: I'm fed up with going to the doctor and hearing I've got distended stomach.

DON: Well is that my fault?

BERYL: Who's talking about your fault?

DON: You did this morning! You said about my tank!

BERYL: Shut up about your tank!

DON: Anyway it's too much for one day, covering half of England and then a dance on top of it ---

BERYL: Yes well that's why I'm going to bed.

DON: What about your Egg Flip?

BERYL: Gargle with it.

(She leaves, to the bedroom.

The haunting rhythm continues. DON sips his Egg Flip comfortably, and watches JOY appear in the upstage area, which has turned into the petrol station again. Thus both the areas are lighted. They speak in dream voices)

JOY: I like Egg Flip. (smiling at him) I think it's healthy at two o'clock in the morning.

DON: She's never refused it before. We always have a glass of Egg Flip and talk about the motor-bike performances for the day. She talks about my carb and I say the ignition seemed a bit off on her bike, and she says just try it and see, you might get a spark, and I say you seemed to be pulling well from behind today, and she says ---

JOY: I thought of coming into chicken paste.

DON: Eh?

JOY: It gets so cold on this job. Look at my arms.

DON: I'm looking.

JOY: And you get so much lip on this job --- drivers, mechanics, all sorts.

DON: I'll see what I can do.

JOY: I'm a mother after all.

DON: That's right.

(The captivating bass rhythm dies as the LIGHTS FADE on the downstage area, but only to melt into the deep putter-putter of an idling car engine as ----

6.

--- the petrol station comes into more than imagined life, and BERYL comes on.

BERYL: I had a funny dream last night.

JOY: Did you?

BERYL: I couldn't recognise myself.

JOY: Go on.

BERYL: I knew it was me but I had a different name, I felt like crying, I'd lost myself.

JOY: If you ask me you should give up that blasted Black Cat run of a Saturday.

BERYL: And Don was helping me to look for myself. He couldn't find me either.

JOY: Was he crying too?

(JOY leaves.

The idle putter-putter continues. BERYL gazes before her.

There is someone beside her: she starts)

BERYL: Oh!

(It is MARION: she is in black, with tall boots, not unlike a Black Cat minus the helmet)

MARION: Didn't you hear the car?

BERYL: Eh? How many please?

MARION: Four. Super.

(BERYL unhooks the petrol gun. She stares at her client, who walks away with a firm, click-clicking heel, then turns again)

I heard what you said about your dream.

BERYL: Oh.

(The same measured stride up and down)

MARION: Like my car?

BERYL: Yes.

MARION: Drive yourself?

BERYL: A motor cycle yes.

MARION: You've given me more than four.
BERYL: Oh!
MARION: It's all right, fill my tank. Fill it right up.
Right to the top, go on.
BERYL: All right.
MARION: You will?
BERYL: You want it full up?
MARION: Yes, very much.

(BERYL now studies the clock)

BERYL: That's two pounds three and four.
MARION: There you are. (as BERYL hooks up again) I asked
for super. You gave me ordinary.
BERYL: Oh I'm ever so sorry!
MARION: That's all right. It must be the dream.

(She leaves: her car makes a wild roar
before departure --- a menacing sports
car.

Silence.

JOY returns.

JOY: What's bitten you?
BERYL: Eh? Oh I gave her the wrong petrol.
JOY: Your tea's waiting.
BERYL: Oh ta.

(She walks off.

BLACKOUT)

7.

(The downstage area fades into view,
DON is drinking tea, alone.

A ring at the bell.

He hurries to the door.

DON: (off) Hullo, Joy.

JOY: (off) I thought I'd slip in.

DON: (off) Oh yes. Like a cup of tea?

(They come in)

JOY: I wanted to ask you if there's a job at your works.

DON: (to himself) Well Christ Almighty!

JOY: Eh?

DON: You mean up at the factory?

JOY: That's right. I'd be nearer home see. And I get so cold on that job, not like her she's covered in fat...

DON: Beryl?

JOY: Just look at my arms.

DON: Well Christ Almighty!

JOY: Still, I'll miss some of those cocky drivers, if it ever happens.

(He gets a cup for her)

DON: As a matter of fact I think there's a vacancy in Breasts.

JOY: Breasts?

DON: They're the best paid of the women. Picking the breasts off the chickens. That goes out froze to the restaurants.

JOY: Oh yes!

DON: (pouring her tea) You'd like this work. There's no gristle, they're all broiler birds, soft as rubber, comes off the bone easy.

JOY: As long as I'm warm.

DON: I'll see you're warm. Would you like some Egg Flip?

JOY: No I hate the stuff. Anyway you've just given me tea.

DON: What?

JOY: It's so sickly.

(Another ring at the bell)

That's Jack. He went up the pub.

(DON goes)

JACK: (off) Hullo, Don.

DON: (off) Come in, mate, your wife's here.

(They come in)

JOY: He's getting me into Breasts.

JACK: Into what? (putting bottles on the table) What does she mean by that?

DON: There's a vacancy.

JACK: No music?

(He switches on a disc. We have something like the captivating rhythm of Sunday night)

JOY: Why don't you concentrate?

JACK: Oh shut up, I've come to drink not argue. Fetch some glasses, mate.

JOY: Did you see mum?

JACK: Yes I took one look and fled. (stagewink at DON)

JOY: No, serious!

JACK: What do you mean serious?— Do you think I look at her for fun then? (another wink)

DON: You two!

JACK: Come on, fill 'em up.

JOY: I'm leaving the filling station.

JACK: That's what you think. Down to your toes!
(he drinks)

DON: Here's health.

JACK: (spreading the itinerary on the table) I thought about a run up to Harrow.

JOY: Oh some woman asked after your Beryl today.

DON: Go on?

JOY: In black boots. Beryl gave her the wrong petrol. I hope she don't make trouble.

DON: Tell her to go to hell. We all make mistakes.

JACK: Now listen!

(The living room fades, with JOY, JACK and DON at the table, so that in the following scene they are silhouetted below.

8.

Simultaneously the petrol station comes into view in the upstage area, with MARION standing there alone. It is night. As before, the captivating rhythm has turned into the putter-putter of an idling machine.

BERYL appears, in overalls)

BERYL: Oh hullo. My mate told me.

MARION: You're on all night?

BERYL: Nearly.

MARION: A woman all alone?

BERYL: There's a police station just up the road.

MARION: My name's Marion.

BERYL: Oh.

MARION: Can you give me six?

BERYL: Super this time eh?

MARION: That's right.

BERYL: I don't know what was the matter with me, (unhooking the gun)

MARION: Unhappy probably.

BERYL: What's that?

MARION: (coming to a halt before her) You've done it again.

BERYL: Oh!

MARION: Fill me up then.

BERYL: Honestly I...!

MARION: Don't worry. Just fill her up.

BERYL: We've had such late nights. The weekend we go for a run with the Black Cats, then there's the dance.

MARION: You like speeding?

BERYL: Oh yes.

MARION: I like to sit back when I drive. You can't on a bike.

BERYL: There's something in that.

MARION: Shall we go for a spin one day?

BERYL: It's certainly a nice car.

(MARION goes and switches off
the car engine)

MARION: It's a lovely night.

BERYL: Yes.

MARION: You don't often have it silent do you?

BERYL: No, not here.

MARION: I mean in your life..

BERYL: That's three pounds two and six please.

(She hooks up again)

MARION: There are whole worlds you haven't discovered yet.
And when you go back home tonight you'll blame
yourself. You blame yourself for everything you do.

BERYL: Eh?

MARION: Yet all you've done is have the happiest minute of
your life. (cramming a note in her hand)

(BERYL stands there staring at her
as she descends to her car. It starts
with a smooth roar and in a moment
is gone.

(The whole scene --- both areas---
blacks out)

9.

Dawn light comes up slowly on the downstage area. The living room is empty. Bottles and glasses have been left on the table from the evening before.

BERYL comes in from work. She begins clearing away the debris.

DON enters in his pyjamas, yawning, his hair tousled.

DON: Hullo, mate.

BERYL: Hullo.

DON: They stayed half the night.

BERYL: All these bottles.

DON: Oh once in a way. Funny life. When I think of mum and dad, the same bed every night. Whereas you come in when I go out.

BERYL: Families are out I reckon. Look at Joy. Two kids and she's never there.

DON: Reckon she gets on with Jack?

BERYL: Why not?

DON: Oh I just thought.

BERYL: We're not any of us really married, so we get on all right.

DON: I'm married.

BERYL: Not like your mum and dad. You said it yourself. Look at your father. Always at his union meetings. And you have to go and give it up. You might have got to the top of the union by now.

DON: I found my nitch in life, that's all. I found the right girl, and the right club. That's what happened. Anyway, I've never been a fighter. All I used to do was hold their coats while they went on strike.

BERYL: I remember how you used to talk to me about the bosses and the profit motive. You knew the dates of every industrial reform act since 1870.

DON: I still do.

BERYL: And now you've all got what you wanted there's nothing to fight for. That's how it looks to me.

DON: Well I'm not complaining.

BERYL: I wish you would sometimes.

DON: Eh?

BERYL: Go and get dressed, I'll make a cup of tea.

DON: (gazing at her) Nights do something to you.

(He leaves to change for work.)

BERYL continues clearing up.
Slowly the LIGHT FADES and---)

10.

---the upstage area comes to life in the form of DON's chicken paste factory. We hear the deep rhythm of the pulping and tinning machines, not unlike the captivating rhythm of Saturday night.

BERYL, silhouetted in the downstage area, stops what she is doing and moves forward, gazing upstage, as DON enters the factory in his overalls. Throughout the scene BERYL stands quite still below.

TWO WOMEN WORKERS are at their bench.

FIRST WOMAN: I reckon this lot was prize fighters.

SECOND WOMAN: Come away, you blighter!

FIRST WOMAN: Morning, Don.

DON: Hullo.

