

THE MECHANICAL SAW

A Play

by

Maurice Rowdon

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CONGRESS WASHINGTON  
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CHARACTERS:

CAPTAIN JACK SIMMONS.

ELLIS (A Guest).

BRIGADIER CHARLES THOMSON.

JOAN THOMSON (His Wife).

The Helpers At The Garden Party:

GEORGE GORRINGE.

ELSIE GORRINGE (His Wife).

MABEL FORBES.

DAVE FORBES (Her Son).

HESTER SIMMONS (off)

SCENE: ENGLAND.

1.

A garden-party in the evening. Behind the trees a small country house is visible.

This side of the trees there is a long table with glasses and buffet supper. A group of helpers polishes glasses; mixes drinks: GEORGE and ELSIE CORRIDGE; MABEL and DAVE FORBES.

There is dance music from a gramophone. We see some couples dancing beyond the trees, under faery lights.

CAPTAIN JACK SIMMONS is talking to another GUEST. The CAPTAIN is lean and full of beef. The GUEST is pale and thickset and might have been overtaxing his liver with rich food in the last few years.

SIMMONS (in a loud voice, glass in hand) My wife's tragedy is this---she's never been able to have a kid. We've tried but---!

GUEST (sipping his drink) Is it too late?

The music is suddenly switched up to top volume and we hear BRIGADIER SIMMONS, off, shout Turn that bloody thing down!, and abruptly it is lowered.

SIMMONS: Eh?

GUEST (swallowing and shouting hard) Is it too late?

BRIGADIER THOMSON enters and strides across the lawn. He is a massive, flushed bulldog of a man.

THOMSON (to the helpers) Just got the gramophone fixed up!

GEORGE (with respectful nervousness) Going to dance, Brigadier?

THOMSON (going out again) Hate it!

SIMMONS: She's over forty. She admits to forty! (with a guffaw)

GUEST (guffawing nervously) Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: We've been trying for fifteen years or more. I thought of sending her---! (lost)

GUEST: What?

SIMMONS: Another man!

GUEST (staring at him) Another man?

SIMMONS (angrily) Well, by Christ, if you want a kid you have to face facts---but she's too bloody respectable by half! (Red in the face) She acts hearty, she rides to hounds and makes a bloody nuisance of herself hanging round the whips, but she's a po-faced bitch underneath!

GUEST (gingerly) I see!

SIMMONS (looking round at the helpers, in a lower voice) I say, do you think they heard?

GUEST: I shouldn't be surprised.

SIMMONS (peering at him) Who are you?

A sputnik passes over. Somebody has caught sight of it and there is a whoop from behind the trees.

A SHOUT (off) It's a sputnik!

They all gaze upwards.

ANOTHER SHOUT: Switch the lights out!

ANOTHER: Lights!

THOMSON (off, with an enormous voice) Joan---can you get the lights out?

JOAN (also off) Do my best! (Perfect in an emergency, you know)

The helpers stand there gazing. GEORGE has a tall

jug of lemonade in his hand. He and ELSIE are robust and red-cheeked, Cockneys turned country folk. MABEL and her son DAVE both look frailer.

GEORGE: See it, Elsie?  
ELSIE (craning) No!  
GEORGE: Look! (He points)  
MABEL: Where?  
DAVE: Blimey, can't you see it?  
SIMMONS: I've got it! There! (He shoots up an arm)  
Hester! (No reply)  
GUEST: Where?

The lights go out and the gramophone runs down. Another excited woop. Everything in darkness.

DAVE: See it, mam?  
MABEL (in a marvelling voice) Oh, yes! It's scary, isn't it?  
ELSIE (laughing) Scarey!

A squeal from behind the trees. A laugh.

SIMMONS (alarmed, shouting) Hester!

The sound of a slight collision and a liquid splash.

THOMSON: Now, Christ in---!  
GEORGE: What the 'ell---?  
ELSIE: It's the Brigadier!  
THOMSON: Issay, I'm sorry! Is that you, George?  
GEORGE: That's right! It's only the lemonade!  
THOMSON: It's all over my bloody trousers!  
MABEL: Your wife'll wonder what you've been up to!  
GEORGE (spluttering) Sssh!  
THOMSON (chuckling) Better make my way to the house.  
SIMMONS: It moves so fast!

Another squeal from behind  
the trees.

GUEST: Is this the American one?

SIMMONS (shouting) Hester? Where's my wife, for Christ's sake?

ELSIE (to MABEL) Glad it's not a V2, eh?

MABEL: I'll say!

JOAN (off) Anybody seen my husband?

ELSIE (calling out to her) He's got 'is trousers wet, Mrs  
Thomson!

GEORGE (to his wife, amused) You'll copk it, mate!

JOAN (off) He's what? Is that Mrs Gorringer?

ELSIE: That's it, Mrs Thomson! He spilt some lemonade  
down hisself!

JOAN (off) Trust him! (Chuckling) Heard that, Hester?

HESTER (off) What?

JOAN (off) The brigadier's gone and wet his pants.

HESTER (off) Good God, does he still do that?

JOAN (off) Apparently!

SIMMONS (to GUEST) That's my wife.

GUEST: Which one?

SIMMONS: The one with the brown voice.

GUEST: The brown---?

SIMMONS: I feel washed-out tonight! Don't you feel---?  
I mean, what the hell is there to live for?

HESTER (off) My husband's the same!

JOAN (off) They're all the same!

The lights come back on.  
They are all gazing up.  
The music whines back. They  
all blink. Dancing begins  
again.

GUEST: You asked my who I was. My name's ELLIS.  
How do you do?

SIMMONS (shaking his hand in an absent way) How do you do?  
The best time I ever had was in the war. That

was my hour. I---! Why am I being honest with you?

GUEST: I don't know.

SIMMONS: I sold sugar in Austria. Ran a paper mill for a chap in England when I shouldn't have. Little things. When they demobbed me I was rich.

GUEST: Really?

SIMMONS: I was a captain. Major, really. M.C. Got it by shooting my mouth off at the right time. Insurance-agent before the war, so I know how to do it. I think I'm impotent.

GUEST: What?

SIMMONS: I've got no class, that's my trouble. Know who I am round here?

GUEST: No?

SIMMONS: The M.F.H.

GUEST: The what?

SIMMONS: M.F.H.

GUEST: What's that?

SIMMONS: Are you English?

The gramophone blares again and once more BRIGADIER THOMSON shouts, off, 'Turn that bloody thing down!'

ELSIE: He must have found some new trousers!

JOAN (shouting) Is that you, Charles?

THOMSON (off) Who else?

JOAN (off) I heard you wet your trousers?

Music subsides again.

GUEST: Yes.

SIMMONS: What?

GUEST: You asked if I was English.

SIMMONS: Did I?

GUEST: Yes.

SIMMONS: You know, if I had a son, a little chap with blond hair, I'd be a king---!

ELLIS: What's the M.F.H? Something in business?

SIMMONS: Master of the foxhounds! Why don't you join us?

ELLIS: I can't ride!

SIMMONS: You can drive a car, though?

ELLIS: Oh, yes!

SIMMONS (guffawing) I thought you must be good for something!  
Have another drink!

ELLIS: Yes, let's!

They walk over to the buffet.

ELSIE: Evening, Captain!

SIMMONS: Hullo, Mrs Gorringe! How's your husband?

ELSIE: He's bending down!

GEORGE appears from under  
the table.

GEORGE: Hullo, Captain.

SIMMONS: What about the deal, George?

GEORGE: No, I couldn't. I've been thinking it over---  
but---well, the railway's secure!

SIMMONS: Like hell it is! Secure for early death by  
boredom!

ELSIE: That's what I tell him. He needs adventure.

GEORGE: I need money.

SIMMONS: Money comes by graft, risk, fiddle, sleight-of-  
hand.

MABEL: Drink, Captain?

SIMMONS: Please, Mrs Forbes. Gin with a closed bottle  
of Martini half a yard away!

They laugh politely.

MABEL (to ELLIS) What about you?

ELLIS: Yes, please. Whisky.

MABEL: Neat?

ELLIS: With a shot of soda, please.

The music bursts into

deafening roar again, and at once, as THOMSON'S voice begins, 'Turn that bl---!' it subsides again.

SIMMONS (sipping his gin thirstily and looking round) What the devil goes on?

MABEL: It's the Brigadier's wife, she likes to manage the mechanical side.

ELSIE: She's always got her head stuck in a machine, like a man.

SIMMONS: Sh's wonderful on the hunting field, I'll say that! Mouth's too big, that's the trouble!

They laugh politely.

SIMMONS: Wife said to her one day, 'Your husband may be a brigadier but I believe that doesn't give you the right to hand out orders to the Master!' She's respected Hester ever since. (To GEORGE) You know, George, my wife's tragedy is---!

GEORGE (at once) Like some Martini in it, Captain?

SIMMONS (blinking) What was I saying?

ELSIE (to ELLIS) Are you new here, Mr---?

ELLIS: Ellis. That's right. I came yesterday.

MABEL (to SIMMONS) Is that sputnik American or Russian?

SIMMONS: American.

ELSIE: They'll start throwing their weight about now. They've always been a boastful lot, Americans, don't you think so?

SIMMONS: Well---(hesitating)!

MABEL (to ELLIS) Are you American?

ELLIS: Me? No. What made you think so?

MABEL: I was trying to place you. You don't look foreign yet you do. Just like Americans! (Smiling) Sorry---I'm like that!

SIMMONS: The way that bloody thing was travelling. And you could just see a little trail of silver fire coming out of its arse, did you notice that?

ELSIE (while they laugh) Your language, Captain!

SIMMONS (blinking) What's that?

ELLIS (to SIMMONS) Why don't you adopt one?

SIMMONS (screwing up his face) One what?

ELLIS: A child. Weren't you saying---?

SIMMONS: Christ! I've got enough to do with the hunt. You'll not believe me but it costs the best part of two thousand a year.

ELLIS: Really?

SIMMONS: I've got a little office in the City---my employees wonder why we don't expand---I could tell them!

ELLIS: Do you catch any foxes?

SIMMONS (turning sharply to GEORGE) What?

GEORGE: He says do you catch any foxes?

SIMMONS: Oh! (Uncomfortably) Fifty brace a year, say!

ELLIS: Fifty brace?

MABEL: That's right, they always measure them in braces!

They all laugh, with the exception of SIMMONS.

GEORGE (to ELLIS) A hundred, it means.

ELLIS: As many as a hundred?

SIMMONS (waving his arms about) Well, it's a difficult sport in this part of the world---too many roads---!

MABEL: My boy says he reckons you don't catch anythink!

DAVE: All right, all right!

SIMMONS (with a nervous glance at DAVE) Your boy don't use his eyes!

MABEL (to annoy DAVE, with a wink at ELSIE) My boy reckons he shoots more than you catch, and all you do is drive 'em on to our chickens!

GEORGE: Sssh!

SIMMONS: The ground's damned difficult, Mrs Forbes, it's a built-up area, the old rural England's dead, there was a ~~great~~ day when you could hunt at East Ham, believe it or not!

MABEL (tickled) Now don't come to me with your old excuses!

GEORGE (to MABEL, with a smile) You've been at the gin, haven't you, mate?

MABEL (burlesque) Listen to that! You know I don't like the stuff!

ELSIE (to ELLIS) Do you know the Brigadier's wife, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: Yes. I met her this morning. She asked me to stay for the garden-party.

GEORGE (with deliberate polite interest) Do you live round here, then?

ELLIS: No. I've been living abroad.

GEORGE: Oh, I see.

ELSIE (to GEORGE) Nosey! (To ELLIS) He was born like it!

A crash, off. The music stops. Pandemonium behind the trees.

SIMMONS (dashing off) That's Hester! She always gets drunk about this time!

ELSIE (quietly, as they watch SIMMONS disappear) You're telling me! She shows it in her face, too. (to ELLIS) Ever seen her, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: No.

ELSIE: She's got one of those flushed complexions if you know what I mean.

ELLIS: Oh, yes!

GEORGE: I don't suppose this gentleman wants to hear all our local gossip.

MABEL: Don't you be so sure, mate! (with a wink) Eh, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS (with a smile) I like a bit of gossip.

MABEL: Of course, you do! It's natural! (To ELSIE) I liked it when he said two thousand a year, didn't you? I thought I wouldn't mind a lick off that. Where the devil does he get it?

DAVE: Well, they say money breeds money, don't they?

ELSIE: All thrown down the drain on a lot of blasted foxes!

MABEL: Fifty brace a year, I don't think! I reckon all they want is a nice ride on Saturdays!

DAVE (to ELLIS) You been away long, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: A few years, yes.

DAVE (pleasantly) Miss the old country?

ELLIS: A bit.

DAVE: I wouldn't mind getting away for good!

ELSIE: You ought to hear the Brigadier's wife leading off when she's out on a hunt---'Cut 'em dahn! cut 'em dahn!' she screams.

ELLIS: Cut down what?

MABEL: The foxes. (With perplexity) She's ever so nice really.

ELSIE: She's a bitch!

GEORGE (half-laughing) Ssssh!

ELSIE: I tell you when she's good, Mr Ellis---in an emergency. She always rallies round, if you know what I mean.

MABEL: She was something in the war. They say she was the only woman that went in the submarines.

GEORGE: They gave her medals enough, anyhow!

A shout from behind the trees: 'You'd better take her home, Captain!'

CAPTAIN SIMMONS dashes in again.

SIMMONS (to ELLIS) Well, good night, old chap! (They shake hands) I enjoyed our frank discussion!

ELLIS: Is your wife all right?

SIMMONS: Oh, yes! She started a beagle hunt---the usual thing! Tripped over the wires! She chases hares.

ELLIS: Hares?

SIMMONS: Well, good night, Mrs Gorringe! George and Dave, Mrs Forbes---you did very nicely, thank you!

They all say good night and the CAPTAIN hurries off again.

GEORGE (to ELLIS) The Brigadier's an interesting man, too. He's been called a rock of justice, and I don't think it's far from the truth, either. He sits at the local sessions. (To MABEL) Do you know, he did all that wood panelling in the house over there?

MABEL: Did he really?

ELSIE: It's more than she'd do---she don't even feed the poor devil!

GEORGE: Still, she's a good worker. I'd like to see anybody else run a farm like she did single-handed. (Again to ELLIS) The Brigadier does embroideries, too. You've never seen anything like 'em! They take anything up to three years sometimes. I reckon every stick of furniture in that house is covered with his work.

MABEL (to ELLIS) It's funny for a man, isn't it?

ELLIS: Yes.

ELSIE: What parts do you live in, Mr Ellis---very far away?

ELLIS: No. South of France. Where the sun shines.

ELSIE: Oh, that's nice! I wish we'd get more of it here!

MABEL: It's lucky we didn't get a downpour tonight. The forecast said storms, so I thought (with another wink at ELLIS) we'd get it nice!

GEORGE: It's on the way, don't you worry. It isn't often those boys are wrong.

DAVE: I heard a rumble as I came over.

MABEL: It was your stomach, mate!

ELSIE (laughing) Go on! Here---do you remember that storm just before the war, Mabel?

GEORGE: Blimey, you're going back, aren't you?

ELSIE: Well, I've never lived through a worst storm, I can tell you that much. I remember us two huddlin' in the scullery, anyhow, eh, Mabel?

MABLE (to GEORGE) You was underground, mate, so it didn't bother you.

ELSIE (to ELLIS) He was in the mines.

GEORGE (also to ELLIS) I'm not sorry I gave up that lark. Still, I don't see as it's much better on the railways.

ELSIE: Go on with you!

GEORGE: If you can see a future in it just tell me!

DAVE: It's clean, for a start. Not like paints.

GEORGE: I don't see it's so clean! I shifted a

cartload of coaldust this morning and didn't notice it, anyhow!

ELSIE: Well, you got your offer, didn't you, mate? To my mind, you looked a gifthorse in the mouth.

GEORGE: I'm not walking into anything blindfold and that's a fact!

MABEL (to ELLIS) My Dave mixes paints all day. I'm sure it's not doing him any good!

DAVE (discouraging her) All right, all right!

MABEL: I heard it gets in their lungs and---!

JOAN THOMSON, the BRIGADIER's wife, enters. A quick, anxious-looking, sporty woman in her fifties. Perceptive, alert eyes.

JOAN: Hello, all! Lots left over for Sunday din, Mrs Gorringe?

ELSIE: That's right, Mrs Thomson!

JOAN (with a chuckle) I'll have the old chap eating sandwiches for a fortnight! (They all smile politely) Well, Mr Ellis, what about seeing the house?

ELLIS: Love to.

JOAN: I expect you want to get away?

ELLIS: Oh, no, I---

ELSIE: He's been having a natter with us, Mrs Thomson, you know what I---

JOAN (cutting her short) Well, let me lead the way. I'm afraid it's in a bit of a mess!

She leads ELLIS out.  
ELSIE stands there looking abashed and mortified.

ELSIE: Well, I never! She makes you feel that big, don't she? (In the direction of the house) You old cow, you---for two pins I'd give you a piece of my mind!

DAVE: She'd better not try any of her lip on me, else there'll be trouble!

ELSIE: She does it so sudden! She starts off nice, then all of a sudden she turns!

GEORGE: I told you before, you've got to watch your step

with them people! She's not one of us, you know.

The BRIGADIER comes in with new trousers on. They brighten.

THOMSON: You can clear up now! No more music---thank God!

MABEL: Your trousers dry yet, Brigadier?

THOMSON (chuckling) Steaming in the kitchen! Where's Ellis?

ELSIE: Who?

THOMSON: The foreign chap.

ELSIE: Oh, your wife took him in to see the house, Brigadier!

THOMSON: I see! Well, we can clear up! I never <sup>get</sup> any enjoyment out of these things... (Gazing round)

GEORGE: Never mind, Brigadier. Have a drop of whisky.

THOMSON (turning to him slowly with a slight smile) That's the nicest thing's been said to me this evening!

GEORGE pours him a stiff glass.

GEORGE: There!

THOMSON (taking it and sniffing it) That's my Isla Mist, if I'm not mistaken!

GEORGE: I kept your bottle aside.

THOMSON: Didn't the Captain smell it?

ELSIE: He sniffed round a bit but we waved an onion under his nose!

THOMSON: Well, here's to your health, good people--- (stopping) but I'll not drink alone!

ELSIE: Oh, well, then! (as they all take up their glasses)

GEORGE: Got anything in it, Mabel?

MABEL: You bet!

They all drink, with 'Good health!', 'Here's health!'

THOMSON: Look at those trees---! (They follow his gaze) When you die you're like that, just the same. (Silence) There's no point jumping and shouting and switching that blasted music on, you've got to come to it in the end. Ah, well! (He drinks off his glass with a gulp and raps it back on the table) Better take all this stuff to the barn, George--- it'll rain tonight!

GEORGE: Right you are, Brigadier.

THOMSON (peering through the trees at the guests) I suppose they'll go home some time. They only come for the booze. Good night, all!

ELSIE: Good night, Brigadier!

He stalks off. They gaze after him.

MABEL: I don't think I've ever seen that man really smile. He laughs, but he don't smile.

GEORGE: He's got nothing to smile about.

ELSIE: If they were all like him it wouldn't be so bad...

They assemble the cartons of food and the crates.

MABEL: It makes me smile---she wouldn't dream of giving us a penny for this work, would she?

DAVE: Oh well, we get a few drinks.

MABEL: No, but we are piecans, aren't we? She's only got to say a word and we go all soft inside! I do, at any rate! I don't think I could give her a no if she asked me to put my hand in boiling water.

ELSIE: It's the voice, Mabel. They're brought up to it, you see.

GEORGE: She's not a bad old stick.

ELSIE (to MABEL) Remember that time she gave me five shillings for washing out nine pairs of sheets? Never again, Elsie Gorrings, I said!

They collapse the table. The faery lights go out behind the trees.

GEORGE (to DAVE) Fifty brace of fox! He must think we're mugs!

DAVE: They say he's a proper martinet on the back of a horse. Cusses and blinds!

GEORGE: I reckon that's why they do it---to work off their poisons.

MABEL: It makes me laugh, all this captain and brigadier lark. Anybody'd think there was a war on!

DAVE: Oh, they love their names!

GEORGE: I'll call myself lance-corporal!

ELSIE (laughing, to MABEL) It took him five years in the cook-house to get a stripe!

MABEL (to GEORGE) I heard you was mentioned in despatches for your mashed potatoes, mate?

GEORGE: That's right!

ELSIE looks round to see if anybody is looking, then speaks in a lower voice.

ELSIE: Who is that young feller?

MABEL: I reckon they're selling the house!

ELSIE: Go on!

GEORGE (to DAVE, with a smile) There they go!

ELSIE (playfully) All right, nose-y, you needn't listen!

MABEL: She said she'd never let it be sold, not over her dead body! That was a month ago.

ELSIE: I reckon he put his foot down.

MABEL: I wouldn't live over there, I can tell you that much!

GEORGE (to DAVE) Last time I looked at the stairs there was dry rot all the way up. That was two years ago, so God alone knows what it's like now! The roof'd fall in if you breathed too hard!

ELSIE (to MABEL) She says to me once, she says, Mrs Gorringe, the best dinner for me is a nice piece of fish and six pennorth of chips, in a newspaper! I---!

CAPTAIN SIMMONS enters again.

SIMMONS: Seen the Brigadier?

ELSIE: Yes, he just went over to the house, Captain.

SIMMONS: I hear they're sealing it! Know anything about it, George?

GEORGE (turning away) Not me.

DAVE shoulders some cartons and trudges off.

SIMMONS (calling after him) Tell the Brig I'd like a word with him, Dave.

DAVE (off) OK!

SIMMONS: Got another drink?

GEORGE: Well, we've packed up really, Captain.

SIMMONS: Come on, you artful old bugger, there's some whisky under there---I can see it! (Bending down to one of the crates) God above, Isla Mist!

GEORGE (with a smile) It's the Brigadier's private bottle.

SIMMONS: Well, just milk a little off for me. (As GEORGE pours a glass) Now what about it--- is he selling or not?

GEORGE: I told you, I don't know.

ELSIE: There's somebody come to look at it.

SIMMONS: Who? That foreign chap?

ELSIE: I think so, yes.

GEORGE: Only a mug'd buy that place, Captain.

SIMMONS: What? I could turn it into a palace. What's the matter with you people? You're like all the other Englishmen nowadays---no bloody initiative!

GEORGE: All I say is you wouldn't get your value.

SIMMONS: I'd make the value! It's a business man's dream, that bloody house. Three hundred yards from one of the biggest highways in England, with a screen of poplars in front!

MABEL: It gives me the jitters. I only have to set foot inside that door and I come over liquid!

SIMMONS: It's got style---the past---! It's a house to sit and dream in. What else is there to do? I'll never forget that week-end at Chevenham. It taught me all I knew about life. (His eyes gleaming) That's why they won't let me buy it. Because I've got no class.

The BRIGADIER's voice:  
'Somebody want me?'  
He appears.

THOMSON: Oh, hullo, Jack! Young Forbes said I was wanted.

SIMMONS: That's right. I've just been having some of your best unblended.

THOMSON (irritated) Oh, that's the style. (With a glance at the others, who promptly go on with their work)

He and the CAPTAIN withdraw from the others a little, and THOMSON puts his hand on the other's shoulder in a paternal yet gingerly way.

THOMSON: What's it about?

SIMMONS (pointing at the house) That.

THOMSON (after a pause) What?

SIMMONS: You didn't invite me to make a bid, did you?

THOMSON: Well, it's---(hesitating) This fellow needed a house pretty quick, you see. Friend of mine in the City more or less talked me into it.

SIMMONS (cynically) Oh, yes?

THOMSON: If he don't meet the price I'll let you know...

SIMMONS: Thanks!

An awkward pause.

The helpers begin taking out the crates, cartons etc.

The BRIGADIER and the CAPTAIN wait until they're alone.

SIMMONS (with a fixed expression) You haven't paid your hunt subscriptions.

THOMSON (his head ducked) Oh, really?

SIMMONS: Yes, really. I could sit and dream in that house. That's one thing I learned about the English early in life. They don't help your dreams.

THOMSON: Come, you're English, aren't you?

SIMMONS (aggressively) Well, I've never been outside except

to kill Germans!

THOMSON (parrying) A good reason to travel.

SIMMONS: It's more than you did! You were warming your arse in Malta all the war, I believe?

THOMSON (abashed) I---

SIMMONS (looking across at the house again) We could have our hunt meetings over there. Instead of in the butcher's!

THOMSON (his anger up) I can't see what's wrong with a butcher!

SIMMONS (glaring at the house again) She might have had a baby over there!

THOMSON: What?

SIMMONS: You never know---the right atmosphere could produce fertility!

THOMSON: You fool! She's fifty years of age!

SIMMONS: It's happened before!

THOMSON: It's never happened!

Silence. Anger brooding like a volcano.

SIMMONS (in an outburst) You never wanted me in that hunt!

THOMSON: I like your damned cheek---!

SIMMONS: The two thousand quid comes out of my pocket, for all your bloody class! You're living on me when you hunt on Saturdays!

THOMSON (flushed and shouting in a strange, mechanical way) I started in the family business, I'm an MA, my war record's clear! My name was bandied about for Lord Sherrif of the County, I commended a battalion in Malta for nearly two years---I got the CBE---!

SIMMONS: I was mentioned in despatches twice, they respected me in the mess---!

They shout in a thick, blind, rhythmic way, as if not really speaking from their own thoughts.

SIMMONS: Shut up! I've sat on thirteen boards and God knows how many tribunals! I done at White's now and then, I'm a member of Savage's, Carlton's, the Traveller's! I was in the TA before the war and went in the Buffs as a major---!

- SIMMONS: I fought with my own hands, the soldiers under me loved the ground I walked on, it's just that the wife can't have any kids---!
- THOMSON (turning on him suddenly) There's always trouble with mixing classes! You're not by any means a natural M.F.H!
- SIMMONS (almost in tears) I'm the only one with money!
- THOMSON: Tweed could have filled the job, or Denham, Crew, young Viscount Wallmaster---but they've all been eaten away by death duties---!
- SIMMONS: Like you, I suppose!
- THOMSON: My wife, not me! Mine's a trading family and I don't mind who knows it! In the war I was called to Corps Headquarters frequently to clear up points of supply---I sat on the officer selection board---I---!
- SIMMONS: I built up my business from scratch---I've earned my way to where I am now---in the mess they used to get up when I came in---I wasn't substantive major but that was my name---Major Simmons---the GHQ commended for getting 'B' Echelon up two hours after consolidating my chaps on a hilly position---point 287---a machine gun nest---I ran up screaming!
- THOMSON: Two of my boards were banks, man! I've got five horses in my stables, I buy a new car every year, my brother-in-law's in the House of Commons, his wife has a title, they own some railways in South Africa!
- SIMMONS: My wife has distant relatives who---!
- THOMSON: I inherited an estate in Scotland! I lunched the other day with QC whose father was Speaker once and we talked about costly clarets for nearly two hours---Lord Bligh came in---he's one our board---and we found we knew each other as kids!
- SIMMONS: In the mess I used to lose my temper and make young subalterns feel a fool---the Adjutant always came to my bivvy for a drink---I made a standing order that nobody lower than a captain should talk at our table unless addressed---I had two secretaries before the war---I used to run a car in the days when that was something! We took a holiday on the Riviera in 1937---!
- THOMSON: We go every year to France! We know the hotels like the back of our hands! We drive through the Loire and sometimes the Rhone. We go to the Bahamas, stay at a close friend's house---! I--- (running out of ideas) I---I never voted Labour

in the post-war election!

SIMMONS: Nor did I! (Remembering with a shock) Yes, I did!

THOMSON: My father was a friend of old Lord Grey's and met Baldwin twice! In the crisis at the Fort he lunched with Edward the King---I can't stand royalty myself, it's the Bosch in them, I suppose, but by God I'd fight----!

SIMMONS: Ever since the war we've always gone to Cannes or a little place called Bague de Zou where we're quite familiar! The restriction on foreign currency never meant a thing to us!

THOMSON: I never put my hand in my pocket when we go abroad---there's a trust in Switzerland from a farm we sold up---the family had interests in Tasmania once!

There is silence. They stare before them, panting. The recital is over.

THOMSON (fumbling for his leather cigarette case) Have a cigarette.

SIMMONS (out of breath) Thanks.

THOMSON (showing him the case) Florence. Nice, isn't it?

SIMMONS (smelling it) I love the smell of leather. My wife walked in with a leather coat on the other day.

THOMSON: Coat?

SIMMONS: Believe it or not. (Helping THOMSON to a light) My bank manager gave me the shock of my life when he showed me the bill.

THOMSON: That's one good thing---my wife doesn't spend much on clothes. She's an untidy bitch, as you may have remarked.

SIMMONS (confidentially) Oh, while I'm on it---you might tell her to keep a check on her language when we're out---! It's not swearwords I mean---it's the tone. The other women feel she's a bit upstage.

THOMSON (reasonably) My wife has to be understood, that's all.

SIMMONS: Oh, I realise that. But I thought I'd just tell you.

THOMSON: Oh, yes.

SIMMONS (glancing at him doubtfully) I'm sure she doesn't mean to be highhanded!

THOMSON (also doubtfully) Oh, no!

SIMMONS (holding out his hand) Well, it's been a nice evening, Brigadier. Hester's drunk in the car. I've fixed up a place in the back for her---she says she loves passing out.

THOMSON (chuckling) Just like her family.

SIMMONS: She says she'd like to pass out completely one day---to the valley of no return!

THOMSON: That's the trouble with women. Too imaginative. I always describe imagination as 'overheads we can ill afford.'

SIMMONS: Did you ever try with the wife?

A pause.

THOMSON: What?

SIMMONS: Did you try---hard?

THOMSON: In what way?

SIMMONS: For a baby?

THOMSON (stumbling) Oh---I---I---

SIMMONS (confidentially) She started telling me I didn't---pull my weight properly!

THOMSON (frightened) Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: Did you?

THOMSON: Did I what? (backing up)

SIMMONS: Pull yours?

THOMSON: Good God! (He begins to chuckle) You...

SIMMONS (screwing up his eyes) What's that?

THOMSON (almost to himself) You dirty bugger...

SIMMONS: But tell me---?

THOMSON (with sudden, stamping fury) She hates it! (Baring his teeth and shouting) I'd like to BITE her! (Biting the air)

SIMMONS: In life (quietly)---and my wife agrees---there are two basic and what we call royal kinds of riding.

THOMSON (glancing round carefully) How often do you ride?

SIMMONS: Er---(also glancing round) three times a week---  
over very rough country!

They both roary with laugh-  
ter.

THOMSON: Not a bad average!

SIMMONS; By no means!

THOMSON (about to leave) Well, good bye, old chap! Drop in  
and have a drink some time.

SIMMONS (shaking hands) I will!

THOMSON (to himself, chuckling as he walks off) Over very rough  
country! Joan! (Calling) Joan!

They disappear in opposite  
directions.

2.

Inside the house: a small hall rather like a barn, with heavy beams. There are a roughly covered settee and an armchair, with odd broken chairs and tables. A window gives out on to the garden.

On the left a porch leads in- to the garden; on the right a door leads into the dining room.

JOAN THOMSON is sitting on a table smoking. Her skirt is hitched up as if only breeches make her feel really comfortable.

JOAN: That you, Charles?

THOMSON (entering) Has he gone?

JOAN: Yes. He seemed to like it.

THOMSON: I don't like him. I've got a feeling he won't be reliable---the cheque'll bounce or something.

He potters about in a drawer while he talks.

JOAN: What are you looking for?

THOMSON (with a startled expression) My CBE ribbon. That blighter Simmons didn't believe me!

JOAN: You are a goof sometimes, old boy.

THOMSON (straightening up) Sometimes I forget I ever had the CBE---it suddenly comes over me...

JOAN: It is rather hard to believe.

THOMSON (blinking doubtfully) What?

JOAN (with a glint in her eyes) Never mind.

THOMSON: I had occasion to mention it to old Simmons; that's all. I say, do you know what he said?

JOAN: No?

THOMSON: He said, there are two kinds of bloody good ride in life, and I ride to hounds four times a week--- no, three!

A pause.

JOAN: What?

THOMSON: Well, he said there are two rides---and I said how many times a week---! (Sulkily) Oh, I don't know---something like that! I can never bring a joke off with you!

JOAN: What d'you think of my garden party?

THOMSON: Oh, (pottering again) all right.

JOAN: Good idea my switching the music up every now and then, eh---to keep 'em on their feet?

THOMSON: Was that you?

JOAN: Me and old Hester.

THOMSON (chuckling) I don't know, you are the bloody limit, you two.

JOAN: It was her idea. Did you see the sputnik?

THOMSON (mumbling, at the drawer again) To hell with the sputnik.

They both yawn.

JOAN: So what's wrong with my young man?

THOMSON: Simmons wants the house. But I'm bugged if I'll let him have it.

JOAN: He'll pay within a month. The whole thing.

THOMSON (turning) Who?

JOAN: My young man.

THOMSON: Good God! Has he got the money?

JOAN: Apparently.

THOMSON: Idle rich?

JOAN: No, his company's buying the place.

THOMSON: His company? I wish my company bought me houses!

JOAN: He makes sputnik parts.

THOMSON: What?

JOAN (laughing) I'm only kidding!

THOMSON: What's his offer?

JOAN: A thousand more than you said.

THOMSON (starting) What?

JOAN (with cool triumph) That's right.

THOMSON: Oh!

A pause.

JOAN: In other words, he's a mug.

THOMSON (quietly) Well, we were after a mug, weren't we?

She goes to the window.

JOAN: Intelligent chap (gazing out).

THOMSON: The last intelligent chap you had as a guest drove his car into my stables. And then described it as an act of God!

JOAN: We'll see what this chap can do!

THOMSON: He treated me with great respect. I must say that. He called me sir. (Gazing at her) He didn't seem won over by your libellous stories. Have you started on him yet? (She hums and picks thread from her skirt) I say, he wasn't won over by your stories.

JOAN: Yes, I heard.

Silence. There is a clap of thunder in the distance. She walks to the door abruptly (left).

JOAN (going) I'd better get the gramophone in.

She leaves and the BRIGADIER is alone.

THOMSON (gazing out of the window) I smelt rain. (His hands thrust deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched) I didn't fight. Well, I know that. Some of us didn't. We couldn't all fight, damn it! Only one in seven of an army does. (A pause) Eddy did---same build as me---(it begins pouring with rain outside) same school---he stood over the trenches directing fire. (Another pause)

Bloody fool. He only did it because he's potty. Hullo, rain. The trouble is, I---!  
(He stops, looking round) I don't believe in a damned thing!

Lightning and an enormous clap of thunder.

JOAN dashes in. She has thrown a kind of old sack over her head.

JOAN: Oh, come on, for Christ's sake---there's half the furniture out there! It isn't ours, either!

THOMSON: I'm sorry!

He dashes out after her.

The rain grows heavier; there is more thunder and lightning.

We hear JOAN and the BRIGADIER puffing and blowing as they push upright chairs into the porch.

The chairs grow slowly until a pile of them almost blocks the doorway entirely.

Then the BRIGADIER emerges at the top of the pile and climbs back into the room, soaked and out of breath. JOAN follows, jumping down in an agile way.

THOMSON: Well! I rather enjoyed that! Just what the liver ordered. (Wiping himself with a handkerchief as he sits down) God knows why he does respect me. Because I'm a JP, do you think? Like that American I met in the City. Shook hands with him---and I found he was trembling. Know that? Yes!

JOAN (having thrown the sack off) Trembling?

THOMSON: I'm everything they're frightened of, perhaps.

JOAN (ironically) Is that possible?

THOMSON: In one word, class. (Taking off his jacket) I can tell you one thing, I prefer your buffet suppers to the dinners you cook. Those spuds I got last night looked like pin cushions! (Suddenly) By God, Hester's a fine piece, isn't she? I mean---! One shufti at her and I spend a restless night!

JOAN: All right, old boy, don't get beyond yourself!

She walks across to the dining room door and as she does so he puts out a hand to touch her.

THOMSON: Joan---how do you think they enjoyed it?

JOAN (suffering his hand on her arm silently) Oh, all right.

THOMSON: Let's have another drink. Joan---! (Pulling her a little)

JOAN (between clenched teeth) I'll get the drink!

She then strides off.

THOMSON (to himself again) She's always been like that. I used to sit on the bed and cry. Joan!  
(Calling suddenly) I say, you haven't seen my embroidery, have you? The latest job?  
(Jumping up rather frantically) I left it on the chair here!

There is no reply and he stumbles in something of a panic towards the porch and manoeuvres the hill of chairs again, cursing to himself. The room is empty again.

The rain continues. There is more lightning. We hear the BRIGADIER crash into a last chair on the porch: 'Damn!' Then there is silence.

JOAN reappears with the drinks in her hands. She looks round.

JOAN: Charles?

Only the sound of the rain. She puts the drinks down and goes to the window. She peers out.

At last we hear a scraping at the porch again.

JOAN: Is that you, Charles?

We hear him climbing the chairs again. His head appears at the top. Then he climbs down.

THOMSON: It's ruined. It was in the flower patch.  
Three years work.

He stands gazing at her.  
The rain has soaked his  
shirt now.

JOAN: Here's your drink.

THOMSON: Aren't you sorry?

JOAN (impatently) Of course I'm sorry!

THOMSON: You left it in the mud.

JOAN: I left it?

THOMSON: You can be so cruel. That took me three years.

She shrugs, though a little  
ashamed.

JOAN: The colours don't run, do they?

THOMSON: It's torn. Nearly ripped to pieces.

JOAN: Hester used it as a hare.

THOMSON: I thought so!

JOAN: Oh, I'm sorry! (Taking his drink to him)  
Here---come to mum!

She holds the glass to his  
lips and he takes a sip.  
Then she takes one as well,  
from the same glass.

JOAN: Pax?

He nods sadly and they link  
little fingers. A little  
tug to confirm it.

THOMSON: Pax.

Some of the drink spills as  
they tug.

THOMSON: Look out!

They smile at each other.

JOAN (as they separate) Ah---I like the smell of that breeze!

(At the window) Do you know, he said he'd buy  
the house without the land?

THOMSON: Did he? (Suddenly realising what she has said)  
What? Without the garden?