(A MECHANIC enters and meets DON)

MECHANIC: There's a stoppage down at Livers, mate.

DON: Oh thanks!

MECHANIC: (burlesque) Notice the smell of chicken this morning?

(He watches DON walk away)

You're going towards the Breasts, mate.

DON: (turning) Oh about Breasts. Is there a vacancy? I've got a mate, his wife wants a change of job.

MECHANIC: What wife don't?

DON: No, serious.

FIRST WOMAN: Keep her off Legs, that's all. It's horrible!

SECOND WOMAN: The muscles they get.

FIRST WOMAN: He put me on Breasts and my rash went right away.

MECHANIC: That was something else, mate, you was in love.

FIRST WOMAN: Not with you, I do know that.

(MECHANIC leaves)

SECOND WOMAN: He's always got something to say, that one.

(DON leaves in the opposite direction)

FIRST WOMAN: Whereas he's not got two words to say for himself.

SECOND WOMAN: Nice bloke, though.

(The scene begins to fade)

BERYL: Yes I know he's nice but...

(There is a ring at the doorbell in the downstage area. The chicken paste factory blacks out and with it the captivating rhythm of machinery dies. And simultaneously--)

11.

--- the living room comes to life again.

BERYL takes off her overalls, tidies her hair.

She answers the door. We hear no greeting. MARION enters silently, with BERYL following her.

BERYL: You found it then.

MARION: Would you have lunch with me?

BERYL: I won't be very lively company, I haven't had a wink all night.

MARION: Nor have I. Different causes.

BERYL: Can I get you a cup of tea?

MARION: We'll drive out somewhere. A whole day just forgetting... as if none of this belonged to you.

BERYL: Eh?

MARION: That's something you've never done. Just sat. With your own life in front of you.

BERYL: I don't get much time. I mean what with the Black Cats and Don and us both working--

MARION: Is that his name?

BERYL: My husband? Don, yes.

MARION: What does he do?

BERYL: He's in chicken paste.

MARION: Chicken---?

BERYL: Paste factory.

MARION: Chicken paste!

BERYL: It's more the technical side.

MARION: I should hope so.

BERYL: Was you---?

MARION: Yes?

BERYL: --- ever in a factory?

MARION: I've been a truck driver, I've piloted a plane across the Atlantic, I've sprayed car chassis, worked on board an Atlantic liner and my conclusion is that most of the world's unhappy and you can tell the handful of happy ones at a glance and they've usually got nothing.

BERYL: Oh!

MARION: I mean by nothing really nothing. I mean no home and usually no job. The happiest man I ever saw stood on his head four hours at a time to make tourists think he was holy--- that was in India--- he had a tin can by his head and they threw coins in.

BERYL: You've travelled a lot then? I've always wanted to travel.

MARION: It depends if you're free in yourself. You can travel a long way to your own prison.

BERYL: Yes that's quite right.

MARION: My God you need prising open!

BERYL: What?

MARION: You're determined to make yourself unhappy aren't you? squeeze up your life with all these little thoughts instead of looking me in the face and seeing just the person that's me, Marion, asking yourself if it excites you or not, makes you feel good---

BERYL: (utterly out of her depth) Don't you like it here--- or something?

MARION: God did better outside, darling. But then He had longer to work on it.

(BERYL hurries to get her coat.
The scene fades quickly as they leave.

We hear the smooth roar of MARION's car as they drive away. It melts strangely into the captivating rhythm we are now used to, until---

12.

--- the upstage area comes to life, and BERYL and MARION are walking outdoors.

BERYL: I just like getting somewhere--- I don't mind where it is but I have to do it every weekend--- Don doesn't like it really, I can tell that.

MARION: You mean you like leaving. That doesn't mean arriving. But you've arrived now. You're losing the lines on your face (touching her face)

BERYL: I never heard about any lines.

MARION: Oh they don't see a thing like that.

BERYL: Who's they?

MARION: Feel my hair--- it's like black snakes---!

BERYL: Snakes?

MARION: Has a man got that? or a woman?

BERYL: What?

(The scene blacks out)

13.

A ring at the doorbell in the downstage area brings the living room to life: DON is alone, drinking beer. He goes to the door.

He returns with BERYL.

DON: I don't like you on that road after dark.

BERYL: I popped over to Joy's. It was dark too. Black as snakes!

DON: As what?

BERYL: Eh?

DON: Didn't you say snakes?

BERYL: I meant black.

DON: Snakes aren't black, necessarily. Have you been drinking? You'd better look sharp if you're on late turn, hadn't you?

BERYL: I haven't had a wink all day.

DON: More fool you.

BERYL: I went down to the Hog's Back.

DON: You did what?

BERYL: I couldn't stick it any more!

DON: Stick what?

BERYL: I met ever such an interesting woman.

DON: Go on?

BERYL: She talks.

DON: What else should she do?

BERYL: Eh?

DON: What do you mean, she talks?

BERYL: I never heard a person talk before! She didn't like our furniture.

DON: Oh she came here then ---

BERYL: It's a prison here, Don! --- every day, the same damn thing! And some people are free! They are!

DON: You mean she's got money.

BERYL: Yes. I suppose she has. Can't we be free without it, Don?

DON: (sitting down to his beer again) No, we can't.

BERYL: I'm sure we can. We don't feel free. That's why we're not! But we're as good as anybody else. You don't need an education to be free? And we've got more money than mum and dad put together!

DON: All my life I've tried to work out a system of earning without working. But it never came off. (he finishes his glass with a smack) Ready for bed?

BERYL: (with a sigh) Yes.

(He leaves.

She stands still for a moment, touches her hair as if feeling something strange.

A car dashes by outside. She turns swiftly, hopefully. Then it dies away again.

Silence.

She follows DON:

BLACKOUT)

14.

A deafening dance number brings the upstage area to life in the form of another Black Cat dance.

DON and JOY are dancing.

DON: It's better than Legs.

JOY: (shouting) Eh?

DON: (also shouting) It's better than Legs, I said!

JOY: Oh'.

DON: Breasts, you got no stripping to do there see?

JOY: Stripping?

DON: Down to the bone!

JOY: As long as chickens don't smell of petrol, suits me. Beryl queer?

DON: She's bringing a friend.

JOY: Oh.

DON: Nice woman she says. Interesting talker. Might join the Black Cats.

JOY: Oh yes.

DON: Got a Ferrari.

JOY: What's that?

DON: One of them sleek jobs.

JOY: A car?

DON: What else?

JOY: She's got money then.

DON: Well, you don't get a model like that under two thou.

JOY: Single?

DON: Yes. And I can't wait.

JOY: Men never can.

(At the end of this number JACK appears with his box, again in his capacity as M.C.)

JACK: Well, cats, the wishbone craze seems to have caught, so let's start breaking --- this time camping accessories or a hamper of grub or a five-pound gardening token await the winning couple.

(The intoxicating rhythm is taken up again as wishbones are broken.

BERYL and MARION come in)

BERYL: Oh let's break one.

DON: Hullo, duck.

BERYL: Hullo.

(She and MARION break a bone,

BERYL wins)

BERYL: This is Don.

MARION: My name's Marion.

DON: Hullo.

JACK: Who's missing a bone?

DON: (to BERYL) Come on.

(They break bones. She wins again)

BERYL: There!

DON: Who are you with?

JOY: We lost?

DON: To Beryl.

JOY: Who's she with?

(BERYL continues breaking bones, accompanied by MARION)

JACK: Any more? (rattling the box)

BERYL: Me, me!

JACK: Who are you with, duck? I thought you'd got your eye on that hamper.

BERYL: No it's the camping outfit.

JACK: Well who's the lucky man?

BERYL: I'm with Marion.

JACK: Who?

BERYL: This is Marion.

JACK: Hullo, Marion.

MARION: Hullo.

BERYL: We're together.

JACK: Yes but it's got to be a man, duck. Come on, stop pulling my leg. You with her, Don?

DON: I was with Joy.

JACK: (burlesque) What, my wife again! Well come on, Beryl, there's three prizes waiting and a lovely dance in the arms of --- who is it to be?

BERYL: We can dance together.

DON: Come on, mate, it's got to be a man!

MARION: Is it a law?

JACK: Well no I suppose it isn't really. Just give me time to register surprise (burlesque surprise), no well I suppose it's all right if the other Cats don't mind. So strike up the band and Marion will take his and/or her partner for the prizewinning dance. ---

(The intoxicating rhythm is stronger and louder, and BERYL and MARION begin dancing)

DON: Mind his long boots, mate!

JACK: Watch out for his tail you mean.

DON: Knees up mother Brown!

JACK: Knees up mother Brown!

JOY: Knees up, knees up!

(Laughter, shouting, everybody takes up the song 'Knees up mother Brown' in a great triumphant chorus that drowns the band)

BERYL: OK you lot!

ALL: Knees up mother Brown!

MARION: Let her dance!

ALL: Knees up, knees up! etc.

MARION: Quiet!

ALL: Knees up mother Brown! etc.

(Suddenly MARION releases BERYL and strides, her boots sharp and loud, off the floor. The singing and then the band stop)

BERYL: Marion! They didn't mean it!

(She hurries after her)

JACK: Well strike a light.

DON: Beryl!

(But BERYL has gone)

JACK: You'd better go and sort it out, mate.

JOY: Who is she?

(DON goes)

JACK: All right, Cats, while we're sorting out that little drama --- if you ask me, this is a case of mistaken sexual identity, --- we'll call for a real hip shaker, it don't even matter if you lose your partner, OK let it go, BLACK AS A COUPLE OF CATS, ---!

(The band roars into a quick version of the rhythm and the CATS roar approval. While this dance is going on we see the silhouettes of BERYL and MARION, ---)

15.

--- entering the downstage area. The music and the upstage area begin to fade as the living room below comes to life. At the end there is only the simple bass rhythm left.

MARION: I did it for you, for your dignity. Because you looked marvellous! They ought to have stopped and seen how you danced.