JOAN: Yes.

THOMSON: But the land's worth---!

JOAN: I know!

THOMSON: But what sort of complete bally idiot is this man?

JOAN: He's intelligent. They're all idiots nowadays, didn't you know? And they get paid like film stars. Anyway, we can build up a real stables at last.

THOMSON: You're damned right we can! (With quiet astonishment) What a blasted mug! Here--- (suddenly) he's not a Yank, is he?

JOAN: No!

THOMSON: I don't want this place colonised. I admire them and all that, but we need a corner to ourselves!

JOAN: He's English, though you wouldn't know it.

THOMSON (gazing at her with a slight smile) You are a blasted old swindler, you know.

JOAN: What was I to do---turn him down?

THOMSON: Oh, no! Certainly not!

They sip their drinks.

JOAN (chuckling) Hester caught her hare just by the switchboard tonight---brought the whole lot down, lights, radio and all!

THOMSON (reminded) She caught my embroidery, too.

JOAN: You know what this deal means, don't you? I can run the garden.

THOMSON: It means you can come down and lead him hell when you like.

JOAN: That's right.

Another pause.

THOMSON: Old Simmons thinks I want him out of the hunt--- damned foolish idea!

JOAN: Why?

THOMSON: Says I've always looked down on him. Which I have. I can't stand him dressed up in that pink coat of his. Makes him look like a puppet!

JOAN: You men are frightful when you quarrel.  
Hester and I could run that hunt better.

THOMSON: Like hell you could. What about that time  
she called you the fox's best friend?

JOAN (smiling) I don't remember.

THOMSON: I swear you'd been scrapping with each other.  
You both came back with more mud on you than  
anybody gets on horseback, anyway!

JOAN: She's <sup>a</sup>bitch, but so am I. That's why we agree.  
And another thing we've got in common---(glances  
at him)

THOMSON: What's that?

JOAN: We're both childless.

THOMSON (mumbling) Oh, put a sock in it, for Christ's sake...

There is silence between  
them.

JOAN (almost to herself) I used to try so hard. I used to  
sit and will a baby. I used to pray even.  
But you can't do it like that.

THOMSON: All right, all right.

JOAN (almost in tears) I was always picked on in the family.  
Always laughed at. All I heard was 'service'.  
I always fell short in 'service'. And it was  
such a hearty family! I had nothing I could  
call my own---they always smashed it up for me!  
(Putting her handkerchief to her eyes) They  
took my socks---I had to come down to breakfast  
without any socks on, and then get shouted at.

THOMSON (his head bowed, with disgust) Oh, Christ!

JOAN: I can see it in people's eyes. The Gorringes,  
for instance; Dave Forbes. They say, She  
puts her energies into the farm because---

THOMSON (raising his voice) You haven't got a farm!

JOAN (in a steely way) I will have! That's where this money's  
going. A small stable. And a big herd of  
Guernseys!

THOMSON (in alarm) Oh, no, we're not having that again---not in  
the new house! Cows calving in the drawing  
room---

JOAN: That happened once, you chump!

THOMSON: ---and the clang of that bloody milk pail at  
four o'clock in the morning---

JOAN: Five!

THOMSON: It felt like four. Then young Dave Forbes sticking his grinning face round the door--- (imitating him) 'One of your fences is down, Brig. Four or five missin' again.' Oh, no... And the tramps through the mud for the missing cow. The bloody agricultural inspectors, and the milk board, and pigs rooting in the lawn.

JOAN: I broke even on it, anyway!

THOMSON: But not again! Not in the new house!

JOAN: All right---no Guernseys, no horses.

THOMSON (menacingly) You'll leave my money alone!

JOAN: I shan't touch your money. I'll just tell him the right price.

THOMSON (in a quiet, firm voice) You won't tell him the right price.

Another pause, during which they sip their drinks.

JOAN: I wish you could dance, you know.

THOMSON: I'd have started thirty years ago if I'd wanted to.

JOAN: Our family quack told me once---

THOMSON: Yes, I know: it 'loosens the fluids'.

JOAN: You never loosened mine.

THOMSON (his head lowered) Yes, yes.

JOAN: I still dream about a house full of children.

THOMSON: Yes.

JOAN: Easter's the best time for me---when all the children come. I swear I can understand them better than grown-ups.

THOMSON (with a touch of reverence) I believe you can.

JOAN: I'd eigher like to be a child---or a horse.

THOMSON: I say---(looking up at her hesitantly) do you think I'm unattractive to women?

JOAN: Yes.

THOMSON: Why?

JOAN: Well, you're big and hefty but not where it

counts.

THOMSON: Oh. By God, I'd like to spend a night on the tiles with old Hester---I'd be all right with her, I'm sure of it! I wish I could remember what Simmons said about riding---three times a week... Do you think he---? (He stops) I mean, do you think it's all right between most people?

JOAN (quietly) Go to hell!

THOMSON (almost to himself) The old Lady Maude liked me.

JOAN: But she was cuckoo! She turned up at a meet once with a chamber-pot hanging from her saddle. 'In case he wants to do something!' she said. (Gazing before her) She was a fine old creature, Maude.

THOMSON: She was. I swear she was a deal less loony than the people round her.

JOAN: She had style. The last of the grand old ladies.

THOMSON (yawning) Oh, well---! It wasn't a bad evening, was it?

JOAN: The rain kindly held off.

They are silent.

THOMSON: Is his firm sending a surveyor down?

JOAN: He is the surveyor.

THOMSON: What?

JOAN: Among other things. He buys up property on the Continent.

THOMSON: I thought you said he had brains.

JOAN: He has.

THOMSON: What, buying property? Old Simmons does that.

JOAN: He says he'd pay twice as much on the Continent.

THOMSON: Did he, by God?

JOAN: He says the prices here are low.

THOMSON: Do you know, when I was in Germany a month ago, on that engineering board, the Germans kept us waiting an hour. Do you think that was deliberate?

JOAN: Yes.

THOMSON: Why?

JOAN: Our position's shrunk, that's why.

THOMSON: I've often thought I should have done the same as my brother Gerald and gone to Calcutta, there's a wonderful swimming pool, they tell me, and the old club's still there.

JOAN: The days of the punkah wallah are over, old boy. Anyway, you know my politics. I'm a liberal.

THOMSON (pouting) What the devil's that got to do with it? We could have lived out there like this chap--- what's his name?

JOAN: Who?

THOMSON: The chap who's buying us a stable and a herd of Guernseys.

JOAN: Oh, Ellis!

THOMSON: I mean, he lives in France. Why not? I bet he doesn't have a bad time down in Nice and Montecarlo, in the red-light district! He doesn't seem ashamed. Why should we?

JOAN: They abolished the brothels years ago.

THOMSON: Did they?

A pause.

JOAN: I'll have to ask the Simmonses to dinner. I don't want him cutting up about this house. Ask your cousin twice removed---the honourable one---there's nothing like a title for softening old Simmons up.

THOMSON: Eddy, you mean?

JOAN: That's right. I can't stand the way he walks. Looks as if he wants to go all the time.

THOMSON: Well, he does. He drinks too much. Anyway, he's potty. And this house is a bloody disgrace. I wouldn't even invite this foreign chap!

JOAN (defensively) You find me a housekeeper, then.

THOMSON: I've found you a dozen of them---but they won't stand your clothes all over the floor and your filthy habits---the cow-dung in the kitchen---hay from the horse-box all over the beds---and finally---finally---that blasted mechanical saw clustering up the dining room! (He is livid)

JOAN (stung) I'll keep it there another week. It needs more work on the pistons.

THOMSON: I've got the chairman and his wife coming to dinner Saturday night! All that lovely panelling of mine ruined! And the inlaid side-board with your grease all over it---your nuts, bolts, piston-rings, broken silencers---! (He shakes his head dumbly)

JOAN (also rather in despair) I told you, the silencer's bust! You said you couldn't stand the noise.

THOMSON: I couldn't! No, I couldn't!

JOAN (with a sigh) All right! I'll clear it out of the dining room---you'll get your dinner party---but I'm afraid I can't get the silencer done yet. There won't be time.

THOMSON (hushed, as if in pain) That's right. No silencer. (Nodding to himself) Tit-for-tat. All the way through life. Dinner party---no silencer. Sell the house---a herd of Gusrnseys...

Suddenly he strides across to her, overcome with rage, and seizes her savagely. He begins kissing and biting her violently, holding her hair in a great mass in one hand. She struggles and then begins to scream in a peculiar muted way.

JOAN: Char---! Charles! You swine! Swine! (Screaming at the top of her voice, as she manages to tear herself away) Swine!!

She stamps out of the room like a soldier, into the dining room. There is some tearful fumbling with machinery next door. The Brigadier stands there panting.

Suddenly the air is filled with the deafening roar of an engine, minus its silencer. A mechanical saw.

The noise is simply immense. BRIGADIER stands there bowed, like a defeated animal, staring in front of him.

There is a shout from the porch: 'Brig! Brig!' Suddenly he realises he is

being called. He turns this way and that, torn between the engine and the voice from the porch.

THOMSON (thinking to appeal to JOAN to turn it off) Joan!  
Joan!

VOICE (off) Brig! Are you there, Brig?

THOMSON: Yes, damn you! (Swivelling) Joan! Joan!

JOAN (appearing) What the devil---

THOMSON (shouting) There's---

He indicates the porch and as he does so CAPTAIN SIMMONS is seen climbing over the barrier of chairs. He is wet and bedraggled.

SIMMONS (shouting at the top of his voice) HAVE YOU SEEN  
HESTER?

JOAN disappears again.

THOMSON (screwing up his face) What?

SIMMONS: HAVE YOU---(the engine cuts out) SEEN---!  
(He stops, stunned by the silence) What  
the devil have you got there?

THOMSON: Oh, it's---it's... A mechanical saw.

SIMMONS: In the dining room?

THOMSON: Yes---the---er---wife, she's having trouble  
with it.

SIMMONS: But what the hell can she be cutting up in  
the dining room?

THOMSON (irritably) She's mending it, that's all!

SIMMONS: In the dining room?

THOMSON: Oh, shut up, for God's sake! It's bad enough  
with her!

SIMMONS: I'm sorry.

THOMSON: What's the trouble, anyway?

SIMMONS: Hester's not drunk in the car.

A pause.

THOMSON (staring at him) What?

SIMMONS: She hasn't gone to bed in the car.

THOMSON: I should hope she hasn't. Does she usually?

SIMMONS: I fix up a bed there. For when she chases hares.

THOMSON (turning away and speaking quietly) You're drunk.

SIMMONS: But everybody knows I keep a bed in the shooting brake for when she gets tight!

THOMSON (again furious) I don't know anything about your domestic arrangements, man!

SIMMONS (quietly) Well, she's not there anyway.

Another pause.

THOMSON: Why should she be?

SIMMONS: She always is---after she's been chasing hares.

THOMSON looks at him slowly.

THOMSON (calling out) Joan! Hester's missing!

SIMMONS: I've tramped miles.

JOAN appears.

JOAN (showing signs of her former tension) What's that? Oh, hullo, Master!

SIMMONS: Evening, Mrs Thomson. I hope I'm not interrupting your---sawing...

JOAN: Oh, no, not a bit!

THOMSON: He's lost Hester. She isn't drunk in the car.

JOAN: What?

SIMMONS: She caught her hare---some sort of old embroidery--- and then she didn't make her usual beeline for the car!

JOAN: Where can she be, then?

THOMSON (sitting down with some perplexity) I don't know why things have to go so topsy-turvy.

JOAN: Shall I call the police?

SIMMONS: Oh, for God's sake, no! She might be---well, you know---binge, hay, hare, singsong, that sort of thing.

A pause while the others stare at him.

SIMMONS (continuing, to THOMSON) A habit of fifteen years suddenly goes phut!

THOMSON: That's just what I mean---topsy-turvy! Sit down, old chap.

SIMMONS (sitting down) Thanks.

THOMSON: She can't have gone far.

SIMMONS: For fifteen years it's been like clockwork---binge, hare, hay, singsong. And now there's this!

Silence. The others stare at him in bafflement again.

THOMSON (screwing up his face) What's that?

SIMMONS: I say, it's been as---(lost for a moment)---fixed as the stars for fifteen years!

THOMSON: What was that you said---binge, hey...?

SIMMONS: Binge, hare, hay, singsong.

THOMSON (gingerly, with a glance at JOAN) Oh!

SIMMONS (with a trace of indignation) We haven't got children, you know!

THOMSON (quietly) Quite.

SIMMONS: You see, we have asingsong in the car, on the way home, after the hare. She hits the hay and then we sing!

THOMSON: Ah, yes. She doesn't sleep in the car?

SIMMONS: Good God, no! Singing's all part of it. We've got some of the dirtiest Irish songs you've ever heard!

JOAN (chuckling) Really?

SIMMONS: And it---! (He stops, eyeing them both) Works us up. For later.

JOAN: Oh!

THOMSON (guffawing) Good Lord!

SIMMONS: The rest is silence, as they say.

JOAN (with a wink at THOMSON) I should hope so.

THOMSON (trying to get rid of his naughty-naughty smile) Well, what's to be done?

SIMMONS: We'll have to scour the countryside, that's all.

THOMSON (jumping up) Right! What'll we do---spread out or

recce all together?

SIMMONS: Spread out, I think.

THOMSON: Will you take command?

SIMMONS: No, I think you'd better. Higher rank and all that.

THOMSON: Oh. Well, thank you very much.

JOAN: I'll get some greatcoats. They won't be very fine, I'm afraid.

THOMSON: As long as they keep the rain off.

JOAN goes out right to get the coats.

THOMSON: You take the path down to the river, I'll go up to the farm and Joan can stay on the road, she's got high-heeled shoes on. Communication: voice. Synchronise. (Looking at his watch)

SIMMONS: What?

THOMSON: Synchronise.

SIMMONS (looking at his watch also) Oh!

THOMSON: It's coming up to 01. 13 hours. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, now.

SIMMONS: Thank you.

THOMSON: Headquarters, this house.

SIMMONS: Right.

THOMSON: Got any ammunition?

SIMMONS: Christ, I don't want to shhot her!

THOMSON: As you wish. It's your party.

JOAN returns with three rough farmcoats. She throws one to her husband and one to SIMMONS.

THOMSON (watching SIMMONS As he struggles into it) Fit, old boy?

SIMMONS: Yes, thanks!

THOMSON: Right, let's advance. Joan, you stay up on the road. (He begins clambering over the chairs in the porch) Blast! There's a little climb, I'm afraid, Simmons.

JOAN: Shall I go ahead, Master?

SIMMONS (meekly) Please.

JOAN climbs after her husband.

JOAN: Damn! (A chair falls in the porch)

THOMSON (off) You all right, Joan?

JOAN: Yes, thanks.

CAPTAINS SIMMONS begins climbing absent-mindedly.

SIMMONS (to himself) After fifteen years---phut. (crash)  
Damn!

He disappears and the stage is empty.

THOMSON (off) Lovely night for a show like this!

SIMMONS (off) Here I am!

THOMSON (off) Very well, you know your orders. Spread out!  
Report back to headquarters by 03.00 hours  
(0-three hundred hours)!

3.

The same: but all the furniture and the curtains have been removed. Builders' materials. One thing remains from the previous scene: the pile of chairs in the porch, forming a barricade nearly as tall as the doorway.

GEORGE GORRINGE and DAVE FORBES are stripping apparently endless layers of wallpaper off the walls. The floor is already ankle deep in various patterns and colours, old and new. GEORGE and DAVE are dressed in overalls.

GEORGE: A lot of paper here, mate! (rip)

DAVE (rip) Eh?

Silence.

GEORGE (turning to look at him firmly) Either you don't wash your ears out, mate, or you daydream.

DAVE (rip) I daydream.

GEORGE: Scats! (Rip)

DAVE (rip) Eh?

GEORGE: 'Eh'? You want to get on to B, mate, it's next in the alphabet! (rip)

DAVE: Everybody's 'scats' for you.

GEORGE: It's better than 'eh' (rip).

DAVE: (rip)

GEORGE: (rip, rip)

DAVE (turning to him) Do you think he's right?

GEORGE: Who?

DAVE: Ellis.

GEORGE: What about?

DAVE: He says we're all policemen!

GEORGE: (rip, rip, rip, rip) A-c-c-c-h! (exclamation of disgust)

DAVE: It's true. There's no openings. There's always a copper round the corner---you can't get forward in this country. You always feel you're doing wrong. That's the truth.

GEORGE (half to himself) You and your bloody openings (rip)! Here---I'll tell you something, mate. You need a woman.

DAVE (smiling) I need more than one.

GEORGE: I never talked my bloody head off about openings when I was your age.

DAVE (careless rip) I'd work, real work, if I could get things a bit clear,

GEORGE: You take after your mum (rip).

DAVE: Sometimes I think I've got that fatal disease.

GEORGE: What---putting lids on paint-tins? You're seats!

A pause.

DAVE (rip) What a way to spend Saturday.

GEORGE: It was your idea, mate.

DAVE: It was Ellis. He said it was a good opening.

GEORGE: Listen, he lives abroad and he's foreign and he's very big and he comes over here with his pockets full and all that's very fine; he's bought a nice house riddled with dry rot and woodworm and Christ knows what else and he's paid three times as much as it's worth and he talks French fluid---

DAVE: Fluent.

GEORGE: ---fluent, and I expect he's seen the Folly Bergear and he's been in the re-light district like the Brigadier said, and his clothes are dandy, he combs his hair nice and he's very charming to my wife, she's going to wash out his dirty clothes for him and make his beds, but we're not French, mate, we're workers, and---!

DAVE: I'm whatever I can make myself!

GEORGE (angrily) Well make yourself a millionaire, then---I'm sick of your lazy-arsed talk!

DAVE (turning away) All right, all right.

GEORGE: I went down the mines---!

DAVE: Here we go!

GEORGE: I was a boy of sixteen and I lived in darkness the best part of the day. I got some strength in my arms, I can tell you! I used to cry myself to sleep sometimes with my duodenal. My old dad used to tell me about the tommy-shops. They gave you food instead of wages, and if you didn't like mildewy bacon they gave you the sack. I used to get drunk regular on Friday nights and have a woman in the early hours of Saturday morning. That was before I married Elsie, and it went on for two years afterwards, too, because I don't like to break a habit too precipitous, it's bad for the nerves.

DAVE: Ellis was born by the Liverpool docks. His dad works on the barges.

GEORGE: Get out---(rip) he's foreign! You can see it! Liverpool docks!

DAVE (his eyes gleaming) I'll wait for a win on the pools.

GEORGE: You'll wait a damn long time, mate!

DAVE: I'd like to have ~~the~~ sun on my back all day--- (rip) Tasmania---ride round the farm on horseback (rip)!

GEORGE: You've signed up with three of the dominions as an immigrant, mate, and you still haven't gone! There's no more dominions left after this lot.

DAVE (rip, rip, rip) Oh, well, I---! (Burying his head) If I could see an opening I'd go but---!

GEORGE (RIP) You get one big opening, mate, and that's at the end, a nice big hole and you go down it and you never come back! Is that what you want?

DAVE: Eh?