BERYL: You had too much gin if you ask me.

MARION: He was singing too --- sneering like all the others ---!

BERYL: Who?

MARION: The man who lives here of course.

BERYL: Oh, he meant it as a joke.

MARION: You aren't a joke. Not to me. Men used to be as soft as I am! Now they're hard and small and careful. They used to prise the women open but now it's left to me!

BERYL: You?

MARION: I was passionate, passionate as a child, I wanted things like a grown-up woman, I was too hungry for life, and something grew, like my own body giving me what I wanted, supplying its own need, you see, and I've lived the contradiction ever since --- !

(A ring at the bell.

BERYL goes)

DON: (off) Oh you're home then.

(He and BERYL come in)

MARION: I made a scene tonight I'm afraid.

DON: Oh that's all right, it's all among friends.

BERYL: She thought they were taking the mike.

DON: No!

BERYL: We had a nice day down at Dorking.

DON: Go on.

BERYL: Where did you go?

DON: Oh, up to Harrow, the old beat. And the bike loved it this time.

BERYL: Because I wasn't there.

DON: That's right, how did you guess?

MARION: Good God, he can actually say it.

DON: Can I offer you some Egg Flip?

MARION: Egg Flip?

DON: Yes.

MARION: What's that?

BERYL: It's thick and yellow, made of egg with liqueur in it.

MARION: Sounds the end. I'll be going. Try and forgive me.

DON: Nothing to forgive.

BERYL: You won't have a cup of tea?

MARION: I only drink coffee, you ought to know that.

BERYL: Be careful how you drive then.

MARION: Good night.

DON: Good night, Marion.

(BERYL sees her to the door)

BERYL: (off) 'Bye 'bye.

(She returns)

DON: Well she's none too polite is she? what's wrong with Egg Flip?

BERYL: She's upset, that's all.

DON: Is she joining the club?

BERYL: No.

DON: Hates motor bikes I expect.

BERYL: Yes she does.

DON: What does she like?

BERYL: Me.

DON: Oh well that's something we can chalk up to her credit. She isn't by any chance a dike is she?

BERYL: No.

DON: Well it damn well looked like it when she was dancing.

BERYL: It didn't seem wrong --- not then.

DON: But you don't dance with a woman do you for Christ's sake?

BERYL: Oh drink your Egg Flip and shut up!

DON: Well don't show me up in future!

BERYL: I'll show up who I like!

DON: You won't me!

BERYL: I see you joined in too --- with your knees up mother Brown!

DON: Because it was funny --- damn funny, watching you wiggling your arse round next to a big fat dike --- !

BERYL: Now shut up! (smacks him round the face)

DON: Here! (seizes her hands) Don't you start that!

BERYL: She's a wonderful person. She's been wonderful to me ---

DON: Don't you start scrapping, do you hear me? It's the first time you done that.

BERYL: She's been so nice to me, then she comes to the club and you all start jeering, she was a guest after all ---!

DON: Now don't start crying. They wasn't jeering, Beryl. They thought you was having a lark. I did too.

BERYL: We never really go anywhere, we're only in the Black Cats because of me, I don't like speeding, it's just that I like to get away.

DON: I suppose it's all my fault. Well you can lump it or like it because chicken paste is my lot and that's that.

BERYL: It isn't anything to do with chicken paste!

DON: But I'm bloody well working all day and so are you so how could we go out more than we do?

BERYL: And don't shout!

DON: I'll shout as much as I like!

BERYL: Like you did tonight --- it's all right I saw all your hard little faces ---

DON: Oh you did!

BERYL: Yes I did.

DON: Listen I've had just about enough of your snot --- just because your dad had a job up at the town hall and your house was detached ---

BERYL: Oh you fool!

DON: That's why you're always astride that bike isn't it, it's to get away from the sight of me?

BERYL: Oh don't talk rot!

DON: Well take your snot somewhere else! Take it back to your mum!

BERYL: All right I will!

(She dashes for her coat)

DON: You stuck-up dike!

(She slams the street door)

Beryl ...

(The scene fades but DON remains there, watching the --

16.

--- upstage area come to life with MARION and BERYL, who are walking outdoors in the dead of the night.

MARION: That's what they'll all call you. It's one of the crosses you have to bear.

BERYL: Let's go back to the car.

MARION: Aren't you on early turn?

BERYL: Yes.

MARION: Where will you sleep then?

BERYL: That's what I mean, in the car.

MARION: Come with me. I'll bring you coffee in the morning. I know how to serve. My sheets are fresh, they smell of lavender. See these fingernails? They're clean, like my home.

BERYL: I didn't know who I was --- rushing across the room like that to get my coat --- it felt like somebody else. Did I tell you about the dream I had, when I couldn't recognise myself, though I knew it was me?

MARION: You tell me every day.

BERYL: I wish I could tell him but I can't. I can't tell him I'm so happy! You give me this feeling of happiness all the

- BERYL: time, I feel safe, everything's exciting! I don't need
(contd) the speeding on the bike, it seems silly to me now life's
too exciting for that!
- MARION: If you weren't happy before what were you?
- BERYL: All right I suppose. Just that. I thought I was happy.
I used to enjoy the first cup of tea of a morning with
Don, and then having a smoke in the canteen with Joy
when the trade was slack, and the hot lunches, and
getting home to a nice fire, and the Black Cat dances
every week. All sorts of little things made me happy,
and I seemed to go from one to the other. But it wasn't
like life. You're just happy all the time, you're free!
You aren't going from one thing to the next. You're
exciting to be with because everything's exciting to you,
you're a happy person in yourself and that's marvellous.
- MARION: (laughing) I've certainly taught you to talk!
- BERYL: Only to you.
- MARION: Would he be jealous?
- BERYL: Of you?
- MARION: Of your happiness?
- BERYL: Not if he understood.
- MARION: You know, it's not quite true what you say. I love
waking up in the morning knowing I'm free, which few
people are. But I'd like to be less free --- I shouldn't
say that but what I mean is I can't go on being alone.
I don't feel lonely but sometimes, with that feeling of
freedom I get in the morning when I look out of the
window I feel lonely for someone to tell it to.
- BERYL: The dream was right in a way, I am somebody else!
- MARION: It frightens you?
- BERYL: No. It might frighten Don, I can feel it. All of a sudden
--- life's different! I thought I loved him.
- MARION: Thought?
- BERYL: You might not understand. A woman begins to need
her husband. I don't mean love. That gets passed by ---

- MARION: You can need him without loving him? Isn't that terrible? Isn't that your imprisonment?
- BERYL: I should have stayed on at school like my sister.
- MARION: Why do you say that?
- BERYL: Because then I'd be able to sort things out with my mind. I can't explain it. I'm under things all the time. I don't seem to make my own life. I thought it was because I didn't have a child. But a child doesn't come to me because I don't know who I am. I know that if I was happy --- I mean at home --- it would happen. You said the other day, a child comes to the undecided. And it's true! I'm not decided! And that's what makes Don miserable. He could have had a dozen other women down the street, and it would have been all right.
- MARION: Shouldn't you put it the other way round, that you've chosen badly, not Don?
- BERYL: He tries to give me everything. And it isn't his fault. It's my fault we're in the Black Cats.
- MARION: And it never made you wretched --- speeding --- wearing black leather --- listening to that music --- and that man with the wishbones!
- BERYL: Yes, yes, it did!
- MARION: And so when I walked up to that filling pump, it was an act of destiny.
- BERYL: How do you mean?
- MARION: It was meant to happen!
- BERYL: Why?
- MARION: To make you free. You can see your imprisonment now, so you're free!
- BERYL: But it doesn't get me out of prison! --- out of that house! It doesn't get me new furniture.
- MARION: Can you see the dawn?
- BERYL: Yes.
- MARION: I knew a man --- the only man I could bear. He used to pray all day and part of the night. I asked him what

MARION: it felt like to be so close to God. He said it was like
(contd) having a hundred thousand sex organs all over his body
and every one of them turned to Him! That's what
freedom is! Living so that none of this matters. And
you haven't got it! And I haven't got it! (stopping)

BERYL: What are you looking at?

MARION: Nothing.

BERYL: She's one of our girls. She's on early turn, like me.

(A car starts in the distance)

So what am I to do? It's for you to decide!

MARION: Get him out of your system! Come on! (grabbing her
hand) Come on!

(She pulls BERYL away as the scene fades
and ---)

17.

--- DON in the downstage area cranes to
see them go.

DON: Beryl! Beryl! (crying) I'm no good! I'm no bloody
good!

(BLACKOUT)

18.

A ring at the bell in the downstage area
and the living room appears before us
again.

The ringing continues, unanswered.

Then DON appears, in pyjamas, his eyes screwed up. He goes to the door:

JACK: (off) Blimey not up yet, mate?

JOY: (off) Hullo, Don.

(JACK and JOY enter followed by DON)

JACK: You all right?

DON: Not too bad.

JACK: You're taking Joy to work, remember?

DON: That's right.

JACK: Well don't make her late first morning, mate, it's turned half past seven.

JOY: Beryl gone?

DON: Yes.

JACK: Early turn?

DON: Yes.

JACK: Well look sharp, mate.

JOY: I don't fancy going pillion. I said I never would.
(as DON leaves to change)

JACK: Oh shut up.

JOY: It's all right for you, you've never been able to keep your arse still have you?

JACK: I notice you don't mind moving yours now and then.

JOY: It's marvellous you don't get killed.

JACK: All right, all right.

JOY: Here! She isn't on till nine, Mondays. He said she'd gone didn't he?

JACK: Probably out with her girlfriend.

JOY: Oh you!

JACK: Nice if he makes you late first day.

JOY: (as JACK goes across to the disc player) Now leave that thing alone --- this time of the morning!

(Another ring at the bell)

JACK: Milkman. (imitates milkman, then shouts): Don, shall I answer this early-morning call?