GEORGE: We never ought to have started this job. It's like damming up the sea! (Rip. He stands back with a puzzled air) Blimey, how many more bloody layers of this stuff? I reckon it stretches back to the middle ages!

DAVE: You're getting paid for it.

GEORGE: I'm getting paid for this. Then what?

DAVE: Ellis said his company's <sup>going to</sup> help us!

GEORGE: Is that written?

DAVE: Eh?

GEORGE: 'Eh'? I said, is it WRITTEN?

DAVE: What are you talking about?

GEORGE: It sounds to me like a French promise, that's what I mean.

DAVE: Get out!

GEORGE (rip) In the 1914 war, they tell me, the generals used to order up a French division, start the bloody battle, then find out they wasn't there!

DAVE: You don't <sup>want</sup> to believe all that stuff.

GEORGE (to himself) 'French'!

DAVE: I like the French girls, anyway.

GEORGE (turning to face him and using his tool as a pointer) Listen, there's too much parlee-voe and com-  
prenee and madermeselle-from-Armentears over there, if you ask me!

DAVE gazes at him with  
bafflement but says nothing.  
A pause.

DAVE: He says I should give up my job at the paint works.

GEORGE: Don't do it!

DAVE: I won't.

GEORGE: Good.

DAVE (ironically) Beac̄sue I don't want to do anything brave, do I? You wouldn't, would you? You'd do this job week-ends, then go back to the railways Monday and twiddle your ~~blond~~ thumbs till somebody finds you another wall to strip!

GEORGE: That's right.

DAVE: So would I. But it's not my instinct. My instinct's to give up that bloody paint job. It's already given me a fatal disease.

GEORGE: Don't talk scats!

DAVE (earnestly) I can feel it---it crawls up my lungs, mate---it tickles inside---it's on my bronchials---it brings me out in pimples and seems to walk all round inside like specks of sand---(alarmed, his eyes popping out of his head) I can feel it---I can feel it now---it's there---George---  
GEORGE! (panic) GEORGE, for Christ's sake! They're on my bronchials, they're crawling up my throat (trembling from head to foot as GEORGE tries to control him), they're nibbling at my lungs, they're---! GEORGE! GEORGE! (He screams and begins crying, as GEORGE comforts him)

GEORGE (quietly) Here, mate, that won't do. Come on, take it easy, take it easy. That's it!

DAVE (crying like a child on his shoulder) It hurts, George, it's like pins and needles...

GEORGE: You've had umpteen doctors examine you, mate, and there's nothing wrong. It's your brain.

They stand there in a  
strange embrace.  
ELLIS enters.

ELLIS: Anything wrong?

GEORGE: Oh, hullo, Mr Ellis! No---it's (glancing down at DAVE's bowed head) Dave's fatal disease, that's all.

ELLIS (staring at DAVE) He's got one?

GEORGE: No, he thinks he has.

ELLIS: Oh. (To DAVE) Lift your head up, Dave.

DAVE (lifting his head and walking back to his wall without looking at ELLIS) I'm all right now. (Rip)

ELLIS (to GEORGE) I've just been up on the roof. It seems a bit rickety.

GEORGE: Oh, that roof's all right.

ELLIS: Think so?

GEORGE: Oh, yes.

ELLIS: The Captain's coming over. Wants to talk about the house. Use it for his hunt meetings.

GEORGE: Oh, yes?

A pause.

ELLIS: You haven't seen his wife this morning, have you?

DAVE (turning, rip) Old Hester?

ELLIS: Yes.

DAVE: Not this morning.

GEORGE (with a smile) Don't you fancy her, then, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: Well---she chases me.

They both turn slowly and stare at him.

ELLIS (nodding) Yes. At the garden party. She chased me down to the river.

DAVE: Did she catch you?

ELLIS: Yes.

DAVE: Then what?

ELLIS: Well---I---(hesitating)!

GEORGE: Everything went blank, like, eh, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: That's right!

GEORGE (turning back to his work) Oh, yes, we know the Captain's wife! Eh, Dave?

DAVE (rip) I'll say!

ELLIS (gazing round) How's the work coming?

GEORGE: Well, there's more paper than I bargained for.

ELLIS: Yes, there does seem a lot, doesn't there?

GEORGE: If I was you, I'd settle for the next layer and size it over. It's none of my business, mind.

ELLIS: Would you like some wine? Some real good French stuff?

GEORGE: Well---!

DAVE (shyly) Sounds very nice (rip)!

ELLIS: I'll get it.

He goes out via the porch, climbing care-

fully over the chairs.  
He seems to have done it  
before.

GEORGE (calling after him) She don't clear those chairs away,  
I see!

ELLIS (as he disappears) They belong to a hire company.

GEORGE (to DAVE) She'll bore a hole through 'em rather than  
clear 'em away.

DAVE: (rip, rip)

GEORGE: (rip)

A crash, as ELLIS returns.

ELLIS (off) Saved! (As he appears at the top of the chairs,  
holding the bottle aloft) Ever heard about the  
Englishman who fell down two flights of cellar  
stairs and didn't break his bottle of vintage  
port? He got a concussion but the port was  
all right.

He descends smoothly.

GEORGE (eyeing the dusty bottle in a gingerly way) Oh, yes?

ELLIS (following his gaze) What's the matter, don't you trust  
it? Rather have a nice cup of tea?

GEORGE (politely) Oh, no, no!

DAVE (quietly) He would, you know.

GEORGE: You see, I've got a philosophy---

ELLIS: Got a cork-screw?

GEORGE: Only my penknife.

ELLIS: That'll do. In a year from now you'll be  
having a banquet in this room---television  
next door---the brigadier's wife dropping in  
after a spot of gardening---(as he uncorks  
the bottle) wait for the music, boys! (Pop)  
There! Now, glasses! In the dining room.  
Here (handing the bottle to GEORGE).

ELLIS goes out right to  
fetch glasses. GEORGE  
looks at the bottle with  
fear.

GEORGE (almost in a whisper) Is this French, he said?

DAVE: That's right.

GEORGE (with awe) It's dusty!

DAVE: It's old, that's why.  
GEORGE: Old? Can't they get fresh stuff out there, then?  
DAVE: What are you talking about?  
GEORGE (heatedly) Well, he's been to the bloody country, hasn't he?

ELLIS returns with three glasses. He gives a glass to each and pours.

ELLIS: Lovely wood-paneled in there. (As they watch the wine) Like blood, isn't it?  
GEORGE: Eh?  
ELLIS: The wine. Like blood!  
GEORGE: It's blood?  
ELLIS: That's it!  
GEORGE (under his breath) Blimey!  
DAVE (raising his glass with a wink at ELLIS) Well, good bye, all, get in touch with my lawyer, won't you?  
ELLIS: Chin-chin!

ELLIS and DAVE drink, while GEORGE watches them. Then he plunges in.

GEORGE (spitting it out at once) Ph-th--a-a-h-h-h!  
ELLIS: What's the matter?  
GEORGE (handing his glass back to him firmly) Here.  
ELLIS: What's wrong?  
GEORGE: It is blood!  
ELLIS: What?  
GEORGE: It is! You can taste it! Now blood's always turned me, I don't know why! I had some pig's blood when I was down on a farm in the war and I came out in a rash.  
ELLIS: You did?  
GEORGE: It's nice, mind you, but, I don't know, it always turns me!  
DAVE (ironically) Whereas me, I've never minded blood, see? (He drinks)

GEORGE: Yes, well, you was never in a war, was you?

ELLIS: Can I get you something else? Champagne?  
That's pig's bile.

GEORGE (with a smile) Now you're pulling my leg. But, I don't know, that other stuff doesn't agree with me. (Turning back to his work, rip, rip) You see, Mr Ellis, I was down in the mines not far from Durham, I was in darkness most of the time, I didn't learn things like other people did. The old man called me the soul of ignorance once when I stepped out of the shaft. Those things cut deep, you know.

ELLIS: Yes.

GEORGE (rip) I used to get soused along with the boys on Friday nights. They used to talk about the other end of the valley, they liked to think it was clear, with pebbles at the bottom, but it wasn't! The slag used to drift down and make it look like Indian ink. It stained the countryside for five miles down the line, believe it or not.

ELLIS: Really?

GEORGE: We was the toughest unionists there was. If the miners didn't come out in sympathy you was now~~here~~ as a striker. And God help the employers if they did come out! When we pick-  
etted, (stopping work and swelling his shoulders) we picketted and nobody got past us. We stood there like men of iron (standing there stiffly)--  
'Where you off to?' 'Work? There is no work'. (Yelling at the top of his voice, to the astonishment of the other two) 'Get back, blackleg! Get back!' (Advancing on DAVE)  
Blackleg, BLACKLEG!

DAVE (getting soared) All right, all right!

GEORGE (finally) BACK!! (Pushing DAVE and then turning back to ELLIS to go on with his narrative)  
I mean, when you've had a day at the seams---drilling so as the whole of your body shakes and you start to wonder if coal was ever really necessary---after a day of that---well, look! Suppose you've got a seam---remember, we're a mile and a half underground, don't overlook that---! (He is about to demonstrate the drilling)

ELLIS (following him with his eyes) No.

GEORGE (lifting up a large flap of the wallpaper on the floor)  
Now suppose this is your seam---here, take this! (He offers the paper to ELLIS, who

takes it so that it forms a sort of burrow under which GEORGE proceeds to grope his way) It's a narrow seam, and---(interrupting himself as he bends down) of course, I've got a drill in my hand, that's a weight and encumbrance to start with---then there's my helmet and I might need an extra lamp---but I'm fitted up with a light in my helmet which should do---right, now! I'm just going down into the seam---(sliding into the burrow) just a bit higher, will you, Mr Ellis?b

ELLIS: Certainly.

GEORGE's head disappears and we only see his feet.

GEORGE (from under the paper) B-b-b-b-r-r-r-r-r-r!

ELLIS: What?

GEORGE: I'm drilling.

ELLIS: Oh!

GEORGE: B-r-r! B-b-b-r-r-r! B-b-r-r! Now I'm getting right into the seam---can you hear me, Mr Ellis? (His feet now disappear)

ELLIS: Yes.

GEORGE: Right, well you can let that paper go now, because I'm as you might say tucked right into the seam, it's dangerous work, I could easily bring the whole bloody lot down on my head, so you've got to know where to drill---(suddenly) B-B-B-R-R-R-R! There, now, that's made a kind of platform for me---(the paper moves, and apparently GEORGE has begun to burrow his way along the floor) and I can just---where, now! (Raising his voice like an instructor) I've reached a very good vantage-point---I've got no way back unless I drill it back---I'm completely stuck here and I've got my head in a tunnel---

CAPTAIN SIMMONS enters from the dining room, unseen by the others. He stares at the wall-paper in astonishment, watching it rise and fall.

GEORGE (suddenly) B-r-r-r-r! Brrr! There, now, it's cleared another space---I'm edging (the paper moves and heaves, as he burrows his way further along) forward---slowly---slowly---and---now---let 'em have it! Brrrr! B-B-R-R-R-R! B-r-r-r-r-r! B-r-r-r-r-r-r-r! Bup! Bup! Bup!

SIMMONS watches with increasing fascination.

GEORGE (suddenly) GAS! GAS! I can smell gas---let me get back---! Back!

SIMMONS (plunging forward) Gas, man?

ELLIS and DAVE turn in astonishment.

ELLIS (almost a whisper) Oh, hullo, Captain.

GEORGE's head slowly appears through the paper.

SIMMONS (addressing him earnestly) You must have been on a queer front, George, old chap! I mean, for enfilade fire---look---all right, stay there! (As GEORGE moves) Stay there! That's an order!

The CAPTAIN dashes across the room, to ELLIS'S and DAVE's combined astonishment, and reaches the window with, apparently, a light machine-gun under his arm.

SIMMONS: If you're creeping up on Point 287 with enfilade fire---(as GEORGE moves again) STAY there, man! Are you afraid or something? By God, these bloody soldiers nowadays! (Red in the face) You don't CRAWL and FIRE at the same time, man, and you don't cry GAS because you can be bloody sure Jerry'll never use it! You FIRE, man, on a fixed line, and then wait for your orders! And don't answer back! I'm dug in for the night half-way up the slope, it's been pouring with rain, and before light comes up I'm putting in an attack on a two-section front---I've got a section out on the left (pointing at GEORGE) to give me covering fire, and the rest of the company is lying in reserve. All right, George, give us the fire---! I'm (crouching in the direction of the porch, which he has apparently designated Point 287) advancing---

Silence. GEORGE is lying low.

SIMMONS: Fire, you bastard!

GEORGE: B-b-r-r-r-! Brrr! Brrr!

SIMMONS: That's more like it!

GEORGE: B-b-b-r-r-r-!

SIMMONS: Follow me, chaps! (Signalling to his men, who are apparently DAVE) Follow, you bloody cowards! By God, the soldiers I've been landed with in this war, I don't blame Jerry for thinking he's going to win! (Shrieking suddenly) Follow, follow, follow! (After a desparate glance at ELLIS, DAVE follows him helplessly) FIRE, you bastard!

GEORGE: Brrr!

SIMMONS (to Dave) FIRE!

DAVE: Brrr! Brrr!

GEORGE: Brrr!

SIMMONS: Right (he's nearly at the porch)! Now I'm sending a runner back to say I'm ADVANCING! Now, come on---! (With a terrific blood-curdling yell) A-h-h-h-h-h! (Running at the porch and firing with his machine gun) A-a-h-h-h-h!

GEORGE: Brrr! Brrr!

DAVE: Brrr!

SIMMONS makes a sudden athletic leap up the pile of chairs and all we see of him now is trousers and shoes.

SIMMONS: A-h-h-h-h!

GEORGE: Brrr! Brrr! Brrr!

SIMMONS: A----! (Suddenly he stops)

Silence. His legs are motionless.

GEORGE: Brrr!

Silence again. The legs are frozen.

SIMMONS (speaking to someone off in a polite voice) Oh, I say. I'm sorry.

His legs gradually return to the room, and he lowers himself down backwards.

Then JOAN's head appears at the top of the chairs. She is in riding kit.

GEORGE: Brrr!

JOAN (as she lowers herself into the room) May I? Thank you, Master (with a charming smile):

They all stand there sheepishly. The paper over GEORGE doesn't move.

ELLIS: Good morning, Mrs Thomson.

JOAN (pleasantly) Hullo! Morning, Dave!

DAVE: Morning, Mrs Thomson.

JOAN (to ELLIS) I hope you don't mind the chairs. They said they'd come and pick them up a week ago, but you know what these hiring firms are like!

ELLIS: Oh, that's all right!

JOAN (looking at the floor) What an awful lot of paper! Did all that really come off the walls?

ELLIS: Oh, yes.

JOAN (with a quick glance at ELLIS) I think it would have been nicer to leave it, you know. In a house as old as this you have to be careful! (Kicking among the pieces of wallpaper) Good Lord, I'd never have said there was so much on the walls---there's stuff from the Thirties (kick)--Victorian stuff---(kick) and look at this (kick), I swear it's the damask you used to see in the very old houses---(kick, kick, kick)

GEORGE (in pain) A-a-hhh!

JOAN jumps back.

JOAN: What the devil's that?

DAVE: It's George, Mrs Thomson.

JOAN: George?

GEORGE raises himself up slowly, nursing his calf, his face contracted with pain.

GEORGE: (Limping away) Right on my war-wound!

JOAN: But---what were you doing on the floor?

DAVE: He was resting, Mrs Thomson.

JOAN: Oh, I say, I'm sorry.

DAVE: He likes his head covered.

JOAN: Of course!

SIMMONS: Do you mean to say that wasn't enfilade fire?

DAVE: No!

SIMMONS (to everyone, apologetically) Oh, I say, I'm sorry!  
(To DAVE) I rather made you run, I'm afraid.

DAVE: Oh, that's all right.

JOAN: Did I hurt you, George? (As he limps back to his wall) I'd no idea you were on the floor--I mean, there was no way of telling.

GEORGE (rip) That's all right, Mrs Thomson.

DAVE: (rip)

ELLIS (to GEORGE) Half a minute.

GEORGE stops working grudgingly as ELLIS walks over to examine the wallpaper he has just revealed.

ELLIS: That's just the wallpaper I want. Let's strip it all down to that. Are you down as far as that, Dave?

DAVE: I don't think so.

JOAN: It seems a bit bright to me. I mean, the house has a certain character, Mr Ellis, and you challenge it at your peril.

ELLIS (peevishly) I'm not challenging anything. Some people must have lived here with that pattern on the wall.

JOAN (abruptly) Oh, well, the fancy isn't in my line! I imagine you cultivate that on the Continent! (Business-like) What I really came to ask is would you mind awfully if I left the mechanical saw in the shed?

ELLIS: No, not a bit.

JOAN (with renewed charm) How nice of you! There's always a bit of tree wanting cut down, don't you think? And as I'm looking after the garden I may as well have the tools here.

ELLIS: That's right.

JOAN: I hope you're settling in nicely?

ELLIS: Oh, yes! There's just the roof---I was---!

JOAN (cutting him short) That's good. Well, good morning, all. I'll see myself out! (Going to the door right) Sorry about the leg, George, but I'd no idea you liked resting on the floor!

She leaves.

GEORGE (to DAVE) What do you want to say that for?

JOAN returns at once.

JOAN (to ELLIS) Oh, by the way, my husband asked me to tell you, in case you have any queries, not to bother him, but get in touch with his lawyer.

ELLIS: I see!

She leaves again.

SIMMONS: Morning, Mrs Thomson!

JOAN (off) Morning, Master!

ELLIS (to GEORGE) That's nice, isn't it?

GEORGE: It's her sort been kicking our sort for too long---! (Turns back to his work in a bitter way---rip)

SIMMONS (to ELLIS) Is that the juice of the French grape I see?

ELLIS: Yes, have some.

SIMMONS: Very civil of you.

ELLIS pours him a glass, which the CAPTAIN drinks at once, to the bottom.

SIMMONS (smacking his lips) By God, that's good! It's like blood, blood!

GEORGE (turning in astonishment) Bl---? (To DAVE) What did I tell you?

SIMMONS: Yes, George, I really thought that was enfilade fire! By God, that's an attack I shan't forget in a hurry---point 287! They had a trench cut along the brow of the hill and every time we moved a hair they fired. They gave me an M.C. for it, by God! We had 'em in the bag inside half-an-hour, thirty Jerries shouting Kamarad! It's the same principle in the hunting field, you've got to lay down a covering line of fire and swing on an axis, when I didn't swing on an axis I was always

bloodywell lost---I used to find half the bloody platoon wandering over the countryside---you've got to swing on something! (The others nod in bemused silence) Don't you agree?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: You see, partly it's because I haven't got a child. I started up this business---I've got absolutely no blasted interest in this game at all, really---I'm only in it for the gold. That's why I called this conference. (Suddenly, to ELLIS) Listen, why the hell did you buy this house? It's falling to pieces.

ELLIS: I know---I---!

SIMMONS: You're like me! I had a week-end at Chevenham once, that's Lady Maude's place down in Shropshire, the old Brig got me invited down. The place is falling to pieces, he wanted me to cough up a couple of thousand quid, which I did as a building loan, he always pulls a title out of the drawer when he wants to lay his hands on some cash, he's a JP, too, so watch your step if he tries it on you, he's one of the respectable twisters, and he'll come out of it with a title himself one of these days, if he twists hard enough. I wouldn't have got my M.C. if I hadn't dropped the C.O. a bottle of whisky and told the mess about point 287 until I was blue in the face. (Stopping, in a perplexed way, blinking) Why did you buy this house?