DON: (off) Yes, please, mate.

JACK: Answer the door, Joy.

(She goes as he burlesques triumph)

BERYL: (off) Hullo.

JOY: (off) Where you sprung from?

(They come in)

JACK: Blimey! The milkman in drag!

BERYL: Don here?

JOY: He's taking me to work. When you on?

BERYL: Nine.

JACK: That was a scream last night, Beryl!

BERYL: She didn't think so.

JACK: What is she --- one of them?

BERYL: I couldn't stand being with her two minutes if she was, don't you worry about that. (taking off her coat)

JACK: Still you look better for it. (burlesque wink at JOY)

(DON comes in, dressed)

DON: (to BERYL) Oh. You're back then.

BERYL: Yes.

DON: (to JOY) Are we ready?

BERYL: What about your breakfast then?

DON: Too late for that.

JACK: Well I'm off to my shop. Why do I love motor bikes more than my wife?

JOY: Good question. 'Bye, Beryl.

BERYL: Cheerio.

(JACK and JOY go ahead)

DON: (hissing) So you came back.

BERYL: I'm in love with her, Don.

DON: What are you talking about? have you gone mad? have you?

BERYL: I can't help it --- Don, she said feel my hair, it's like black snakes --- and it seemed all alive ---!

DON: But you can't fall in love with a ---!

BERYL: Go on --- they're waiting.

DON: (going) You're mad! Mad!

(The scene blacks out)

19.

The thump of the pulping and tinning machines grows as the upstage area comes to life as the chicken paste factory. There is the blast of the mid-day hooter.

JOY is with TWO WOMEN WORKERS. They are taking off their workcoats, combing their hair etc.

FIRST WOMAN: Coming down the canteen, duck?

JOY: Yes.

FIRST WOMAN: Got your voucher?

JOY: Yes.

SECOND WOMAN: So how does breast-picking compare with petrol?

JOY: Well it's easier on the feet for one thing. And you haven't got no calculation to do.

SECOND WOMAN: Still I wouldn't mind being in the open air.

JOY: You get the fumes.

FIRST WOMAN: That's right.

JOY: You can't always stand upwind can you?

SECOND WOMAN: Well come to that you can't always stand upwind of the chicken innards.

(DON comes in)

DON: Hullo, duck.

JOY: Hullo where you been?

DON: Down at the Livers. They've always got a stoppage down there. It's the grit.

JOY: Chickens got gritty livers then?

DON: That's what they tell me. Well how do you like the work, duck?

JOY: All right.

FIRST WOMAN: See you downstairs, mate.

JOY: O.K.

(The TWO WOMEN go)

DON: She didn't come in all night.

JOY: Who?

DON: Beryl. Says she's in love.

JOY: In love?

DON: Guess who with.

JOY: Yes?

DON: A woman. The one in black boots.

JOY: She's joking! Beryl's having a joke, don't be daft!

DON: She was out all night!

JOY: You mean that one she chats up at the filling station?

DON: That's right.

JOY: Well I never. It's almost like lesbians really isn't it?

DON: We came to blows near on. I had to stop myself. She smacked me round the face.

JOY: Go on!

DON: We've had rows before but ---

JOY: I know what you mean.

DON: Then she comes back this morning. I never expected to see her again. I didn't close my eyes all night, to tell you the truth.

JOY: I bet you didn't.

DON: It happens just like that, your life upside down.

JOY: Still she's back.

DON: I shouldn't have told you.

JOY: Oh go on we're friends.

DON: Did Jack ever do a thing like that?

JOY: Jack?

DON: Well you know what I mean --- go off?

JOY: Of course he didn't!

DON: Why of course?

JOY: Because well Jack don't do that kind of thing that's why --- he's in love with his motor bikes but he keeps a corner for me.

DON: Do his pistons work all right?

JOY: His pistons?

DON: They operate O.K. do they?

JOY: What are you talking about?

DON: Does he tickle your carb?

JOY: Eh? (as she backs away)

DON: Joy mate --- let's have a drink on the way home tonight ---

JOY: A what?

DON: A drink!

JOY: What are you talking about?

DON: A drink, a drink!

JOY: Well I don't want a drink or pistons or anything --- I want my bloody lunch!

DON: Oh.

JOY: Now just you go home tonight and give her a damned good hiding then you'll see if she's in love or not. The trouble with you Don Holmes is you're soft.

DON: Me?

JOY: Yes you. And I'm not coming on that motor bike any more, I'll come an hour early by train. So you know where to stick all that piston talk!

(She goes out, handbag in hand.)

The scene blacks out, as the sound of the machines merges into the haunting rhythm and ---

20.

--- we hear a key in the lock. Someone opens the street door of the Holmes home; a light is switched on and reveals in the downstage area the living room.

DON enters from work, goes to the other door, stage left.

DON: (calling) Beryl!

BERYL: (off) Yes?

DON: Oh I just wondered.

(BERYL comes in, getting dressed)

BERYL: You're late.

DON: I've got a headache. No dinner. This is a fine bloody set-up.

BERYL: I've been asleep if you want to know.

DON: (taking off his shoes) You've got the pluck to say it. But what about me? where do I come in? where's my bit of fun?

BERYL: You had it this evening by the look of it.

DON: I had a drink with Jack that's all. I told him. I couldn't hold it back.

BERYL: I don't care who you tell it to.

DON: But a woman, Beryl! I wouldn't ever have believed that ---!

BERYL: And nor would I! Because it isn't that'. It isn't her being a woman.

DON: What is it then?

BERYL: It's just I can't go through it any more, being a nasty little machine --

- DON: Who's a machine? You did the speeding, not me!
You always had the bike craze!
- BERYL: That's what I mean, Don, I don't want it any more!
- DON: And I never did.
- BERYL: I know. And you wouldn't do anything about it.
- DON: I couldn't! Not I wouldn't! You chose bad, my girl!
I'm the kind that finds a rug and bugs down in it. It was in my dad, and in his dad before him. I could quote you all the industrial reform acts since 1870 but I know what they mean --- nicer rugs for the likes of me --- nothing new! I know what they think of me at work. A good union man. Never given trouble. A bit of a piecan.
- BERYL: So you despise yourself. And you want me to say no, it's not true.
- DON: When I was at school the biology teacher came up behind me one day and said, the trouble with you, Holmes, is you're a bloody fool. Then he walked off again.
- BERYL: All right, well do something about it! It's no good being bitter!
- DON: Who's bitter? I'm impotent, not bitter!
- BERYL: Then don't be!
- DON: At least, according to you I am. But the hospital don't agree. They said I was full of the right things. Perhaps you're not.
- BERYL: No perhaps I'm not! And where did you get that idea from --- Jack Turner? All those people with their little minds going round and round! Black Cats! They can't think outside the little machines inside their brains! And no more can you! I've heard that union speech before, and about the biology teacher. And I don't want it any more! I don't want defeat and death!
- DON: Defeat? I bring in twice the money you do!
- BERYL: Money! You've all failed! What was the good of all that struggling --- of what your mum and dad did, working

- BERYL: (contd) themselves to the bone --- because at the end of the line what have you got? You can't even see a dawn come up! And your father loved the dawn! He was that much of a man! I don't know --- we'll soon be going on strike to be human beings again --- but that'll take some doing because it's too late! --- and I'm going to save myself before it all blows up, that's what! You're all asleep, Don Holmes, and you can stay asleep if you want to but I'm going to wake up just before the light goes out for good, just to say I knew what it was like! And she's showing me how, I don't care who knows it!
- DON: And what exactly is she showing you --- how to be out at dawn when you ought to be curled up in bed like anybody else?
- BERYL: Everybody else! You're all going down! Don't you see it?
- DON: All I know is I haven't slept for three nights and I don't know where I am. I can see one thing --- how you always had me on a string! I can see what you're going to leave me with if you go away --- nothing! Not even insides! Because I gave them to you! I can't feel my insides unless you're around!
- BERYL: Who says I'm going away?
- DON: Aren't you getting married? You could dress her up as a man!
- BERYL: All your nastiness is coming out.
- DON: It's coming out of a wound! It's been there ever since I married you! You look hard and selfish --- you've changed since you met that woman --- but it's not a real change, it's only come to the surface, what you always was, telling me my tank was dry, and roaring off down the motorway just to show how much snot you'd got up your nose! All right --- take it easy! Because if I get another smack round the chops like the one before, I'll give you something that'll lay you low for an hour or more, my girl!
- BERYL: And the night was so lovely! Then that Joy giving me a funny look. All you little people!
- DON: Are you so big?

- BERYL: I'm trying to go somewhere --- that's bigger than not trying anything!
- DON: And you're treading all over me to get there --- is that big? behaving like a brute?
- BERYL: Oh yes, I know all about kindness. We're all so kind. And so nobody ever does anything, in case they hurt somebody's feelings. They just do things underneath, they rot inside and they think that's kinder! They think it's kinder giving other people their rot! spreading it all through the world! Well I'd rather be a brute!
- DON: You want to spill some blood, do you? --- Well two can play at that game! Like the knife that runs along their throats in the chicken factory --- the blood in gullies a foot deep -- hundreds of them flapping about with their throats cut --- hundreds a day! I'm used to blood!
- BERYL: That's right, you stink of chickens, dead chickens --- I can't eat chicken any more because of you --- you reek of blood!
- DON: Do I? Well I never noticed you turning your nose up at the money ---
- BERYL: The jobs you men think up! Blood along gullies --- it might be your own blood soon --- that'll teach you to come to life --- instead of bringing death everywhere, death to get money! That's what you live on --- death! That's what you get your money from! I'd rather be one of them poor little chickens than you with your horrible cruel hands! (DON looks at his hands in alarm) I'd rather flap than be you, you bloody trussed-up chicken-man!
- DON: (about to hit her) You ---!
- BERYL: Go on! Fetch some more blood if you want to --- if you're not too kind! Me a brute! And you go there every day, you hypocrite, and run your hands through blood and ask Joy about her husband's parts, you poor little bit of sex-machinery!
- DON: Get out! (jumping at her) Get out, go on!
- BERYL: I won't! It's my home. I'm going to make my freedom here!
- DON: You can sleep somewhere else then!
- BERYL: I was going to anyway! And if you ever find another girl --- which I hope to Christ you do --- have a bath every night before you get in with her! Because chickens stink!

(She sweeps out as ---)

21.

--- the upstage area comes to abrupt life in the form of the chicken paste factory, with the captivating rhythm of the pulping and tinning machines in the background. JOY is changing into work-clothes.

DON remains in the downstage area, where the light has faded.

The MECHANIC enters the upstage area.

MECHANIC: Hullo, sweetheart.

JOY: Hullo.

MECHANIC: All alone?

JOY: Well I won't be for long, unless there's a strike on.

MECHANIC: Is your bench in good order, duck? nothing I can mend? nothing to ease or grease or soothe in any way?

DON: (staring up at the upstage area) Here!

JOY: No thanks, mate, try your talents on somebody else, I'm respectable married.

MECHANIC: So am I. They're the best. My wife's on Livers.

JOY: She should keep you in chains then. (making her face up)

MECHANIC: They should keep you at home. I would if I was your hubby.

JOY: You're not.

MECHANIC: Even your smock seems made to measure. Nothing wouldn't look bad on you.

JOY: Just listen!

MECHANIC: You're one of Don Holmes's recruits aren't you?

- JOY: We're old friends, yes.
- MECHANIC: And you're in the Black Cat club, he tells me.
- JOY: Well he told you wrong. Because if there's one thing I can't stand it's motor bikes. They stink and they're noisy.
- MECHANIC: I feel exactly the same, duck. Which is why I bought myself a Jaguar, front wheel drive, automatic gears, power steering. Four comfortable seats, air conditioning for when you pass those nasty diesel trucks, though it does consume a lot more gas. What I thought, and smack me round the chops if I'm wrong, is Jaguars are meant for girls like you, and as there aren't any other girls like you --
- JOY: Oh shut up!
- MECHANIC: Come on, duck, give us a kiss!
- (DON grabs his shoes, ties them hurriedly)
- JOY: Lay off!
- MECHANIC: If he's out all day Saturday making a stink and a noise, why not come for a run with me?
- JOY: I don't know what's the matter with this factory, it must be the chicken paste, it seems to infect all the men.
- MECHANIC: It's you who's infectious, mate, you've infected me.
- (DON grabs his overcoat and crash helmet and leaves the house below)
- JOY: Well you can go and find a doctor.
- MECHANIC: You're the only cure for what I've got. Come on, say you'll be there, two o'clock Saturday next, by the Mitre.
- JOY: What, in public?
- MECHANIC: Nobody'll notice. And why shouldn't you have a good time too?

JOY: Because I've got two kids to look after.

MECHANIC: Who's looking after them now?

JOY: Mum.

MECHANIC: Well she can look after 'em Saturday too. Come on say yes.

JOY: I suppose you fancy yourself don't you?

MECHANIC: No I don't, I fancy you. That's why I came early.

JOY: Oh.

MECHANIC: We'll go down to Brighton and ride the bumper cars on the pier ---

JOY: I'll give you bumper cars if you don't keep quiet --- now look out there's somebody coming ---

MECHANIC: Tell me you'll be there, quick!

JOY: I'll think about it.

(DON enters out of breath)

DON: Hullo, duck.

JOY: Hullo, Don.

MECHANIC: Morning, Don.

DON: Hullo. You got the early train like you said then?

JOY: That's right.

MECHANIC: (with a wink at JOY) There's a stoppage down at Livers.

DON: Is there? Oh well cheerio for now.

JOY: Cheerio.

(DON leaves)

MECHANIC: Quick give us a kiss!

JOY: Here!

(They kiss. The scene blacks out)

22.

There is the sound of a key turning in the door of the Holmes house. A light comes across the downstage area briefly, and then the door closes again. We hear the murmur of voices in the dark.

The light is switched on. It is BERYL and MARION.

MARION: (looking round the room) Everything so neat.

BERYL: It's gone dead, that's why.

MARION: Is that what makes you so sad all the time?

BERYL: No. Being so happy makes me sad. The comparison with here!

MARION: (sitting down with legs stretched out before her) Yet you aren't happy.

(A ring at the door)

BERYL: It'll be Don.

MARION: (jumping up) Shall I leave?

BERYL: Why should you?

(MARION sits down with a shrug while BERYL goes to the door.)

DON and BERYL come in silently)

DON: (stopping when he sees MARION) Oh.

MARION: I'd like to try your Egg Flip. May I?

DON: Oh. Certainly.

(He goes to the sideboard and produces a solitary glass, fills it. He replaces the bottle and closes the sideboard door)

MARION: (as DON gives her the glass) Here's to your good health.

DON: Thank you.

MARION: You won't join me?

DON: No thanks.

MARION: What about your wife?

DON: She's got a voice of her own --- though I don't know about mind.

MARION: Here goes then. (drinks it straight off, bravely) It reminds me of custard, which I don't like, mixed with bad brandy.

DON: Oh yes.

MARION: I'm sorry. Am I offending you?

DON: You're offending the company that made it. Why should I worry?

MARION: Perhaps you don't taste it, being a smoker.

DON: Could be.

MARION: Because it tastes horrible.

DON: To you.

MARION: No. There's good brandy and bad brandy. This is bad brandy.

DON: Oh well I suppose it depends how much money you've got to throw away.

MARION: If I had less than a couple of quid in my pocket I wouldn't buy brandy. I'd buy wine. It doesn't depend on money at all. It depends on taste.

DON: Oh well, thanks for letting me know.

BERYL: (to DON) Did you have a branch meeting?

DON: Yes.

BERYL: (to MARION) Don's branch secretary of the union.

MARION: And what kind of thing have you been discussing this evening?

DON: Washing facilities.

MARION: Oh.

DON: Too many workers go home stinking of chicken.

MARION: Can't they take a bath when they get home?

DON: (swinging on to BERYL) That was her idea, eh?

BERYL: Oh don't be silly!

MARION: As a matter of fact, this whole house used to smell of chicken.

DON: Well, it's a mercy you don't have to come here very often isn't it?

MARION: Do you find me odd? and like me the less for it?

DON: I never said so!

MARION: But I don't seem right to you, do I? I haven't got quite the same place on earth as good common folk like you ---?

BERYL: Marion!

DON: Listen what you and my wife talk about is none of my business. She can come and go as she likes, and she knows that. She don't cook for me, she's got a different room, and she's got different friends.

MARION: In other words you've turned this place into a morgue because of me?

DON: Who asked you to come in a morgue?

MARION: Nobody! She didn't! I wanted to see for myself. Because I could already see it in her face.

- DON: What --- death? You saw that in her face? Then your kiss gave it to her --- the kiss of death!
- MARION: (clapping her hand swiftly on the thigh of her trousers where she keeps a knife) You ---!
- BERYL: Marion --- Marion --- ! (she pulls her hand away violently)
- DON: That's who she learned to smack faces off of, is it?
- BERYL: (to MARION) Sit down, go on.
- (MARION subsides)
- DON: Listen I'm paying the rent here and if I don't want visitors ---
- MARION: (shrieking at him) Oh you want me! You've been waiting for me for ten years or more! When are you going to let her out? When is she going to see the light of day?
- DON: I thought you'd given her all that! She's supposed to be happy, isn't she? And look at her face!
- BERYL: I am happy with her!
- DON: Well don't stay here then! And don't tell me that! Don't grind your heels in my face! I've asked you to leave and you won't! I want a new girl! Oh God, give me a new girl! A lovely one --- with a heart --- I've dreamed about her so much! I tried, Joy. I cornered her. I pleaded with her. But --- (crying) I can't switch it on, not after so many years. Nobody came to the works to talk to me, like she did to you. She just turned up. I mean (to BERYL) you didn't do anything. You just stood there at the pump, and she came and asked for petrol! And nobody came to me.
- MARION: They will. Perhaps they have already.
- DON: I know I stink. I know I'm no good. But I never went out of my way to do people harm! I never said a hard word --- not in ten years! I know my Egg Flip's bad -- it's the only brand I know. (suddenly) You haven't got no snakes in your hair! I'll give you snakes, you rotten dike! (dashing at MARION and grabbing her hair while BERYL tries to bar his way) It's crop ---

DON:
(contd) not snakes --- it's the crop of a chicken! (tugging her to and fro) I'll have it off --- I'll tear it away from the neck, I'll make the blood flow --- I'll have it running in gullies --- I'll press your liver to pulp --- I'll truss your bloody legs and serve you in slices!

(MARION struggles up from her chair, swaying with his movements, head down, and then with a great lunge ---)

MARION: Hup!

(--- sends him flying over her shoulder in a judo movement and flat on his back on the floor.

There she holds him down by his shoulders, panting)

DON: Oh Christ! Oh Christ!

BERYL: (pulling MARION away) Marion!

(DON continues to lie there)

DON: What's happened to me? Why are you doing it --- I mean what have I done to you? Oh Christ Christ! Everything's falling to pieces ---!

BERYL: (bending down) Don, come on! Don!

DON: Leave me alone. Please!

MARION: (brushing herself off) Just because I love somebody! Love isn't portioned off in this world, a bit for you and a bit for me.

BERYL: (sitting on the floor by DON) Come on, Don. Get up.

DON: I'm finished. Finished!

MARION: Isn't she lovable for God's sake? You ought to be happy, proud! She's your wife!