ELLIS: I didn't.

SIMMONS: What?

They all look at him.

ELLIS: My firm did. I surveyed it for them.

SIMMONS: And then they bought it?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: A real firm---under a board of directors?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: Good God! Are they all crazy?

ELLIS: No. I gave them a false report.

A long silence.

GEORGE (turning away) Well, my ears are sealed, I don't want

5                    to hear anything, I'm not saying anything  
(rip) and I haven't seen anything. I used  
to be in the reserve constabulary and they can  
look up old records and ask you to come in as  
a witness and you take the oath yourself, and  
the best thing is (rip) for Mr Ellis to stop  
talking.

SIMMONS (gazing at ELLIS with admiration) You and me can do  
business together! You're in the money, George!

GEORGE (shaking his head vigorously) Oh, no, no!

DAVE (angrily) What do you mean, oh, no, no? It's a big  
opening!

GEORGE: I'll keep on the right side of the law, thanks!

ELLIS: I'm the company's lawyer, too.

SIMMONS: What?

ELLIS: Yes.

GEORGE: Oh, well, enough said!

ELLIS: I was in the school athletics, too. I speak  
three languages.

GEORGE (sheepishly) Oh, well, enough said!

ELLIS: I started off as a 500-a-year man, and rose  
like a meteor. I'm a marvellous chap really,  
though you can't see it. I---broke my heart  
in France. I put on a lot of weight, I used  
to be as spare as a girl, in my running days.  
But worry always turns to fat with me. But  
I don't think you'd call me fat?

DAVE: Oh, no!

ELLIS (to DAVE) My mum and dad are both Liverpool Docks people,  
born and bred. (To the CAPTAIN) I'm having  
them down any week-end. They're all I have in  
this country---I wish I had more---I pleaded  
with her, four years ago, I went down on my  
knees like a man from two hundred years ago,  
I cried real tears on her dress, I said, "Don't  
go away, let me have you, I'll keep you all  
my life, we'll have lots of children, don't  
see this man again (kneeling in front of DAVE  
and clutching his legs), don't let him kiss  
you, don't stand under the window at night  
to do it, I can see you, you're my wife (we  
were married, you see), I said, please don't  
make me see you like that, it's when he puts  
his arm round your neck and then you open your---  
(shrieking) I'll kill him, (frantically) kill

him, kill him! But (quietly again, looking up at the CAPTAIN) I never did. I could never have harmed that man. And do you know why?

SIMMONS: No?

ELLIS: Because he loved my wife. I thought, you must be nice to do that...

SIMMONS (his head bowed respectfully) Yes, my dear chap. We all have our story.

ELLIS rises soberly.

DAVE (in a hesitant way) I can never take the plunge. I can have a lark all right, and pull their legs, and a bit of slap and all that, but it's when they get fresh, I go hot and cold all over and feel like a jellyfish!

GEORGE: There's just one thing, Captain---I should like this gentleman's credentials (indicating ELLIS), if he's going to employ us.

SIMMONS: Credentials?

ELLIS: Of course, I---!

GEORGE (interrupting him) I don't want him to speak! (His head turned away from ELLIS) He's been out of this country by his own confession four years or more, and I'm not knowing him, I'm not hearing or seeing him until it's laid down on paper who he is.

ELLIS: But that's the wrong way round! An employer looks into his worker's credentials, not the other way round!

GEORGE (shouting) ORDER! Ring that bell, Dave!

DAVE: Eh?

GEORGE: Ring the order-bell! (Impatiently snatching the bottle from ELLIS'S hands and banging his tool against it) Order for the chairman!

SIMMONS: I can vouch for him, George. (With a wink at DAVE) We were in the army together.

GEORGE: Were you really? (Baffled) Oh, well!

DAVE (returning to his work bitterly) Sometimes, when I see what openings some people have got, and I stand in that place from eight in the morning till five at night breathing paint-fumes---! Oh, well (rip)! My lucky day'll come! The law of averages is on my side (rip).

ELLIS (to SIMMONS) There's a point about the roof. I was up there this morning and something shifted. It

didn't feel too safe.

SIMMONS:

Oh, that roof's safe enough! You know, I always compare it to the ribs of a fourteenth-century ship.

ELLIS:

You certainly get a wonderful view from up there. I think it was those trees outside that made me take this place. It's like floating in leaves up there! They're the most marvellous trees I've seen in my life. I could see her face in them. I thought, that's where I belong. She seemed to be in the trees. So I came in and asked if the house was up for sale, and it was. Extraordinary, isn't it?

SIMMONS (going to the window and looking out) Yes, you're a lucky blighter, Ellis! I've been after this house for twenty years or more. Perhaps you're right, it's those trees. It's--- (He stops; barking of hounds outside) Hullo, isn't that Hester?

ELLIS (jumping) Hester?

SIMMONS (without turning round) That's right. My wife.

ELLIS: I think I'll have another look at the roof! Like to give me a hand with the ladder, Dave?

He dashes off right.

DAVE: Right 'o!

DAVE follows him.

GEORGE (calling after him) Mind how you go up there, Dave! (Turning back to the CAPTAIN, who is still absorbed at the window) He's not used to scaffolding, that's another thing---!

SIMMONS: She's running!

GEORGE: Eh?

SIMMONS: Towards the house. She's after a hare--- she's---! (The barking outside becomes more excited) Go it, old girl! Head 'im off! That's it! Send Brave round the trees. Then Fortune. That's it! Back! Hark back! (Jumping up and down with excitement) Hark away! Hark forward, forward! Back, damn you, hark back, hark back, Pat and Brave and Fortune, hark back! B---! (He stops suddenly) I say, she's beagling him up the---! (The barking grows even more excited) She's chasing Ellis up the ladder!

GEORGE: Ellis?

They are interrupted by the most tremendous crash from above. It begins in a slow rumble and rises to a crescendo that shakes the whole house. And it goes from one cascading crash to the next, like tons of coals being tipped down a staircase.

SIMMONS and GEORGE clutch whatever they can get hold of, and finally they clutch each other. Their bodies are tensed against the crash that promises to bring the ceiling down on their heads.

At last it stops. They look up slowly. A cloud of dust drifts peacefully in from the porch, over the piled chairs.

GEORGE (coming to his senses first) Dave! Dave! Are you  
all right? (Frantically) He's like a son  
to me, he's---! DAVE!

DAVE (off, faintly) Hullo?

GEORGE: Are you all right?

DAVE: I'm in the daylight!

GEORGE: Eh?

DAVE: I can see the sky. Half the bleed'n roof's fallen in!

GEORGE (turning to SIMMONS in astonishment) The roof!

But SIMMONS has sat down disconsolately and is staring before him.

SIMMONS: It was Ellis...

GEORGE: The roof's collapsed!

DAVE (off) George!

GEORGE: Yes?

DAVE (off) Mr Ellis won't come down.

GEORGE: Is he all right?

DAVE (off) He seems all right. He's hiding.

GEORGE: Hiding?

DAVE (off)            That's right!

GEORGE:                Well, leave him up there, then!    It's his house!

DAVE (off)            Right 'o!

SIMMONS (quietly)    I never expected that, George.    It's always been, well, a game---you know, not a man.

GEORGE:                What do you mean?

SIMMONS:                It's funny how you can feel your life drain right out of you and know it won't come back.

Silence.

GEORGE:                I hope he's insured.    (Gingerly going to the window)    I reckon we'll need danger-money after this.    Blimey!    It looks like the desert outside.    Have you seen it?    There's dust everywhere.    It makes it look nice in a way.    (Turning to Simmons confidentially)    Like the quiet feeling you get after a battle.    Know what I mean?

SIMMONS (as if answering him)    Yet she isn't the battling sort.    We made up a search-party, you know, the Brig and his missus and me, and we were out two hours before we tracked them down by the river.    Then he joined us for a cup of tea.

GEORGE (lowering his voice)    I'll tell you something, Captain, I shouldn't get too deep with the foreigners if I was you.    My wife says he's always on the phone talking a foreign lingo.    Fancy silk pyjamas.    A bath every morning.    And squirts scent all over himself.    And he keeps calling out a foreign name.    'Frosty' or something.

DAVE appears, dusty.

DAVE:                 He still won't come down.

GEORGE (mysteriously)    Just you keep your nose out of it and you'll be all right.

DAVE:                 Out of what?

GEORGE (grimly)        Never mind out of what.    Just keep it out.

DAVE:                 Your wife's gone up the ladder, Captain.

GEORGE:                Now, then!

SIMMONS:                What?

DAVE:                 It seemed a bit dangerous.

SIMMONS: She's---she's never minded danger. (He gets up) I think I'll go. (Walking out blindly, via the porch) I'm going home! (Beginning to cry silently as he scrambles over the chairs) I won't be a witness! Hester... Hester...

But suddenly he stops.

We hear him whisper in an astonished voice, 'Ellis!'

He then retreats back into the room, and we see ELLIS's head coming over the chairs. He also is covered with dust.

ELLIS (to the CAPTAIN) Ssssh! I got away.

SIMMONS (standing back) You what?

ELLIS: I got away! I escaped!

SIMMONS: From---from the hunt?

ELLIS: Yes!

SIMMONS: But I understood---! Ellis!

ELLIS (out of breath, brushing himself off) Yes?

SIMMONS: Do you mean to say---? Ellis! (His mouth open) You---came away?

ELLIS (gazing at him) The roof collapsed!

SIMMONS (military) Damn the roof! She went up the ladder after you, didn't she, man?

ELLIS: Yes!

SIMMONS: She chased you on the night of the party, didn't she?

ELLIS: Er---

SIMMONS (yelling, his head lowered) Did she?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS (quietly) Thank you. (His head still lowered) And then what happened?

ELLIS: Er---!

GEORGE: Mr Ellis told me everything went blank, Captain.

The CAPTAIN nods slowly.

ELLIS: I'm sorry. It---wasn't really my fault.

SIMMONS (suddenly) It should have been, damn you!

ELLIS: Eh?

SIMMONS: You played hound-and-hares down there---by the river?

ELLIS (with a panic-stricken glance at GEORGE) Er---yes!

SIMMONS (quietly) Hare, hay, singsong?

ELLIS: What?

SIMMONS: Hare, hay, singsong? Irish songs?

ELLIS: She did sing some Irish songs, yes.

SIMMONS (with quiet patience) That's why I ask you---hare, hay---?

ELLIS: Hey?

SIMMONS: Did you hit the hay?

ELLIS: Er---! (With another panic-stricken glance at GEORGE, who nods) Yes!

SIMMONS (in hushed relief) Thank you! Thank you, Ellis!  
(Going to him and grasping his hands) Do you think she'll have a baby?

ELLIS (trying to back away) Captain---she's over forty-five, I believe---!

SIMMONS (mildly, with a smile, shaking his head) No, no, no, no. Thirty-five.

ELLIS: She---!

SIMMONS (suddenly) And she's got the finest bottom in the county!

ELLIS: Yes, I know, but---!

SIMMONS (overjoyed) You know! That's why I ask, is there a baby? What are my expectations?

ELLIS: But, Captain---! (He glances at GEORGE, who mimes 'yes') Yes, She is. I don't know, I---! (As SIMMONS appears to boil up again) Yes. Yes. I'm pretty sure.

SIMMONS (laughing) I'm a father! (Dances round) A father!

GEORGE: Congratulations, Captain! (with a wink at ELLIS)

SIMMONS: Thank you, George, thank you!

He goes and shakes hands  
with GEORGE.

DAVE: Congratulations, Captain.

SIMMONS (smiling and gazing into DAVE's face with quiet confidence) Thanks, David. (Turning to ELLIS again)  
Look, why don't we go and have a drink?  
(Taking ELLIS by the arm) Come on. I know  
where we can get something stronger than wine.

He marches ELLIS out via  
the dining room, and ELLIS  
throws a last helpless  
glance at GEORGE and DAVE.

SIMMONS (calling out to them as he disappears) See you later,  
boys---plastered, I hope!

DAVE and GEORGE gaze after  
them.

DAVE: Can you make those people out?

GEORGE: No, I can't. But I can tell you this much---  
none of 'em's happy!

4.

The same: but the walls are now uniform, and there are curtains and some furniture. The hill of chairs in the porch is still there.

ELSIE is sweeping while MABEL looks on.

MABEL: It's funny, I don't like ~~old~~ things. If my Dave's got an old lighter I always throw it away.

A pause, during which ELSIE continues sweeping.

ELSIE: Your Dave's put the first lot down for a car, then?

MABEL: That's right. He'll be driving me out on Sunday afternoons, I don't think!

ELSIE (with a smile) He'll be driving out a girlfriend, more likely!

GEORGE (off) Elsie!

ELSIE (going to the porch) Yes?

GEORGE (off) Got a cup o' tea, mate?

ELSIE: I'll just finish this sweepin'!

GEORGE (off) Make it snappy, gal!

ELSIE (walking back into the room) I reckon he'd swim in tea if he had the chance!

MABEL: They're all the same.

ELSIE: Still, that roof's damned hard work, isn't it? There's new joists and everything. Here--- (lowering her voice and glancing round) do you know how much he's putting down for that roof?

MABEL: Who?

ELSIE: Old Ellis.

MABEL: No?

ELSIE: The best part of three thousand.

MABEL: Go on! I reckon he needs his brain tested.

ELSIE (with another glance at the door) He don't, you know!  
He's cleverer than you and me---his company's  
paying for the lot!

MABEL: Go on!

ELSIE: He's gone into this decorating lark with the  
Captain, and now he's paying himself three  
thousand quid. Not bad, is it?

MABEL: My Dave says he's only on the outside of it,  
though.

ELSIE: Eh?

MABEL: They're not telling him the real price.

ELSIE: Who's not?

MABEL: Your George and the Captain.

ELSIE (stopping work) Go on!

MABEL: That's right. It's only costing two thousand  
really. And they're splitting the other thous-  
and between themselves.

ELSIE (shocked, putting her hand up to her mouth) Oh, dear!

MABEL: That's right. They're going fifty-fifty.

ELSIE: Well, I never did!

MABEL: Five hundred for the Captain, and five hundred  
for your George and my Dave. They're going  
fifty-fifty, too. (A pause) Why, didn't  
they tell you, then?

ELSIE: You bet they didn't!

MABEL: My Dave says it's high finance. It's always  
like that.

ELSIE: It sounds like a swindle to me!

MABEL: Oh, no, I don't think so!

ELSIE (going on with her sweeping resolutely) Oh, well! Least  
said, soonest mended!

GEORGE (off) Elsie!

ELSIE (going to the porch rapidly) Yes?

GEORGE (off) What about that tea?

ELSIE (angrily) Just you wait for your bloody tea!

GEORGE (off) All right, all right, keep your shirt on!

ELSIE (walking back into the room) I'll give him tea!

She continues sweeping, with quick movements.

MABEL: Is your Ellis up yet?

ELSIE (with another glance) He's going round the place with the brigadier. They've been sniffing round all morning. Here---I saw him sticking his penknife in the wood---showing the dry rot, you see.

MABEL: Go on!

ELSIE: I reckon he's getting wise, don't you? (In a cautious half-whisper) He's taking her to court. He told me this morning.

MABEL: Go on!

ELSIE: He's not such a bad feller, is he, really?

MABEL: I wouldn't mind a chase of him myself, would you?

ELSIE (smiling conspiratorially) It's a scream, isn't it?

MABEL: I reckon it's drink keeps her young!

ELSIE: Turned fifty and expecting twins---I don't know!

MABEL: My Dave says he's the best hare she's ever had. (She looks uncomfortable) I don't like the way my Dave talks sometimes.

ELSIE: Did you hear him carrying on the other night?

MABEL: Who?

ELSIE: Old Ellis. He calls out a foreign name. Something like 'frosty'. 'Frosty, Frosty!' (They laugh) And he leaves all the windows open, you know. It turns your blood cold, it does, honestly, at night.

MABEL: There's one thing I will say, he's brought us out of ourselves, hasn't he? You never used to catch me putting lipstick on. I reckon it's all that wine he gives us!

ELSIE: I have to drink it on the sly. My husband doesn't like it. He says it tastes of blood.

MABEL: Men seem so bigotted, don't they?

ELSIE: That's right!

MABEL (lowering her voice): Did you see that bite on the side of Mrs Thomson's face?

ELSIE: No!

MABEL: I said, Hullo, Mrs Thomson, been having a scrap with one of your Guernseys---you know, having a joke, like! And do you know what she says?

ELSIE: No?

MABEL: She says, The Brigadier bit me!

ELSIE: No!

They both laugh, ELSIE leaning on her broom.

ELSIE: I reckon he gets hungry, don't you?

MABEL: That's right!

A pause.

MABEL: He spat blood the other night.

ELSIE (with a quick glance): Who did?

MABEL: My Dave.

ELSIE: Go on with you! (She goes on sweeping)  
That was his tooth. My George told me!

MABEL: Still, it was blood. I thought I'd go and tell the doctor, anyhow!

ELSIE (firmly): Here, you just leave him alone! I reckon he's seen enough doctors!

MABEL: I don't like him working up on that roof, either. He's never been a one for heights.

ELSIE: He'll be all right.

MABEL (sitting down in a tired way): I don't know, sometimes I think I'm ill, too. I can never pluck up courage to go to the doctor myself!

ELSIE: I told you before, if you've got a pain, go to the hospital. Never mind about Dave, he's all right!

MABEL sits staring before her.

ELSIE (as she sweeps) Worry's your trouble.

A murmur of voices in the dining room.

BRIGADIER THOMSON enters followed by ELLIS.

THOMSON: Splendid panelling, don't you think?

ELLIS: It's not so splendid up on the roof.

THOMSON: There is no panelling up on the roof. Good morning, Mrs Gorringe!

ELSIE: Morning, Brigadier!

MABEL: Morning, Brig!

ELLIS (as THOMSON sits down comfortably) I just want to know what you're going to do about it, that's all.

THOMSON (after a pause) Invite you down to Chevenham.

ELLIS: What?

THOMSON: My cousin Lady Maude's place. She married a Chester (with a wink at ELSIE).

ELLIS: What are you talking about?

THOMSON: She'd love to have you. Nice morning, Mrs Forbes?

MABEL: That's right, Brig!

ELLIS: You know it put a cool three thousand quid on the buying price, don't you?

THOMSON: Listen, Monsieur---

ELLIS: And for God's sake stop calling me Monsieur!

THOMSON: I'm sorry.

A pause.

ELLIS: I mean, your wife swindelled me into buying it---!

THOMSON: You swindelled yourself. You cooked a report, didn't you? Simmons told me!

ELLIS: Well (helplessly), I liked the trees. My mother and father are coming down---I--- (he trails off)

THOMSON (respectfully) Fair enough.

ELLIS: They could be comfortable here, watch television

all day.

ELSIE: That's right, Mr Ellis!

ELLIS (also sitting down) You see, I'll get the sack if they know I put a wrong report in.

THOMSON: Oh, come, come!

ELLIS: What do you mean, 'come, come'? Suppose one of your employees put three thousand quid on your bill unnecessarily, what would you do?