(MARION sits down again, exhausted, trembling despite efforts to maintain her poise before BERYL)

MARION: And who comes to me? How do you think I get on, with my strange sex? You saw what happened at your so-called club the other night? would it have happened to anybody else? It happens once a week to me! Do you think I can afford to lie on the floor and howl about it? You can afford to! You've got a wife to ask you to get up, and a cosy club to feel you're real in, so you don't have to make an effort and of course you howl the minute you're touched.

DON: (still prone) I don't go running after other people's wives.

MARION: Yes you do. You ran after that plump one --- you said so yourself!

DON: I wouldn't have if it hadn't been for you.

MARION: You might if you'd had the courage --- but you didn't, so you slept with her inside your own brain, you bounced her in this chair when she was a couple of miles away --- you don't have to tell me about the likes of yourself, Mr. Holmes! Now if I did things in my brain I'd have no friends, I'd have no money, nothing. I've got to act. I've got to keep my wits alive. Well, God gave me a little magic. It saves me every time. He didn't feel you needed any. So He didn't give it to you for free --- you have to work for it. (getting up) Do you know what sex means for me? It means hell! And for you it's a joy-ride! (leaving) You've got the whole of the earth, and you can't help a poor devil like me! Good night!

(She disappears and the front door closes behind her.

BERYL sits gazing before her.
DON remains on the floor.

BLACKOUT)

23.

Bursting in on the darkness the blare and glare of another Black Cat dance in the upstage area.

JOY is dancing with the MECHANIC.

Spots of various colours are playing on the dancers.

JOY: (to the MECHANIC) He said, where you been all day? I said riding pillion in a Jag!

(The MECHANIC has his eyes closed, and is wrapping himself round her as they dance)

MECHANIC: You should never have married a motor-bike, mate. You can't drop the seats back.

JOY: You're telling me!

(JACK pushes his way to the centre of the floor)

JACK: O.K., cats, let's have you, this is searchlight night tonight --- stay inside the lucky green beam and win a prize --- here look there's somebody kissing my wife ---!

(The couples are trying to get under the green spot.

JOY and the MECHANIC kiss as they pass under it. He runs his fingers through her hair, kisses her neck. They are jostled.

The music suddenly ceases. JOY and the MECHANIC are in the green spot. Cries of congratulation)

Well it looks as if the prize of a hundred wishbones

(Disappointed cries of 'Oh!! ')

JACK:
(contd)

---- goes to my loving wife and her loving partner. Will they ever come out of that clinch? Thank you thank you, lovebirds! We shall now have our favourite --- O.K. keep the spots, they're better for my wrinkles --- BLACK AS A COUPLE OF CATS!

(A great cry of approval as the intoxicating number begins.

DON and BERYL come in. DON takes JOY. The MECHANIC looks round for a partner)

(seeing the MECHANIC) Anybody want a strong hairy male?

(He sees that BERYL is old too and draws her over to the MECHANIC)

(to BERYL) I'm sorry he's male, duck! But we're short on the middle sex tonight, this being the Surrey side! (he burlesques laughter as the couple moves away)

(JOY and DON dance somehow)

JOY: Have you been drinking?

DON: Me? All I had was a bottle of custard with some rotten brandy in it!

JOY: You don't seem very steady, that's all.

(The MECHANIC wraps himself round BERYL)

MECHANIC: Don't I know you?

BERYL: Here, lay off! You're squeezing me to death!

MECHANIC: Yes but what a lovely death!

(MARION strolls in, drink in hand)

JACK: (going to MARION) Well talk of the devil! I was looking everywhere for you --- all I could find her was a man --- look!

(MARION follows his gaze across the dancers to BERYL and the MECHANIC.

DON catches sight of MARION)

DON: Beryl! Beryl! Look what the cat's brought in!

(BERYL is lost in the MECHANIC)

BERYL: Look can't you tread on your own feet?

MECHANIC: I'm kneading you, that's all! Badly!

BERYL: Here ---!

(MARION is still watching BERYL and the MECHANIC)

DON: Beryl! She's come back! Beryl!

BERYL: (to DON) Eh? (to the MECHANIC) Here look out! What are you doing? Don!

(But DON has been swept away by an indignant JOY)

He's squeezing the life out of me --- Don ---!

(MARION pushes her empty glass into the hands of an astonished bystanding BLACK CAT and strides forward)

MARION: (to BERYL) Need help?

BERYL: Marion! Where did you ---?

(But she is smothered by the MECHANIC)

MARION: (laying hold of the MECHANIC's shoulder) Here --- let her speak!

MECHANIC: Eh? Well Christ Almighty! Who invented you?

MARION: (extracting BERYL) Come on! You can dance with me. I'll show you how to squeeze!

(She takes him as if she were the man, in the old dancing style, and everybody begins to laugh)

JACK: Another side-splitting diversion from our newest and blackest of Cats ---!

(MARION has a grip on the MECHANIC. He finds himself being whirled round the room like a piece of paper.

DON is trying to maul JOY)

JOY: Lay off!

DON: Just one!

JACK: Watch it, Don mate!

DON: (his attention diverted to MARION) Here look at her!

JACK: Knees up's at it again!

(There is laughter as MARION steers the overpowered MECHANIC round even faster, colliding with others, brushing them aside)

MECHANIC: Let me out of here! I'm inside a man and woman!

JACK: Watch it, mother Brown!

CROWD: Ease up, mother Brown!

(The song starts again with a roaring and relentless firmness as if they had all agreed on it. It rises above the other music.

MARION watches the powerless MECHANIC intently. She even joins in the singing --- it may be in a mimicking way)

MECHANIC: O. K. I've had enough now, duck!

MARION: I haven't!

MECHANIC: Hold it I said! I'm only a man! Remember you're a woman as well!

MARION: I'll dance you to your knees! Knees up mother Brown!
Do you always kiss the ladies you dance with?

MECHANIC: Git out! (giving her a shove)

(She stumbles among other dancers.
The singing is ragged now. MARION
rights herself and strides towards
him)

JACK: Watch it, you two!

BERYL: Marion!

DON: Oh Christ there we go!

MARION: Did you push me?

MECHANIC: Yes I did, now take your fat lesbian arse away from
me!

MARION: My what? (in a flash she has drawn a knife from
her hip pocket) I carry this for men like you!

BERYL: Marion! Don't be a fool!

(BERYL dashes forward)

JACK: She's got a knife!

MECHANIC: Here drop that --- get hold of her somebody --- here
for Christ sake --- get hold of her!

JACK: Come on none of that!

(JACK and BERYL try to hold her)

MARION: (pushing JACK away) Leave me alone!

BERYL: Marion!

DON: (also approaching) Now put that knife down!

(The music is coming to a ragged end.

MARION advances on the MECHANIC,
crouched, her knife pointing)

MARION: I'll scare the balls off you.

MECHANIC: Now drop it!

JACK: Now come on, Marion.

(DON and JACK manage to spring on her and the knife clatters to the floor)

MECHANIC: Blimey! I thought I'd be going home with a soprano voice tonight! Blimey!

DON: (to BERYL) Get her out of here.

BERYL: Come on!

(MARION bursts into tears)

MECHANIC: Some club this is! (to MARION, as she leaves) I'll get you fixed for this!

JACK: (to the MECHANIC) Come on, mate, I'll get you a drink.

MECHANIC: I'll have the police on you!

(BERYL and MARION leave.

DON picks up the knife and pockets it)

JACK: (as he draws the MECHANIC away) Come on, mate, she only does it for a lark, she's always like that, we don't want the police round, they have such big boots. O.K. get the band started up, come on, cats! It's BLACK AS A COUPLE OF CATS.

(The music starts up again. JACK and the MECHANIC go off, with JOY behind them.

The music starts up again)

JOY: (to the MECHANIC) You all right?

MECHANIC: Well I thought my top secret department was for it!

JACK: She isn't a member by the way.

(JACK, the MECHANIC and JOY go off)

MECHANIC: (as they leave) I should hope to God not. You'd all be eunuchs by now!

(DON leaves too.

While the dancing continues ---)

24.

--- BERYL and MARION arrive in the living room below. BERYL switches on the light.

MARION stands staring up at the wild dancing scene above.

BERYL: (shouting above the music) Don't think about it!

(Gradually as MARION recovers herself the upstage area fades, and the music with it)

MARION: They all say she's big and hefty but I'm not. It's only my will that makes me big.

BERYL: It's all right now, you're home.

MARION: 'Home'. That's wherever I feel happy. It isn't a place.

BERYL: Are you happy here?

MARION: If you're here, yes.

BERYL: What made you come tonight? --- just to hurt yourself?

MARION: The lure of the jungle. For two nights I've been wandering about. There's a new girl at your filling station.

BERYL: Yes. She's replacing Joy. Did you talk to her?

MARION: I took her home.

BERYL: Was she nice?

MARION: She stank. I got her to take a bath. But she still stank. Sex is no good. It's for making babies. And I can't make babies. Sometimes, you know, they ask me if I can. So I'm half sick all the time. That's why I came tonight --- it's why I'm wandering all the time --- looking for colour, noise, something to ---!

(A ring at the bell)

BERYL: Suppose it's the police?

MARION: Oh policemen like me, usually. They see I'm not afraid.

(BERYL goes to the door.)

We hear a murmur of voices and then DON comes in, followed by BERYL.

He stands looking at MARION, and takes her knife out of his pocket)

DON: Here's your knife.

BERYL: (snatching it) Don't give her that! Do you want the police to find it?

DON: Why not? It's hers, isn't it?

MARION: Did you enjoy seeing what that man was doing to your wife?

DON: I didn't see him.

BERYL: You were too busy doing it yourself, to Joy --- or trying to!

MARION: Yes it's wrong to use knives.

DON: (to BERYL) Give it here. I'll lose it somewhere in my tool kit.

(He takes the knife and goes out stage left)

MARION: I feel I've broken up a marriage.

BERYL: Why?

MARION: It used to be warm here --- intimate --- it was ugly but at least you enjoyed it.

BERYL: I enjoyed being in prison. I don't any more. I admit I enjoyed it -- and it makes me shudder now!

MARION: But if it's a prison, why not get out? I feel him there inside you all the time!

BERYL: Couldn't you come and live here? make it free for me? It's all I've got, this house. And to have you all the time --- hear you talk about your travels, and the people you know --- I still can't get over why you took the trouble to talk to me at all --- when you've been all round the world --- known so many important people!

MARION: I was looking for something rough --- quick. Like the girl last night. That's why I came to the filling station. And I found you. A jewel in a ---!

(Another ring at the bell.

DON appears at once)

DON: I'll go.

BERYL: Suppose it's the police?

DON: Oh I'll head them off.

(He leaves. They listen as the front door is opened. A murmur of men's voices.

DON comes in with JACK)

JACK: (to MARION) Here I've got a bone to pick with you.

BERYL: Well pick it with me --- she's upset!

JACK: She's upset! What about me and fifty-odd members of the Black Cat club? You know what's happened don't you? He's gone to the police! I pushed three whiskies down his ferretty gullet but he promised to go even harder! And you know what the police'll do

- JACK:
(contd) don't you --- they'll break up my club, they've already had complaints about the noise we make -!
- MARION: (turning on him suddenly) And why shouldn't they break it up? What are you doing that's so holy ---?
- JACK: Well I dare say you're not a saint yourself --- you've put your fingers where they shouldn't never have been, I dare say --- you've had some scrapes, I can read it in the way you walk --- you can't fool Jack Turner --- and you may be soft enough to like police but I'm not --- I've had a go at fake betting systems on the horses and they nearly put me inside once --- I used to trade in contraband cigarettes --- they tried to pull me in for selling second hand bikes as new ones --- I don't want to feel like a saint! Saints are fit to die but not Jack Turner! I keep moving, that's the idea in my life, keep on your toes because if you lay down you're doing just like the horse when he's sick, he'll never get up again! You can do all the things you want to do, my girl, but keep on your own pitch and don't queer mine, that's all! And, listen, if you want a bit of good advice, you can do all what you want to if you keep your head screwed on tight and keep within (taking strange little mincing steps) the straight and narrow, it's only a game --- but the way you go at it --- you've lost before you start!
- MARION: (laughing) You aren't a coward by any chance are you?
- JACK: And what's so courageous about you? You couldn't fiddle your way to a free railway ticket because you've never had to! You've never had to fight! You've had it done for you, by the likes of me! You can read it all over your backside, the chairs you've sat in, the lovely soft beds ---!
- DON: Yes, that's just how I feel too --- it's all right for you to come round criticising and jumping down our throats and calling our brandy bad names but it may be we haven't had your chances in life ---!
- MARION: We all get chances, you mouse! We get the same chances all of us! --- to be free or to fiddle! And you're fiddlers! That's what I can read! You fiddle in prison! And you expect her to follow that? You call yourself men! You should get your own liver pulped down for tinning, because it's about the value of a chicken liver!

DON: Now listen here, you ---!

BERYL: Oh leave her alone!

JACK: Don't bother with 'em, Don --- you can see they're in it together --- up to their eyes in dirty ---

DON: (checking him) All right, all right.

BERYL: What do you know about it?

JACK: I know what my eyes tell me, don't you worry about that! I can see ---

DON: All right, leave her alone!

JACK: (to DON) You want your bloody head examined too, letting her get up to ---

DON: What? You talk to me about letting her get up to larks --- and what about your little wife who's out now with old ferretty-face from the chicken zoo --- bouncing his Jaguar all over the ---

JACK: Now shut up! I can't help it can I? She went off a dozen times before, leaving the kids, she's always wiggling her arse at somebody, what can I do, I've got work on my hands, I mean I'm out all day, I stay awake half the night worrying where she is, and blimey you wouldn't believe it the way she talks, she acts so innocent, the way she grumbles, it's the way a real wife grumbles, the way she leads off at me about my bikes, it's the way a real wife leads off, but (crying) she's given me a real crucifixion, I can tell you that, Don Holmes!

DON: All right, Jack, I didn't mean it all that much. Now come on, sit down, there's no need for us to quarrel.

(JACK sits down)

MARION: That's right, have a good cry. That's what comes of doing nothing grand, never thinking about the world outside, letting it go hang itself as long as you're all right. Then comes the day when the tears start and you feel sorry for yourself, and there's nobody to listen because they're the same as you, they're looking after themselves, they're fiddling and ferretting in their little prisons to keep the money and the sex dribbling in. I know, I've done it myself.

JACK: (through his tears) Yes, you know it all don't you? You've got a big mouth that's all, and I bet I know where it'll end up tonight too ---

MARION: (jumping towards him) Do you want me to throw you out of the window?

BERYL: Don't take any notice of him!

(MARION subsides.

A ring at the bell)

JACK: (jumping up) Here! That's them! I knew it! They've found out where you are. You've got me in the bag now, you bitch!

DON: All right, calm down!

(DON goes to the door.

JACK listens, trembling.

We hear a murmur of voices, and then DON returns alone)

(to BERYL) Somebody from the filling station. They say you're on late turn.

BERYL: Oh so I am! Quick! Where's my things?

(She goes out stage left to fetch her night kit)

MARION: I'll drive you there. We'll make it in two minutes.

DON: (calling to BERYL) What about your sandwiches?

MARION: It's all right. I'll find her something and take it along.

DON: Oh.

(BERYL returns with her workbag)

BERYL: Well, good night. There's beer in the cupboard.

MARION: Good night, gentlemen!

(Neither of the men answers.)

MARION and BERYL leave and the front door closes. A sports car revs up violently outside, pulls away with a skid of tyres and is gone in a moment)

DON: What about a drink to straighten you up?

JACK: Best thing you ever said.

(DON opens two cans of beer and pours. He takes a glass to JACK)

DON: Here's health.

(JACK drinks thirstily and makes a relieved gasp afterwards.)

The LIGHT FADES on the downstage scene but the two men remain below, silhouetted, as ---)

25.

--- the LIGHT COMES UP on the upstage area to reveal the filling station.

We hear soft laughter and a man singing Black As A couple Of Cats.

It is the MECHANIC with JOY. They walk across the upstage area hugging each other. He pulls grotesque faces and makes little dancing steps as he sings, making her giggle uncontrollably.

They kiss and fondle each other, then wander off.

Their laughter and kidding die away.

A sports car drives up and comes to a skidding halt.

MARION strolls up to the pump and looks round. She has a bag of sandwiches.

BERYL comes on in her overalls.

MARION: I brought you something to eat.

BERYL: You're so nice to me.

MARION: Beryl --- will you come back with me?

BERYL: Come back?

MARION: Forget this filling station, forget Don, forget they ever existed and come with me?

BERYL: Oh, Marion --- I couldn't --- I could leave all this but Don --- I couldn't!

MARION: That's what I thought.

(She leaves)

BERYL: Marion!

(The car starts up with a roar.
BERYL rushes down towards it and
out of sight)

Marion! Marion!

(The car pulls away and is gone in
a moment)

Marion!

(The LIGHT FADES on the empty
upstage area as ----)

26.

--- it comes up again on the downstage scene. DON and JACK are slumped in their chairs with many empty beer cans on the table between them.

- JACK: (blinking drowsily awake) No good going back. Not yet.
- DON: (also blinking half-awake) Eh?
- JACK: (still more asleep than awake) I'm finished, Jack.
- DON: (in the same state) Finished? --- by a woman?
- JACK: (weighed down by beer and sleepiness) Oh come on, I know you, Don Holmes. You was born at number 32 and your mum raised chickens on the roof and swore blind she didn't. You don't have to come the strong man with me. We used to have Christmas parties together when we was kids, we used to sit round the fire all night and bet who could smoke the most, and you always won with upwards of two hundred cigarettes from dusk to dawn ---
- DON: (bursting out) It's horrible, horrible!
- JACK: You could have got a nice dose of lung cancer out of that, my boy, as you was only sixteen. And you've got the neck to tell me you're not ruined by a woman! You was always ruined, by everything! Because you're not anything! No more am I! She ruins me every week, and I want her to. I don't want her there every night in that pink nightdress, she's a lump --- ! There, that's the first time I've said it though not the first time I've thought it. When I'm in that bed alongside of her I feel they're going to wheel us away and box us up and bury us for good. You know what I mean don't you, Don?
- DON: I never felt like that with Beryl.
- JACK: More fool you. Because they're all the same. Only yours is a bit stuck-up, that's all.
- DON: Oh come away for Christ sake!
- JACK: Well that's the end of the club. They'll be round my

JACK:
(contd)

place in the morning first thing, don't you worry about that. It might be the end of me too. And you. I don't know, I never feel good. Not really good. I've always got an ache somewhere. Or a cold coming. And she's got her stomach trouble. We're all finished I reckon. It's the end of the world.

(A ring at the bell)

(jumping up) Blimey, why you don't you get that bell dismantled?

(They wait. There is another ring, more persistent)

It's them!

(He dashes out, stage left.)

DON yawns and stretches, and rises slowly. He goes to the door as the bell sounds again)

DON: (off) Beryl!

(BERYL comes in still in her overalls. He follows her quickly)

What's up?

BERYL: Thank God you're awake! She's gone! She drove away and she's never coming back, Don!

DON: What, have you left the filling station just like that --- who's looking after the pump?

BERYL: I ran all the way! Don, come out with me --- I've got to find her! I have, honestly! I'll be ever so good to you if you help me! Please, Don!

DON: But how do you know she's gone for good --- ?

BERYL: I went by her flat --- I rang and rang and rang --- and there's no light up there! She's gone, Don --- I can feel it!

DON: Well what's the use of looking then?

BERYL: I've got to look! Perhaps we can stop her --- she goes to other filling stations --- Don, get your coat on --- we might find her! Please, please!

DON: All right just calm down, that's all.

BERYL: (clinging to him) Come on, Don! Come on! I can't lose her! Please!