THOMSON: Sack him!

ELLIS: Exactly. You see, I told them it was a sound house, from cellar to chimney. Then the roof caves in!

THOMSON: It's old, that's why!

ELLIS: I know, but what I mean is, didn't she ever go up and have a look?

THOMSON: No.

ELLIS: Why not?

THOMSON (after another pause) She doesn't like heights. That's why she was in the submarines (with another wink at ELSIE)!

ELLIS: I'll never find another job, that's a cert! Not round here, anyway. Everybody seems crazy!

THOMSON: What---you pay three times the proper value of a house and then say we're crazy? Eh, Mrs Gorringer?

ELLIS: You took the money all right!

THOMSON: That's not crazy!

ELLIS: Well, you'll have to get her to fork up three thousand quid, that's all.

THOMSON: She hasn't got it. It went on the Guernseys. And a couple of chargers for me, short in the arse and their knees knocking together (with an enormous guffaw, and this time a wink at MABEL)! She told me they cost five hundred quid apiece, and I know she got 'em at the knacker's yard for fifty each! That's the sort of wife she is!

ELLIS: I give up!

THOMSON: In fact, she only let me out this morning to soften you up, as she put it. 'Invite him down to Chevenham', she said. 'Wave a title under

his nose!

ELLIS (half to himself) It's funny, I must have been born under trees...

THOMSON (to ELSIE) She likes to keep me away from people. She tells 'em I don't want to be disturbed, that sort of thing. All perfect rot, of course. I love being disturbed. (To ELLIS) What were you saying about trees?

ELLIS: I said I only bought this house for the trees.

THOMSON: Don't tell her that.

ELLIS: Who?

THOMSON: My wife. She'll have 'em down in a second. I only get roast beef on Sundays by saying I want lamb. See what I mean? I get coffee after dinner by howling for tea. I made a big mistake with those horses, though---I should have asked for a couple of brewers' drays and she'd have got me thoroughbreds! (Guffawing with great enjoyment) I'm in good form this morning, eh, Mrs Gorringer? It's thorough being let out for the first time since the war. (Again to ELLIS) I had an awful time when she ran a farm. Were you ever married?

ELLIS (uncomfortably) I---I---!

THOMSON: I thought you were. Chaps have pimples when they don't marry. I've often noticed it. Yes, we had rats in the barn in those days---everything! I'll never forget the clank of that bloody milk-pail, which is supposed to be a nice rural sound. I---I'm not really a strong man, Ellis.

ELLIS: What?

THOMSON (putting out his hand) Feel my handshake. How do you do?

ELLIS (shaking hands) How do you do?

THOMSON: It's weak, isn't it? No grip to it. It's a matter of generation. My old dad had a grip of iron. They call me a rock of justice round here. That right, Mrs Gorringer?

ELSIE: That's right, Brigadier!

THOMSON: The reason is, I can always see the other chap's motive. All law is motive. I learned to stick to what people think of you. People called me a rock of justice so I became one.

Take that Simmons chap. He's all right.  
But you couldn't depend on him for the truth.

ELLIS: Really?

THOMSON: I've been studying my wife for years. She's  
a rock of pride. Can't give way, you see.  
Ever seen a man on the edge of a precipice?  
If he took a step he'd fall. That's her.  
You see (leaning forward to whisper something  
to ELLIS) she never...

ELLIS: Oh, yes?

A pause during which the  
BRIGADIER looks round guard-  
edly.

THOMSON (to ELSIE) She isn't in the garden, is she?

ELSIE: I haven't seen your wife this morning, Brigadier!

THOMSON (again to ELLIS) You see, she doesn't like me biting  
her!

MABEL (to herself) Oh, dear!

ELLIS: Really?

THOMSON: That's another silly thing you did, old chap---  
going in with old Simmons. He's charged your  
company three thousand for the roof but he's  
taking---!

ELSIE (flushed) No, he isn't! I'm sure my George wouldn't be  
a parcel to that kind of thing, Brigadier. My  
old dad wouldn't have liked it, for one thing!

THOMSON (baffled) Oh, I see. (He is silent)

ELLIS: I'm supposed to trust you and not the Captain, is  
that it? At least, he hasn't sold me a ruin!

THOMSON: It wasn't his to sell.

ELLIS: Well---(out of patience) I can tell you one thing,  
I'm not having my mother and father messed about  
like this---I'll---!

THOMSON (earnestly) Look, why don't you bring them down to  
Chevenham, too?

ELLIS: I'll bring them down to Chevenham all right,  
and stick a lump of dynamite under the rafters  
and blow the whole lot up, Lady Maude and all---  
then we'll see how she likes living without a  
roof---! I---!

The sound of a mechanical

saw in the garden.  
THOMSON makes a leap in  
the air, at once agile.

THOMSON (his eyes popping out of his head) It's her, by  
God! (As he makes a dash for the porch)  
Good bye, all, nice to have known you!  
She'll flay me alive if she catches me here!

He makes a clean leap to  
the top of the pile of chairs  
and promptly disappears.

The others are left staring  
after him. The mechanical  
saw ceases.

ELLIS (bitterly) There's that bloody instrument again. She  
woke me up with it at half past six this morn-  
ing---God knows where she finds all the dead  
trees!

ELSIE: You've only got to get to know her a bit, Mr  
Ellis.

ELLIS (so preoccupied that he hardly hears her) Is that all?  
I---I feel like a prisoner in my own house.  
It is my own house, I keep on having to remind  
myself. I've bought it, I've paid good money  
for it, three times the value, I fell in love  
with those trees outside, and then with these  
old rooms, that wood panelling next door---!  
(Exhausted) He's a nice chap, really, the  
old Brig, isn't he? He did all that wood,  
you know, you wouldn't catch her---

JOAN appears in the door-  
way of the dining room.

JOAN: Morning, all!

ELLIS makes a jump out  
of his seat.

ELSIE: Morning, Mrs Thomson!

JOAN: My husband been here (sniffing)? I can always  
smell him. (Pleasantly) Smells like a horse!

EDDIE: Good morning (very weak voice).

JOAN (to MABEL? taking no notice of him) You look seedy, Mrs  
Forbes.

MABEL (gushing at once) It's my pain, Mrs Brigadier, right down  
inside, I'm-too scared to go to a doctor!

JOAN (capably) Don't you know that women shouldn't suffer pains  
right down inside?

ELSIE: That's what I always tell her, Mrs Thomson!

JOAN: I had the same myself once. And I had the farm to run, a herd of Jerseys, a couple of hacks to groom. (Sitting down) Well, Mr Ellis, how do we all strike you?

ELLIS: Batty.

JOAN (with a slightly defensive chuckle) Really? I think that's rather a compliment. Everybody's so serious nowadays! Mind if I smoke?

ELLIS: Not at all.

JOAN (lighting a cigarette) I've always found the French sympathetic. So orderly---I suppose that's because I'm so messy myself!

ELLIS: The roof was certainly messy. It was hanging by a thread, in fact.

JOAN: You aren't one of the Shropshire Ellises, are you?

ELLIS: No. Your husband asked me that.

JOAN: You look like Nigel, that's why. One of the finest farmers in the land. Completely inefficient, of course. Produces a marvellous crop, first-class livestock, but not the right amount per square acre, which I believe is what counts nowadays. He doesn't believe in machines, you see.

ELLIS: Oh.

JOAN: I do, though. (Puffing thoughtfully) I believe in machines.

ELLIS: I realised that.

JOAN: Do you know, Mr Ellis (the tone seems to be getting dangerous), I think you belong more on the Continent than here?

ELLIS: You're dead right I do. And I'm going back as soon as I've had you in a court of law!

A stunned silence.

JOAN (a glint of defensive amusement in her eyes) Do, It won't get you very far.

ELLIS: It's worth trying, for three thousand quidsworth of damages.

JOAN (shaken) How's the pain, Mrs Forbes,

MABEL: Oh, it seems better now!

JOAN (to ELLIS) Well, there's nothing more to be said, then, is there? If you're bent on being nasty, that's that.

A contrite silence from all parties.

ELLIS (looking down) I've never been to law before. I never thought I would.

Another silence.

ELSIE: Don't let's part enemies---eh, Mrs Thomson?

JOAN (reasonably) You see, Mr Ellis, I can't really help it if the roof falls in. It's been there for over four hundred years and was bound to happen some time.

ELSIE: And that was with two world wars, wasn't it, Mrs Thomson?

JOAN: That's right.

ELLIS: But you don't seem to realise my position, Mrs Thomson. I liked those trees outside so much---(He stops) They'll sack me when I put in that bill.

JOAN: Couldn't you tell them it was an act of God?

ELLIS: It would have to be a pretty ferocious one, wouldn't it?

JOAN: Not at all.

ELLIS: But how the devil does a roof suddenly cave in like a pack of cards, even if God wills it? He's got to have some earthly agency.

JOAN: The wind.

ELLIS: There wasn't a wind. They can check up on that.

JOAN: A tree could have fallen on it.

ELLIS (after a pause during which he considers this) Yes, that's not a bad idea. But they'll want to see the tree.

JOAN: Oh, we can down a tree all right. My machine's first-class. American job.

ELSIE: As long as they don't send a surveyor down, Mrs Thomson. He could tell.

JOAN: Mr Ellis is the surveyor.

ELSIE: Oh!

JOAN (to ELLIS) It just means cooking two reports instead of one, it seems to me.

ELLIS: Yes, I suppose it does! Well, I can try. There's just one other thing.

JOAN (pleasantly) Yes?

ELLIS: I wonder if you'd mind using your saw a bit later in the morning?

JOAN (danger again) I beg your pardon?

ELLIS: The saw. It make a hell of a noise. It doesn't seem to have a silencer on it.

JOAN: It hasn't.

ELLIS: Well, I think half-past six in the morning is a bit thick.

JOAN: You do?

ELLIS: Yes, I do.

A silence.

JOAN: Country populations are up by five or six, you know.

ELLIS: I'm not.

JOAN: Then why do you coem and live in the country?

ELLIS: Because I want to.

JOAN: In that case you must adjust yourself to its habits!

ELLIS (angry) What---you think you can just come round and make my life a plague when you feel like it? There must be laws about such things!

JOAN: I thought you said we were policemen, when you first came over? You're always talking about laws!

ELLIS (defeated) I---!

JOAN (plunging in) I've never liked you in this house, and that's that! You're not the gype. You don't cooperate!

ELLIS: Cooperate?

JOAN: You've done nothing but complain. But you must have known what you were buying. It's an old house, and all this fancy wallpaper (waving her arm) doesn't do at all.

ELLIS: What---what the hell's is got to do with you? I bought the house and that's that!

JOAN: You didn't buy the garden. And you didn't buy us! And if you don't like it---

ELLIS: Don't lik---!

JOAN: If it's too old and primitive for you, sell it back! I'll pay you every penny you gave me!

ELLIS: But I tell you, I liked those trees---I---(He stops again)

A pause.

JOAN (quietly) My husband always said he hated them. That's why I kept them.

ELLIS (in hushed desperation) It's my home. I---I bought it. I haven't had a restful day in it so far.

JOAN: I was a fool not to take the Master's offer. But my husband's dead set against Trade.

ELLIS (weakly) Oh?

JOAN: I must say, I don't like your design for the new roof, either.

ELLIS: You weren't meant to.

JOAN: I think you misunderstand one thing, Mr Ellis. (Sharply) It isn't money we're after round here---it's people, and a certain type of people! Ever since you came there's been trouble!

ELLIS: ???!

JOAN: And we'd better come to some arrangement quick because my husband's impatient to get you out!

ELLIS (struggling valiantly for words) You---you---you can get out! (Waving a trembling finger towards the door) At once!

JOAN (standing up and planting her feet astride) I'll stay in this house as long as I like!

ELLIS: I'll call the police!

JOAN: Policemen again!

ELLIS (dashing wildly for the flinging room door) Where's the

phone?

JOAN (shouting after him) I'll make your life hell! I'll stand at the porch all day!

ELLIS (returning abruptly) You've made it hell already!

JOAN: I'm glad.

ELLIS (his fury breaking bounds) It's always people like you! All my mother and father wanted was a holiday in the country with their only son---they haven't seen him for over four years! Every time I invite them down a roof falls in or the light goes out or you work your mechanical saw! I won't have those chairs in my porch!

JOAN: You'll have them there as long as I wish! (Suddenly bursting into tears) Get out of my house! You're in my garden! You're standing in my garden!

ELSIE (sorrowing) Oh, Mrs Thomson!

JOAN: I know you all hate me! It was the same as a child---she hasn't done her duty---by the tenants, by the farmer's boy, by the steward, by the grooms---! (Screaming frantically) I HATE tenants, I hate you all, I don't want you near me---(breaking down into tears)!

MABEL: Oh, dear!

A pause, in which only JOAN's sobs break the silence.

ELLIS (relenting) I'm sorry.

ELSIE: He didn't mean it, Mrs Thomson.

JOAN (screaming again) He DID! (To ELLIS) I'll have you out of the house---and your mother and father--- I'll stand by the door and spit in their faces!

ELSIE: Oh!

ELLIS: Oh! (Wild again) It's always people like you---taking our pleasures away---telling us how to live---that's why I left England--- that's why I left---you've put your dirty mark everywhere---you---(Suddenly) No wonder your husband hates your guts!

JOAN: Oh!

ELLIS (in frantic bursts) My father---used to work---all day---bring back four pound notes---Friday night---he---he---he used to g---g---get s---sick---my---my

m--mother u--u---used to qu--queue for s--sick  
b--b--benefit---he u--u--used to w--work on the  
docks---the barges---the b-r-r-r-r-r (drilling)  
th-th-through the w-water brrr---b-r-r-r-r  
(Almost in tears) B-b-r-r-r-r-r

He advances on JOAN with  
lowered head, like a boat  
through the water.

JOAN (backing away) You're mad! MAD!

ELLIS: B-r-r-r-r-r! (His knees bent as he plunges  
forward)

JOAN (suddenly) He's got my socks on! He's got my socks!

She dives down towards his  
legs and makes a grab at  
one of his socks.

ELSIE: Oh, dear!

JOAN: They're MINE!

ELLIS (apparently brought to his senses by her hand) Take your  
hands off!

JOAN pulls at him savagely  
by the sock and begins drag-  
ging him round. He hops  
along helplessly after her.

MABEL: Oh, I say!

ELLIS: How dare you---!

JOAN: My socks!

ELLIS: Off! You---! There! (He gives a smart  
smack across the back of the hand)

JOAN (withdrawing the hand). Oh! On my wedding ring! (Supp-  
ressing an immense cry of rage) Now you're for  
it! Just wait and see!

She dashes out through the  
dining room.

ELLIS stands panting and  
dazed, staring after her.

The women have their hands  
to their mouths.

ELLIS (in a whisper) Wh---what's she going to do?

Suddenly the mechanical saw  
is heard again outside, but

much closer.

ELLIS: She's---!

ELSIE (out of her wits) Here, she's coming in here with that saw, Mabel---!

MABEL (with a piercing scream) Oh!

ELSIE: She's coming to cut us down!

The saw draws nearer to the house and seems just by the dining room door.

The two women scream frantically and try to climb over the chairs in the porch, unsuccessfully because in their panic they push each other down as fast as they take a step up.

ELSIE: She's coming! Mabel!

The saw becomes deafening.

ELLIS, his eyes starting out of his head, dashes to the dining room door and slams it closed, then locks it twice. He stands there panting.

MABEL: She can cut her way through that door!

ELSIE screams again, in brief, helpless bursts, holding her mouth.

ELLIS (shouting) She can get through those chairs, too!

But there is now a different sound. The saw is getting to grips with something. They stop and all go to the window slowly, staring.

There is a wrenching sound, like cloth tearing, and then a slight whistling noise, followed by a crash.

A moment's silence.

ELLIS: She's cutting the trees down!

A head appears above the chairs in the porch, start-

led and pale. It is  
the BRIGADIER. He crawls  
into the room.

THOMSON: The trees!

ELSIE: Oh, Lord, I never did!

The saw deals with more  
trees: a wrench, a whistle,  
a crash.

THOMSON (crushed) My trees!

ELLIS (shouting above the saw) I'll stop her---! (About to  
dash off)

THOMSON (grabbing his arm) She here! She'll <sup>kill</sup> you, man, if you  
touch her now!

The saw goes on with ~~her~~  
work, while they all watch  
aghast.

THOMSON (shouting, to ELLIS) They were planted when I was a  
boy!

Another tree goes.

THOMSON: She was in the war, you see!

ELLIS looks at him in a  
baffled way but says nothing.

Suddenly the saw gets loud-  
er again.

ELSIE (screaming) She's coming!

MABEL: Brig!

The two women cling to the  
BRIGADIER.

ELLIS: Go out to her, Brig!

THOMSON (as the saw gets closer) It's the tree by the house!  
The elm! She's going to cut it down.

ELLIS: The roof---

ELSIE: My George's up there! GEORGE! GEORGE!

MABEL: DAVE!

But their voices cannot  
be heard above the saw.

MABEL rushes for the dining  
room door but ELLIS holds

her.

The saw begins its work close to the house. This is quite a long job. Then slowly and surely the immense elm falls, on to the roof, and again there is a prolonged crash, reminiscent of the one in the third scene. Again there is the slow drift of dust through the porch.

ELSIE (whimpering in the silence) George! My George!

MABEL (screaming suddenly) Dave! My DAVE!

Silence. They all stand there listening.

GEORGE (off) You all right down there?

ELSIE tries to speak but can't.

MABEL: Dave!

DAVE (off) You all right, mum?

MABEL: Thank Christ! Oh, thank Christ!

DAVE (off) We're in the daylight again!

THOMSON (quietly) The old trees...

The dining room door is tried. We can see the doorknob moving.

THOMSON walks over to it firmly, unlocks and then opens it.

JOAN stands there, sweating and dishevelled.

THOMSON (leading her to a chair) Let me get you a drink.

JOAN (to herself, her head sunk) What have I done...

The others stand staring at her.

5.

A garden party as in the first scene. But there are no trees now. A series of arches have been made with trellis-work and faery lights, incorporating the tree-stumps.

GEORGE, ELSIE, MABEL and DAVE are helpers as before, behind a buffet-table.

There is music, people are dancing beyond the arches. The chairs from the porch are again in evidence.

SIMMONS (off) Anybody seen the Brig?

GEORGE (to ELSIE) You'd better hide old Thomson's whisky, mate. The Captain's on the prowl.

The music suddenly becomes deafening.

THOMSON (off) Turn that bloody music down!

It is abruptly lowered again.

ELSIE (in a low voice) Where's old Ellis, that's what beats me!

MABEL: I reckon he's---!

GEORGE (checking them) All right, all right! (Glancing round furtively as he polishes glasses) If you know anything, keep quiet.

ELSIE: It's not like the old garden parties, I don't care what you say. There's not the old spirit, is there?

MABEL (quietly) Well, she put paid to that, didn't she? Remember how we used to complain the trees was damp? I wouldn't mind 'em now they've gone!