DON: Oh well, if it does you any good to traipse round the streets all night!

(He goes to get his coat and they leave together. He switches out the light as he goes.

The front door closes.

The light is switched on again. It is JACK.

He tries to see the time by his wrist-watch, swaying, screwing up his eyes. Then he gets his coat and shambles off. He leaves the light on.

It fades as ...)

27.

... the chicken paste factory comes to life in the upstage area.

The TWO WOMEN WORKERS are putting their workcoats on.

FIRST WOMAN: Go anywhere?

SECOND WOMAN: No, not with him. He's a fire-man. We thought of going to the zoo but as the time drew near his courage failed him. Anyway, I said I have enough of animals at work!

FIRST WOMAN: Well it's true isn't it? Mine brought in a bottle of whisky unexpected from work, the foreman slipped it into his pocket as he was leaving, well there wasn't anything left by two o'clock Saturday morning. We saw to that - just the two of us.

(JOY comes in)

SECOND WOMAN: Hullo, duck. Have a nice weekend?

JOY: Quiet. You know.

FIRST WOMAN: That's right.

(JOY puts on her workcoat)

See you downstairs.

JOY: OK.

(The TWO WOMEN WORKERS leave.
JOY begins fixing herself as if for a party.)

DON comes in, already in his work-coat. He watches her from behind)

DON: Get any sleep?

JOY: (jumping) Oh! You gave me a start! Here --- where's Jack? He didn't come in all night!

DON: On the run, I should think. He was at my place till turned four. He says the police are rooting round for him.

JOY: The police?

DON: He said your boyfriend went to the police last night!

JOY: Oh don't talk rot! He was sitting in his Jaguar with me. He would have if I hadn't given him something to think about!

(She sweeps out and leaves him staring.)

BLACKOUT)

28.

We hear the sound of a key being turned. The front door of the Holmes house opens. The light is switched on in the downstage area. It is BERYL.

She is returning from work. She takes off her overcoat and begins making a cup of tea.

A ring at the bell and she rushes hopefully to the door.

JOY: (off) Hullo, duck!

BERYL: Oh, hullo.

(They come into the room and BERYL continues getting tea. JOY is done up to kill)

JOY: My two are playing up. I left mum in charge. They're worse than an army sometimes.

BERYL: Oh yes.

JOY: (sitting down) Jack wants you to take the Black Cats down to the coast on Saturday. He said he'll meet up with you later. He's got a job on Saturday morning. (BERYL makes no reply) And there's nobody else he could trust to lead. None of the men.

BERYL: Oh I haven't touched the bike for two Saturdays. I don't feel like it any more.

JOY: I don't blame you. I never understood how you did it, bouncing about like that.

BERYL: Are you off out?

JOY: Jack's taking me to the pictures. I know his game, don't worry. He wants me on a string. But nothing in trousers can fool me! Not Joy Turner. It's funny, the minute that man gets into bed he seems to capsize, like a plastic duck. When his bike's turned on it makes a lot of noise and it goes very fast but the minute you turn it off there's nothing but a lot of old iron, and a seat with nothing on it, not even a carrot.

JOY:
(contd)

But men are lovely when they've got real engines, like my machinist at the chicken paste works. He can dance, he can tease. I know he's a devil but I wouldn't have him any different. I love devils. Your friend didn't like him did she? And no more did you. But he's only playing you up, for the fun. And it's woman's fun, Beryl. It's real woman's fun. I mean we've got to have men like him. I don't regret being married to this one. And as for being married to the devil, I'd rather turn my feet up and die. But I like men who like women and I don't care how they play up, it's only what should be when a man's got something real between his legs. After all that's how our parts are made. Men are hard where we're soft. It must mean something. You can have two soft ones together, but it's not natural, duck. Do you see what I mean?

BERYL: Oh, we're not just bodies.

JOY: No but we've got bodies just the same. I mean you don't use your ears to spit out of, do you? Do you see what I mean? I love men when they get up to their little tricks! But mine's round his bike all the time. He's either on it, moving, or under it, still. Yet the other one, he keeps all that for women. Sometimes I think Jack's afraid. And then I think he doesn't like me. Do you ever feel like that, Beryl? I mean I like the look of the other one much more than I do Jack but I'd marry Jack just the same if I had my time over again. Would you marry Don too?

BERYL: Yes I suppose I would.

JOY: Do you like anybody better than you do him?

BERYL: Any man you mean?

JOY: No I mean anybody --- I mean ---

(A ring at the bell. BERYL simply stands there)

It's the bell, duck.

BERYL: Oh!

(She hurries to the door)

JACK: (off) Hullo, Beryl!

BERYL: (off) Hullo. Come in.

(BERYL returns with JACK)

JACK: (to JOY) I knew I'd find you here. We must have made an appointment!

JOY: Oh blimey! I could laugh if it wasn't for your face.

JACK: (to BERYL) Now listen, duck, I'm in a flaming hurry. This girl insists on being taken to the pictures. What about it?

BERYL: What?

JACK: Saturday. Come on, duck, you can lead the party. --- just for once --- I can't rely on anybody else --- I've got a job --- it's contraband and could bring me in a lot of illegal money --- what about it?

BERYL: I can't, Jack, honestly. I'm off the road for a bit. I can't help it.

JACK: Listen, duck. You're not your old self, we all know that. Just get on the bike and you'll see things the same as before.

BERYL: I don't want to see things the same as before! That's what I'm trying to avoid.

JACK: Oh well! Too bad. And I had everything nicely organised. For your friend as well. She'll miss you.

BERYL: What friend?

JACK: Your friend with the knife --- what's her name --- mother Brown, you know! I met her on the street. She passed in a flash but I hailed her and she stopped with a skid of flat tyres and a stink of exhaust. It was a beautiful moment. She'll be there at the coast on Saturday --- she's meeting up with us! I couldn't believe my ears!

BERYL: But there's nobody at the flat --- I've tried the bell --- there's no light in the window --- she must have gone away --- abroad --- it couldn't have been her!

JACK: Well there she was as large as life in front of me this morning!

BERYL: No!

JACK: And I've given her the rally point --- so get out in that backyard and start servicing the machine because a large contingent of Cats is going to be waiting at your filling station at 6.15 sharp this coming Saturday morning!

BERYL: But, Jack ---

JACK: There. It's done! I knew I could rely on myself to bring you round! (to JOY) Come on, we've got to git! If there's one thing I can't stand it's walking in late and trying to figure out the ...

(Their voices trail away as they leave hurriedly)

(calling to BERYL, off) See you Saturday, mate! I'll be down there by two o'clock latest!

The door slams.

She stands there, bursting with hope.

BLACKOUT)

29.

A Black Cat dance roars into evidence in the upstage area. There is an air of extra wildness tonight. Coloured spots are playing on the dancers.

JOY is dancing with DON.

JACK pushes his way to the centre at the end of the dance.

JACK: OK, black cats; let's have your unwashed ears! Well, we got there fast today under the wings of her ladyship Beryl Holmes! A big cheer for Beryl! (making the motion of starting a motor-cycle with his right leg) Kick, kick!

CATS: And away!

JACK: Kick, kick!

CATS: And away!

JACK: Kick, kick!

CATS: And away!

JACK: All right, Cats, my paws are itching to dip into the raffle box this week. Nowhere is the Joy of my life?

(JOY comes forward with the raffle box)

No wishbones this week --- (taking a raffle ticket) no chicken parts --- and no scenes! A simple ticket with a simple number! Back to normal, Cats! Back to Saturday nights that make cool cats sleep sound on Sundays! The first prize tonight is no fewer than fifty gallons of super fed into your tank at intervals by the hand of her ladyship Beryl Holmes! I arranged it with her boss. So here, to the tune of Black as a Couple of Cats, is the box of magic numbers!

(As he walks round with the box the thumping tune comes over and they all begin to sing and move to the Black Cat song.

BERYL appears suddenly)

BERYL: Jack! Jack!

(JACK cups his ear towards her,
burlesquing)

(shouting) She isn't here either! You said she'd be
here!

JACK: Eh?

BERYL: You never saw her, did you? You never saw her
in the street!

JACK: Who?

BERYL: Marion! Marion! Mother Brown! You lied to me---
you lied, didn't you?

JACK: It was his idea. (pointing to DON) Take it out on him!
I've got the raffle to do!

(DON breaks with JOY and comes over)

DON: What's all the screaming for God's sake? You're
not starting again are you?---

BERYL: You lied! You made him lie! (crying) You shouldn't!

JACK: Come on, Cats!

BERYL: Oh Don Don! (clinging to him) You promised me!
You promised me she'd come! (crying desperately)
You shouldn't lie to me!

(She pummels at DON with her fists
while he stands perplexed, shocked
at himself)

DON: I didn't mean it--- I thought!---

(The song roars to a climax. BERYL's
voice wails higher, and DON begins to
draw her towards the exit as best as
he can)

DON:
(contd)

Beryl.---come on--- Beryl!

(The CATS stamp, writhe, roar in the Black Cat song, with more than a touch of the grotesque. The stage is bursting with colour and sound, and gradually BERYL's terrible wailing dies away).

APPENDIXBLACK AS A COUPLE OF CATS

Black as a couple of cats
--- black goggles and black hats ---
Instead of growing roots
we sprout black boots!
We lick not milk but miles!
At night we're on the tiles ---
meeow --- meeow ---
this is how
you do it now ---
first you shake a whisker
then you make a hiss,
you see which one is frisker
and choose that one to kiss ---
meeow --- meeow ---
we're doing it now ---
you rub fur
and purr-purr ---
you twitch your tail ---
mmm! mmm! it can't fail
to fill you with greed
for speed speed ---
and a big thump
on a powerful pump ---
meeow --- meeow ---
it's happening now ---
we're young and we're free
and nobody can see ---
because we're black as a couple of cats
--- black goggles and black hats!

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