- GEORGE: I can tell you one thing, it's knocked half the value off the property. There's no screen in front of that highway now.
- DAVE: No wonder he's never been known to smile!
- MABEL: It's a wonder she didn't murder the lot of us. (To ELSIE) I can still hear that blasted saw, can't you? Trying to get up on them chairs, then old Ellis says, 'She'll cut her way through the door!' (To GEORGE and DAVE) Well, that did it---old Elsie let out such a scream, and I had ago, too, and there was both of us struggling with each other---! (They all smile and nod) We can laugh about it now but it wasn't so funny then, was it?
- ELSIE: It put me in mind of the war.
- GEORGE: Me, too!
- ELSIE: You know, when you read in the papers how people was trapped. I kept thinking to myself, 'Who's going to get George's dinner tonight?' I did, honestly!
- MABEL (with a furtive glance round) She had such a wild look in her eye, didn't she? I thought to myself, 'She wants us all for today's mincemeat!' Talk about scream! Well, honestly, I don't think I've been so frightened since I was a kid and got caught down the coal-hole!
- GEORGE: I'm glad Dave and me was taking a smoke on the chimney, anyhow!
- ELSIE (to MABEL) That was the first thing I said, wasn't it? I said, Well, thank God George and Dave are all right! Then we sat down and had a good cry!
- GEORGE: I'd have given her saw the trees down if I'd been her old man!
- DAVE: He ought to have put his foot down twenty or thirty years ago, if you ask me.
- ELSIE: He didn't even budge, did he, Mabel? And he wouldn't let old Ellis go out after her. 'She'll kill you!' he said.
- MABEL: It's funny, he didn't even seem very worried, did he? He seemed to think, 'Oh, well, if the trees have got to come down, let 'em!'
- ELSIE: And then there was old Ellis! (To GEORGE and DAVE) You'll never believe it---he was burrowing under her legs, sort of thing, drilling his way through---! (Laughter overcoming her and MABEL)

GEORGE (blinking, with his own memories) Drilling?

ELSIE: That's right---he was supposed to be a barge or something! B-r-r-r-r! B-r-r-r-r! (More laughter) And she got hold of his socks! There he was drilling and kicking his legs up--- talk about scream! Well, you can see the funny side of it afterwards, can't you?

MABEL: 'Give me my socks!' she said. 'You've got my socks on!' Talk about scream!

ELSIE: Do you remember that first night he came? So shy and respectable!

DAVE: I reckon he's learned a lot since then!

ELSIE: You're telling me!

GEORGE: All I know is she's undone a good fortnight's work on that roof!

MABEL: I reckon it's not meant to stay up. It's been down twice in as many weeks!

GEORGE: It'll stay up now, don't you worry, I'm going to see the Brigadier about it.

The music is deafening again.

THOMSON (off) Joan! Joan! Turn that bl---!

It is lowered again.

MABEL: Well, I can tell you one thing---I won't be so keen giving her a helping hand in the garden, not after this!

DAVE (quietly) I reckon you will.

MABEL: Eh?

DAVE: I said, you will. She knows how to twine you round her fingers.

ELSIE: Well, she does! She makes me feel all unworthy, I---!

The CAPTAIN comes in.

SIMMONS: Hullo, all!

MABEL: Evening, Captain!

SIMMONS: Seen the Brig?

GEORGE: Wasn't that him shouting just then?

SIMMONS (approaching the table) I'm keeping an eye on Hester

tonight. She mustn't stoke up too fast.  
(Peering at the table) Well, George, what  
have you got for me tonight?

GEORGE: Usual, Captain?

SIMMONS: That's right. Put the Martini bottle under  
a cloth!

Polite laughter.

GEORGE (pouring) How's that, Captain?

SIMMONS: Fine! (Taking the glass) Well, folks,  
I've been dreaming about this place for  
twenty years or more and I do believe I'm  
within an ace of getting it!

ELSIE: Go on!

SIMMONS (as they look at him) Mum's the word, George!

MABEL: Will Mr Ellis be leaving then?

SIMMONS (awkwardly) Oh, I don't know about that! He's in  
town at the moment. Board meeting. Telling  
them a tree fell through his roof. Which it  
did. That'll cost his insurance a pretty  
penny.

GEORGE: Oh, I'm glad he's insured.

SIMMONS: He isn't. His firm is. That tree was the  
best thing that happened to the house, from  
his point of view.

GEORGE: Oh?

SIMMONS (drinking) We can build our company on that, George.  
(Looking round) If somebody puts up a cry of  
here I'll throttle them! Ellis is the best  
here going!

They all glance at each other.

The BRIGADIER comes in.

THOMSON: Somebody call?

SIMMONS: Come and have a drink.

THOMSON (approaching the table) Your wife's threatening to go  
berserk again, Simmons.

SIMMONS: She'll be all right, she's got twins inside her.

THOMSON (baffled) What?

GEORGE: Drink, Brigadier?

THOMSON: Yes, please, George.

SIMMONS: I want you to come in on this decorating lark.

THOMSON: This what?

SIMMONS: With George and Dave. What I was telling you about.

THOMSON: I wouldn't dream of it. (To the others) Trifle bare without the trees, ish't it? Still, she can't cut 'em down, again, can she? That's one blessing (with a conniving guffaw)!

ELSIE: That's right, Brigadier!

SIMMONS: My second proposition is this---you come in on the lodge scheme as well.

THOMSON (as GEORGE hands him his drink) What are you talking about?

SIMMONS: The hunting lodge. (Pointing at the house) That one.

THOMSON: That's not a hunting lodge.

SIMMONS: It soon will be.

THOMSON (glancing at the others enquiringly) Where is he, by the way? Doesn't he look after his own guests?

SIMMONS: He'll never be happy in this house, Brig. I agree with your wife.

THOMSON: He won't if she can help it.

SIMMONS: Exactly. I'm just facing facts. It'll make a first class hunting lodge. George and Dave can be the caretakers.

GEORGE: Eh?

SIMMONS: We'll have hunt balls, supper parties, bloody great log-fires, a garden party once a month in the summer! We'll liven up this blasted hole if it kills us, eh, Dave? What do you think?

DAVE (with a shrug) Well---

THOMSON: There's nothing I hate more than hunt balls and supper parties.

DAVE (with a big effort) I don't think it's very nice scheming against Mr Ellis at his own garden party.

SIMMONS: It isn't his garden party.

THOMSON: What? Whose is it, then?

SIMMONS: Your wife's!

THOMSON: My---? Good God!

SIMMONS: He doesn't even know about it. He's up in town at a board meeting.

THOMSON: Do you mean to say she coolly gives a party in somebody else's house?

SIMMONS: It's her garden.

THOMSON: Yes. Yes, I suppose it is. But she didn't tell me. Suppose the poor blighter comes back dead-beat and wants an early kip-down?

SIMMONS: There's nothing to stop him. But she invited him as well.

THOMSON: Oh, she did? Well, that's civil!

SIMMONS: And if I know anything about the French, he'll jump at the chance of some free booze.

THOMSON: He isn't French after all. I made that mistake. He pulled me up for calling him monsieur.

SIMMONS: Really? Anyhow, I reckon he'll get at least a couple of thousand quid out of the insurance--- I worked it out for him before he went up this morning---and if we put that into our new company and you fork out another thousand, together with my lot, we can buy it all back from him at the price he paid.

THOMSON: But the value of this place has gone down enormously. We'd be mugs to pay the same.

SIMMONS: That's an incentive for him. Compensation for getting out---put it that way. Trust me, Brig, I know my man. He won't budge otherwise.

THOMSON: Oh.

SIMMONS: The lodge board then becomes the owner of the house and the decorating firm. Anyway (downing his drink quickly) come over and look at the place with my idea in mind. You'll see the point right away!

THOMSON: But I've seen it hundreds of times. I used to live in it.

SIMMONS: But you never saw it as a hunting lodge, I bet.

THOMSON: No, I can't say I did.

SIMMONS: Well, here's your chance..

THOMSON: How do we get in?

SIMMONS: Your wife's got the key.

THOMSON: Good-God!

SIMMONS: She's over there now, pottering about.

THOMSON (with an astonished glance at the others) Well---!

SIMMONS: It means we'll have to leave Hester alone for a minute, but as long as Ellis doesn't turn up she's all right. (To GEORGE, as he goes out) You'll be making a cool thousand a year on this job, George! So will Dave if he's lucky.

THOMSON follows the CAPTAIN out in a mesmerised state.

DAVE: Blimey! Did you hear that?

GEORGE: Did he say a thousand a year?

ELSIE: Yes!

GEORGE: That's manager's money!

ELSIE: But what a damned cheek, shoving a fellow out of his own house like that!

DAVE: She's in it, too, don't you worry.

ELSIE: Well, she always said she wanted the Captain in that house and now---!

A crash.  
The lights go out and the music runs down..

GEORGE: What's up now?

HESTER (off) Here! HARE!

DAVE: Oh, blimey, there we go!

SIMMONS: (off) Hester!

GUESTS (off) Lights, lights!

SIMMONS (off) It is the hare! Hark, hark back!

HESTER (off) HARE!

THOMSON (off) Is that my embroidery?

Another crash---probably glasses.

The sound of pursuit  
and laughter.

SIMMONS (off) Forward! Hark forward! To the river!

GUESTS (off) The river!

HESTER (off, screaming with laughter) HARE! My darling  
here!

THOMSON (off) Get the lights on! She can't see me!

GUESTS (off) The river!

The sounds begin to die  
away gradually.

HESTER (off, very distant) I've lost the scent!

Silence.

The lights suddenly go up  
again and the music whines  
back. An air of desert-  
ion beyond the trees.

ELLIS stands in the middle  
of the stage, looking shatt-  
ered, trying to get his  
breath.

ELSIE: It's Mr Ellis!

GEORGE: Hullo, Mr Ellis!

ELLIS: H-h-h-h---! (He makes a pathetic gesture)  
What the h-h-h---?

ELSIE: It's a garden party, Mr Ellis. Didn't you  
get your invitation, then?

ELLIS (shaking his head) N-n-n----!

ELSIE: The Captain said you was invited.

GEORGE: Shall I fix you a nice drink, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: I-----I-----!

GEORGE: There's some of the Brigadier's three-guinea  
special here!

ELLIS nods.

ELSIE: It's a bit of a cheek, really, isn't it,  
Mr Ellis?

ELLIS sits down on one  
of the chairs heavily,  
gazing round him with

his mouth open, speechless.

ELLIS (recollecting himself suddenly) Cheek?

ELSIE: Not telling you!

ELLIS: Oh!

He simply gazes before him. GEORGE comes round the table and hands him his drink carefully.

ELLIS takes a long draught.

ELLIS: A-h-h-h-h!

ELSIE: That's better, eh?

ELLIS: I fooled her that time.

ELSIE: Who, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: Hester. I headed her off to the river.

ELSIE (comfortably) Oh, well, that's good!

ELLIS (suddenly looking down at the chair he's sitting on)  
How the hell did this get here?

ELSIE: Mrs Thomson brought them out.

ELLIS: How did she get in?

ELSIE: I think she's got a key, Mr Ellis.

ELLIS: Oh! (Looking through the arches) There are lights on in the house. Is anybody there?

MABEL: They're looking it over?

ELLIS: Looking it over?

DAVE: The Captain and the Brig.

ELLIS: Not the Brig. He's down at the river trying to get chased.

ELSIE: They thought you wouldn't mind, I suppose.

ELLIS: I'm past minding, it's true. (A pause, then he holds his glass up to the light) It's a marvellous thing to come home tired from the office and get a first-class unblended whisky thrust into your hand, at a garden-party you know nothing about, in your own garden, given by people who a week ago cut down all your trees, tried to take your socks off your feet and sent an elm-tree crashing through your

roof! If it wasn't England I'd say it was all a dream!

GEORGE (with a smile) As long as you keep your humour, eh, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: That's right!

MABEL: What about your board meeting, Mr Ellis? Did it go all right?

ELLIS (after giving her a look of surprise) I said it was an act of God. They said it sounded more like the act of a devil. Still, the insurance-money's the same.

The CAPTAIN dashes in.

SIMMONS: Ah, there you are!

ELLIS: What's the bad news?

SIMMONS: It's yours I'm after.

ELLIS: We'll get about three thousand.

SIMMONS (everjoyed) Three thousand? My God---! (Sitting down in a business-like way and drawing his chair up to ELLIS'S) First of all, I want to set up a board with the Brigadier on it. We need his name, CBE, JP, all that sort of thing---~~apart~~ apart from his money. The lodge board.

ELLIS: What lodge board?

SIMMONS: Haven't you heard?

ELLIS: No.

SIMMONS: We're turning the house into a hunting lodge.

ELLIS: What?

SIMMONS: Well, come, come, old chap, you said you wanted to resell!

ELLIS: I never said anything of the kind!

SIMMONS: You didn't?

ELLIS: No, I didn't!

SIMMONS: Well, look, I hope you won't mind me saying this, but I wonder if you'll ever really settle down in this place?

ELLIS (after a pause) I wonder that sometimes, too.

SIMMONS: You know what Mrs Thomson's like. She'll make your life hell. That's my feeling.

ELLIS: But she's sorry about the trees. She asked me to forgive her. She even cried.

SIMMONS: Not for long, I bet.

ELLIS: No, not for long.

SIMMONS: You see, old chap, there's one basic fact: she's always wanted me in that house. And when she wants something she usually gets it. I'm only looking at the thing realistically.

ELLIS: Of course.

SIMMONS: She could do all sorts of things---run a water channel into your basement, cut your telegraph pole down (that's still standing, after all). Puncture the tyres of your car. That sort of thing. Wear up all the bushes, cement the lawn over and use it as a car-park. Keep her blasted mechanical saw going all day. These are only the first things that come to my mind. I'm just spilling them out as they occur to me.

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: You see what I mean?

ELLIS: But---what's she got against me?

SIMMONS: That you're not me.

ELLIS: That's not my fault.

SIMMONS: Yes, but she doesn't see it like that.

ELLIS sits thinking it over  
in a resigned way.

ELLIS (with a quick glance) How much would you give me for the place?

SIMMONS: Ah, now you're talking! We'd give you the price you paid.

ELLIS (astonished) You would? But half the value's been knocked off!

SIMMONS: That doesn't matter. Shake on it! (He seizes ELLIS's hand and pumps it)

ELLIS (gazing before him) Perhaps you're right. There doesn't seem anything to stay for...

SIMMONS (peering at him) It's a bargain?

ELLIS (after another pause, without looking at SIMMONS) All right.

SIMMONS (rising at once with great relief) Why don't you come and look the place over? You'll see what I mean!

ELLIS (also rising) Of course.

The CAPTAIN strides out hurriedly and ELLIS follows him in a thoughtful way, without glancing at the helpers.

A pause while they all look round cautiously.

GEORGE: That wasn't very difficult, was it?

ELSIE: You're telling me! I felt like saying something---!

DAVE: I reckon he's better off out of it, myself.

MABEL: It's funny, I don't think old Ellis has got the style for this place, somehow. Do you know what I mean? They've got him caught all the time. Always one ahead!

ELSIE: Well, when all's said and done he's no better than we are, is he? His father worked on the boats same as mine. He told me so himself.

MABEL: That's what I say.

GEORGE: I reckon he thought he could come in here and settle down just like that, with a bit of money in his pocket. But he found his mistake all right.

MABEL: Well, I wouldn't take those people on in a fight, that's all I say! They'll beat you every time.

GEORGE: It's the influence, you see. They've got it in all sorts of ways what we don't understand.

ELSIE: He looked real sad, did you notice that? You couldn't help feeling sorry for him, could you? I mean, it wasn't his fault really!

GEORGE: He shouldn't have cooked that report. He started off wrong, if you ask me.

ELSIE: He's got that cellar full of wine over there. I wonder where he gets it all?

GEORGE: Oh, they all know how to fiddle abroad, don't you worry. It's not like in this country, you know!

MABEL: Mind you---!

JOAN peeps round one of the arches.

JOAN: Was Mr Ellis here?

ELSIE: That's right, Mrs Thomson, he went to look over his own house with the Captain!

JOAN (with a shrewd glance at her) Really? Well, I hope they come to some arrangement. (Sitting down comfortably where ELLIS had sat) Really, you know, it is extraordinary how you can look at a place for ten or twenty years and not realise what it's absolutely made for! The Master's quite right. (Glancing at them) You'll see how it works out. That panelled dining room's made for hunt suppers!

GEORGE: Shall I get you a drink, Mrs Thomson?

JOAN: No, thank---!

The music is deafening again.

THOMSON (off) Turn that blasted thing down!

It is lowered again.

JOAN: Hester must be back. I must say, if all childless women were like her we'd be in the soup!

The BRIGADIER comes in.

THOMSON (to JOAN) Ah, there you are. What's all this about throwing the French chap out?

JOAN: Buying him out, you mean.

THOMSON: We can't do that! I mean, the poor fellow comes over here after four years to see his mother and father and sniff the old English air, and we don't let him have one fair night's rest! He told me so himself---'I haven't had a peaceful night since I came,' he said. 'There's either a garden-party or no roof, and tonight there's both!' I must say (sitting down heavily), I do sympathise.

JOAN: If I'd had my way the Master would have come here in the first place. It always seemed to me better than having a complete stranger walking round the place in stolen socks.

THOMSON: Stolen socks?

JOAN: Yes, he took my socks out of the attic.

DAVE (half to himself) I think it's a damned shame myself.

JOAN (quick to hear him) What good's he done you since he came?

DAVE: Well, I've got a car and a new job. I haven't done so bad!

JOAN: Oh, he's been a catalyst. He's certainly been a catalyst.

THOMSON (gaping at her) A what?

DAVE: Well, all I can---!

More cries of HARE! HARE!, getting closer, then roars of laughter.

JOAN: Hester again!

THOMSON jumps up as if shot and runs to the arches.

The music runs down, stutters, picks up again, then is normal, as if the chase had started again.

THOMSON (turning to JOAN from the arches with an excited expression) I didn't tell you! She chased me down to the river! (Abruptly turning to the arches again) She's coming!

FROM HERE  
IN 2<sup>nd</sup>  
ENDING -  
SCAN

He seems to lose control and begins dashing heavily round the stage in circles, his knees high and his fists clenched like a runner.

JOAN seems to be enjoying it.

JOAN: Go it!

THOMSON (out of breath) Hare! Hare!

JOAN (jumping up and looking through the arches) Stand still, you fool! Let her get your scent!

THOMSON (weakly) Hare! Hare!

JOAN: Cut 'em down! Cut 'em down! Back, back!

The CAPTAIN dashes in and runs straight to the arches to join JOAN.

SIMMONS: Isn't she grand? With two babies inside her! Back, back!

JOAN (with a bloodcurdling yell) Cut 'em d-a-h-n!

THOMSON (pleadingly) She's chasing me! (Begins running round again)

JOAN (suddenly, in a conversational tone to the helpers) Hope you don't mind all this? Just a game, that's all!

ELSIE (awkwardly) That's all right, Mrs Thomson!

SIMMONS (shouting) Hark foward, old scout! That's it---back, back! Forward! Now back, Ellis! Back, old man! Ellis, Ellis! Back!

THOMSON (stopping, stunned) Ellis?

JOAN (to SIMMONS) It's simply marvellous having no trees--- you get a perfect command of the field!

SIMMONS: Hark back, back! Gofon, Ellis, take that table---take it---that's---! (An enormous crash) Oh, I say!

JOAN: Splendid! What a splendid jump!

THOMSON: What happened?

JOAN (turning very briefly) He broke cover!

THOMSON (mumbling) Broke a lot else by the sound of it!

JOAN: You know, I think we've been misjudging this fellow!

SIMMONS: Oh, well done, Ellis! (He stops) Where are they going?

A pause, while they watch closely.

JOAN: He's heading her off towards the house.

THOMSON (who has joined them) He's gone inside.

Another pause.

JOAN: So has she.

SIMMONS: Oh. (Turning away sadly) I won't be a witness...

They walk away from the arches as if from a point to point.

JOAN: You know, I don't think I've ever seen Hester in better form. What do you say, Charles?

THOMSON: Oh, I agree. I agree.

JOAN: And as for this French chap, well, it showed a new side altogether! (With great charm) Don't you think so, Master?

SIMMONS (preoccupied) Yes, absolutely! (To GEORGE) Fix me up a drink, will you, old chap?

GEORGE: Right you are, Captain.

ELLIS enters, dishevelled and out of breath. They all look at him.

JOAN (walking forward in a pleasant way) Congratulations, Mr Ellis! I thought you were perfectly splendid!

She shakes his limp hand.

ELLIS (trying to get his breath) to SIMMONS) I----I----I've locked---locked---her in the house.

SIMMONS: What? (Coming up to him) Hester?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: But, Ellis, didn't you----?

ELLIS (impatently) Yes, yes, yes. It's triplets!

SIMMONS: Thank God!

THOMSON: Get Mr Ellis a drink, George! My special! (With great paternal charm) Now why don't we all sit down?

He gets a chair for ELLIS and puts a soothing hand on his shoulder.

They all sit down.

JOAN: Well, how did the negotiations go, Master?

SIMMONS (brightly) Very well! Mr Ellis agrees to sell!

THOMSON takes the glass of whisky from GEORGE to ELLIS.

THOMSON: There. It'll do you good.

ELLIS: Thank you.

THOMSON: Do they play rugger in your part of France?

ELLIS: I don't know.

THOMSON (to himself) Soccer, perhaps.

ELLIS (also to himself) I'll go to a foreign country where they think I'm English.

SIMMONS (to ELLIS) I must say, I've never seen anybody head her off like you!

ELLIS: Really?

THOMSON (sitting down as if at a meeting) I think the lodge scheme is quite sound, but I've got a suggestion to make. I think Mr Ellis may not altogether want to forget about us in the future, and if ever he likes to come back and spend a few days with us, for old times' sake, I think there'll be a room in the lodge for him, won't there?

JOAN: Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: Here, here!

JOAN (also at a meeting) I think it might be a good idea to keep two or three rooms for guests permanently.

THOMSON: Quite!

JOAN: Now is there anything more <sup>to</sup> while we're about it, Master? It's your brain-child, after all!

SIMMONS: Well, I worked it out yesterday and I reckon five or ten guineas a year should be about the subscription, I favour ten---I mean, you expect to pay at least that for the facilities of a club-house, don't you?

THOMSON: Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: I'd like to say on behalf of the board that we appreciate Mr Ellis's offer---

THOMSON: Here, here!

SIMMONS: ---and hope he'll remain with us as one of the directors.

ELLIS: Thank you. Thank you very much.

<sup>JOAN</sup>  
ELLIS (jumping up in a final way, and smiling at ELLIS) What a relief! I hate these formal occasions, don't you?

ELLIS (dazed) Yes.

They all get up and stroll to the bar.

THOMSON (conversationally) Going to be hard going this winter, Master? I heard so.

SIMMONS: Yes, I think it will (nodding judiciously).

JOAN (confidentially) I didn't really mind about the socks, you know. I'm only glad you thought they were worth wearing.

ELLIS (still dazed) Oh, thank you!

ELSIE: Well, Mr Ellis, I expect you're feeling a bit tired, eh?

ELLIS: Oh, well! (Looking round) You know, in a way I feel I belong here now. We've---we've had some exciting times, haven't we, really?

ELSIE: Oh, yes!

GEORGE: I don't know what Elsie and Mabel think about it, but as far as I'm concerned we're going to miss you! But I expect you'll be glad to get back, eh?

ELLIS (used to being baffled by now) Oh, yes!

GEORGE: It's sunnier over there, by all accounts!

ELSIE: It's a pity your mother and father didn't get down, isn't it, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: Oh, well, I'll give them a good treat in town instead.

GEORGE: That's right. I think they're doing a French show up there now, aren't they, Dave?

DAVE shrugs gloomily.

ELLIS: It's so peaceful now. Sometimes I think I could----

A slight crash from the direction of the house. They all turn.

SIMMONS: What's that?

A pause while they listen. The BRIGADIER goes to the arches and peers through.

THOMSON: It's your wife, Simmons! She's on the roof!

ELLIS: There isn't one.

SIMMONS (striding forward) My wife? (To ELLIS) I wondered if it was wise locking her---

THOMSON: Ssssh! She's calling!

They listen again. We hear HESTER (off): Jack!  
Jack!

SIMMONS: She's calling me!

JOAN: She won't jump, will she?

They all gaze through the arches.

THOMSON: Good God! She's got half the guests up there! No wonder it was so quiet.

ELLIS: Where?

JOAN (helpfully) Look, silhouetted against the sky.

ELLIS: Ah, yes!

SIMMONS: We'll have to get her down! Come on!

Laughter and a light sighing noise in the distance.

HESTER (off) It's a sputnik!

SIMMONS: A sputnik, she says?

JOAN: Come on, chaps, this might be fun!

Shouts of 'Lights out!  
Lights out!'

JOAN (going) Get the lights out, Charles!

THOMSON (striding off) Right! (Calling back) Bring some bottles up, will you, George? We'll have a party! (Guffawing)

SIMMONS (leaving) It's only her condition worries me!

GEORGE: Bottles?

More sounds of excitement. Then the lights go out.

GUEST (off) Look, it's red!

Another sighing noise.

GEORGE (laughing) Now, then, who's digging me in the ribs?

SIMMONS (off) Hester! We're on the way up! Don't move about too much!

THOMSON (off) George! (An enormous bellow) GEORGE! You coming with that boose?

GEORGE (softly) If I find it, mate. Here, Elsie, catch that. Mabel?

MABEL: Here I am. Whoops!

ELSIE: Talk about laugh!

GEORGE: Hang on to me!

MABEL: You coming, Dave?

They seem to go, with much clinking of bottles.

Their voices die away in the darkness. There is a long silence.

DAVE (from the darkness) I reckon they want something to get excited about, don't you?

ELLIS: That's right.

DAVE: Like another drink, Mr Ellis?

ELLIS: Call me Joe. That's my name.

DAVE (embarrassed) Oh. Thanks. Got your glass there?

ELLIS: Here.

The clink of a glass against a bottle.

DAVE: That's the three-guinea special.

ELLIS: Got one for yourself?

DAVE: Yes. Cheers.

ELLIS: Chin-chin.

We hear them drink and smack their lips.

DAVE: It don't seem to taste in the dark, do it?

ELLIS: No.

A pause.

DAVE: You going back to the old job, then?

ELLIS: I lost my job this morning.

DAVE: Eh?

ELLIS: I lost it.

DAVE: Blimey o' Riley! What are you going to do, then?

ELLIS: Well, I'm still a partner on this lodge board, believe it or not!

DAVE (quickly) Don't tell them you've lost it!

ELLIS: I won't. I couldn't find her face any more.  
Not after she cut those trees down.

DAVE (baffled) Her face? I kept on waking up at night and thinking, what country am I in? p.p

ELLIS:

DAVE: I'd go abroad myself, only this coughing of mine starts.

ELLIS: Coughing?

DAVE: It's like a cough inside.

Another cry of 'Sputnik!'  
in the distance.

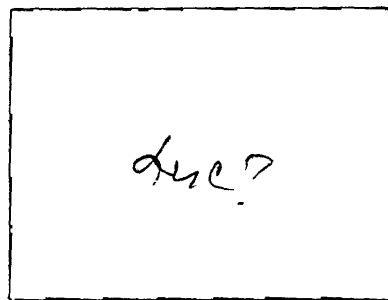
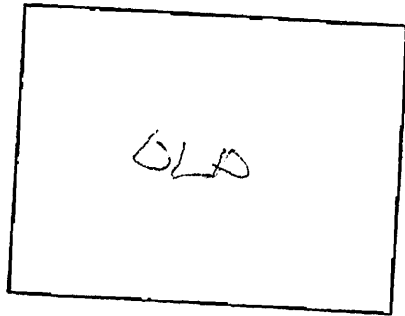
GUESTS (off) Sputnik!

ELLIS: She used to put her arm round his neck---I used to stand there trembling---- Oh, well! (As if speaking to someone) Francine? Francine? They've cut my country down.

DAVE: Here! Look! It's the sputnik! Look!

ELLIS (beginning to sob) Francine...

C U R T A I N



THE MECHANICAL SAW

A Play in Three Acts

by

Maurice Rowdon

CHARACTERS

Captain JACK SIMMONS

ELLIS (the Guest)

Brigadier CHARLES THOMSON

JOAN THOMSON (his wife)

The Helpers At The Garden Party:

GEORGE GORRINGE

ELSIE GORRINGE (his wife)

MABEL FORBES

DAVE FORBES (her son)

ACT ONEScene One

A garden-party in the evening. Behind the trees a small country house is visible.

This side of the trees there is a long table with glasses and buffet supper. A group of helpers polishes glasses, mixes drinks: GEORGE and ELSIE GORRINGE, MABEL and DAVE FORBES.

There is dance music from a gramophone. We see some couples dancing beyond the trees, under fairy lights.

CAPTAIN JACK SIMMONS is talking to another GUEST. The CAPTAIN is lean and full of beef. The GUEST is a young man with nothing military about him.

SIMMONS: (in a loud voice, glass in hand) My wife's tragedy is this --- she's never been able to have a kid. We've tried but ---!

GUEST: (sipping his drink) Is it too late?

(The music is suddenly switched up to top volume and we hear BRIGADIER THOMSON, off, shout 'Turn that bloody thing down!', and abruptly it is lowered)

SIMMONS: Eh?

GUEST: (swallowing and shouting hard) Is it too late?

(BRIGADIER THOMSON enters and strides across the lawn. He is a massive, flushed bulldog of a man)

THOMSON: (to the helpers) Just got the gramophone fixed up!

GEORGE: (with respectful nervousness) Going to dance, Brigadier?

THOMSON: (going out again) Hate it!

SIMMONS: She's over forty. She admits to forty! (with a guffaw)

GUEST: (guffawing nervously) Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: We've been trying for fifteen years or more. I thought of sending her ---! (lost)

GUEST: What?

SIMMONS: Another man!

GUEST: (staring at him) Another man?

SIMMONS: (angrily) Well, by Christ, if you want a kid you have to face facts --- but she's too bloody respectable by half! (red in the face) She acts hearty, she rides to hounds and makes a bloody nuisance of herself hanging round the whips, but she's a po-faced bitch underneath!

GUEST: (gingerly) I see!

SIMMONS: (looking round at the helpers, in a lower voice) I say, do you think they heard?

GUEST: I shouldn't be surprised.

SIMMONS: (peering at him) Who are you?

(The lights come back on. The music whines back)

My name's Ellis. How do you do?

SIMMONS: (shaking his hand in an absent way) How do you do? The best time I ever had was in the war. I ---! Why am I being honest with you?

GUEST: I don't know.

SIMMONS: I sold stolen sugar in Austria. Ran a paper mill for a chap in England when I shouldn't have. Little things. When they demobbed me I was rich.

GUEST: Really?

SIMMONS: I was a captain. Major, really. M.C. Got it by shooting my mouth off at the right time. Insurance-agent before the war, so I know how to do it. I think I'm impotent.

GUEST: What?

SIMMONS: I've got no class, that's my trouble. Know who I am round here?

GUEST: No?

SIMMONS: The M. F. H.

GUEST: The what?

SIMMONS: M. F. H.

GUEST: What's that?

SIMMONS: Are you English?

(The gramophone blares again and once more BRIGADIER THOMSON shouts, off, 'Turn that bloody thing down!')

Music subsides again)

GUEST: Yes.

SIMMONS: What?

GUEST: You asked if I was English.

SIMMONS: Did I?

GUEST: Yes.

SIMMONS: You know, if I had a son, a little chap with blond hair, I'd be a king ---!

ELLIS: What's the M. F. H. ? Something in business?

SIMMONS: Master of the foxhounds! Why don't you join us?

ELLIS: I can't ride!

SIMMONS: You can drive a car, though?

ELLIS: Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: (guffawing) I thought you must be good for something!  
Have another drink!

ELLIS: Yes, let's!

(They walk over to the buffet)

Evening, Captain!

SIMMONS: Hullo, Mrs. Gorringe! How's your husband?

ELSIE: He's bending down!

(GEORGE appears from under the  
table)

GEORGE: Hullo, Captain.

SIMMONS: What about the deal, George?

GEORGE: No, I couldn't. I've been thinking it over --- but ---  
well, the railway's secure!

SIMMONS: Like hell it is! Secure for early death by boredom!

ELSIE: That's what I tell him. He needs adventure.

GEORGE: I need money.

SIMMONS: Money comes by graft, risk, fiddle, sleight-of-hand.

MABEL: Drink, Captain?

SIMMONS: Please, Mrs. Forbes. Gin with a closed bottle of  
Martini half a yard away!

(They laugh politely)

MABEL: (to ELLIS) What about you?

ELLIS: Yes, please. Whisky.

MABEL: Neat?

ELLIS: With a shot of soda, please.

(The music bursts into a deafening roar again, and at once, as THOMSON's voice begins 'Turn that bl--!', it subsides again)

SIMMONS: (sipping his gin thirstily and looking round) What the devil goes on?

MABEL: It's the Brigadier's wife, she likes to manage the mechanical side.

ELSIE: She's always got her head stuck in a machine, like a man.

SIMMONS: She's wonderful on the hunting field, I'll say that! Mouth's too big, that's the trouble!

(They laugh politely)

Wife said to her one day, 'Your husband may be a brigadier but I believe that doesn't give you the right to hand out orders to the Master!' She's respected Hester ever since. (to GEORGE) You know, George, my wife's tragedy is ~~that~~!

GEORGE: (at once) Like some Martini in it, Captain?

SIMMONS: (blinking) What was I saying?

ELSIE: (to ELLIS) Are you new here, Mr ---?

ELLIS: Ellis. That's right. I came yesterday.

MABEL: (to ELLIS) Are you American?

ELLIS: Me? No. What made you think so?

MABEL: I was trying to place you. You don't look foreign yet you do. Just like Americans!

ELLIS: (to SIMMONS) Why don't you adopt one?

SIMMONS: (screwing up his face) One what?

ELLIS: A child. Weren't you saying ---?

SIMMONS: Christ! I've got enough to do with the hunt. You'll not believe me but it costs the best part of two thousand a year.

ELLIS: Really?

SIMMONS: I've got a little contractor's office in the City --- my employees wonder why we don't expand --- I could tell them!

ELLIS: Do you catch any foxes?

SIMMONS: (turning sharply to GEORGE) What?

GEORGE: He says do you catch any foxes?

SIMMONS: Oh! (uncomfortably) Fifty brace a year, say!

ELLIS: Fifty brace?

MABEL: That's right, they always measure them in braces!

(They all laugh, with the exception of SIMMONS)

GEORGE: (to ELLIS) A hundred, it means.

ELLIS: As many as a hundred?

SIMMONS: (waving his arms about) Well, it's a difficult sport in this part of the world -- too many roads --!

MABEL: My boy says he reckons you don't catch anything!

DAVE: (to MABEL) All right, all right!

SIMMONS: (with a nervous glance at DAVE) Your boy don't use his eyes!

MABEL: (to annoy DAVE, with a wink at ELSIE) My boy reckons he shoots more than you catch, and all you do is drive 'em on to our chickens!

GEORGE: Sssh!

SIMMONS: The ground's damned difficult, Mrs. Forbes, it's a built-up area, the old rural England's dead, there was a day when you could hunt at East Ham, believe it or not!

MABEL: (tickled) Now don't come to me with your old excuses!

- GEORGE: (to MABEL, with a smile) You've been at the gin, haven't you, mate?
- MABEL: (burlesque) Listen to that! You know I don't touch the stuff!
- (A crash, off. The music stops. Pandemonium behind the trees)
- SIMMONS: (dashing off) That's Hester! She always gets drunk about this time!
- ELSIE: (quietly, as they watch SIMMONS disappear) You're telling me! She shows it in her face, too. (to ELLIS) Ever seen her, Mr. Ellis?
- ELLIS: No.
- ELSIE: She's got one of those flushed complexions, if you know what I mean.
- ELLIS: Oh, yes!
- GEORGE: I don't suppose this gentleman wants to hear all our local gossip.
- MABEL: Don't you be so sure, mate! (with a wink) Eh, Mr. Ellis?
- ELLIS: (with a smile) I like a bit of gossip.
- MABEL: Of course, you do! It's natural! (to ELSIE) I liked it when he said two thousand a year, didn't you? I thought I wouldn't mind a lick off that. Where the devil does he get it?
- DAVE: Well, they say money breeds money, don't they?
- ELSIE: All thrown down the drain on a lot of blasted foxes!
- MABEL: Fifty brace a year, I don't think! I reckon all they want is a nice ride on Saturdays!
- DAVE: (to ELLIS) You been away long, Mr. Ellis?
- ELLIS: A few years, yes.
- DAVE: (pleasantly) Miss the old country?

ELLIS: A bit.

DAVE: I wouldn't mind getting away for good!

(A shout from behind the trees: 'You'd better take her home, Captain!'

CAPTAIN SIMMONS dashes in again)

SIMMONS: (to ELLIS) Well, good night, old chap! (they shake hands) I enjoyed our frank discussion!

ELLIS: Is your wife all right?

SIMMONS: Oh, yes! She started a beagle hunt --- the usual thing! Tripped over the wires! She chases hares.

ELLIS: Hares?

SIMMONS: Well, good night, Mrs. Gorringe! George and Dave, Mrs. Forbes --- you did very nicely, thank you!

(They all say good night and  
CAPTAIN SIMMONS hurries off again)

GEORGE: (to ELLIS) The Brigadier's an interesting man, too. He's been called a rock of justice, and I don't think it's far from the truth, neither. He sits on the local Sessions. (to MABEL) Do you know, he did all that wood panelling in the house over there?

MABEL: Did he really?

ELSIE: It's more than she'd do---she don't even feed the poor devil!

GEORGE: Still, she's a good worker. I'd like to see anybody else run a farm like she did single-handed. (again to ELLIS) The Brigadier does embroideries, too. You've never seen anything like 'em! They take anything up to three years sometimes. I reckon every stick of furniture in that house is covered with his work.

MABEL: (to ELLIS) It's funny for a man, isn't it?

ELLIS: Yes.

ELSIE: What parts do you live in, Mr. Ellis---very far away?

ELLIS: South of France. Where the sun shines.

MABEL: It's lucky we didn't get a downpour tonight. The forecast said storms, (with another wink at ELLIS) so I thought we'd get it nice!

GEORGE: It's on the way, don't you worry. It isn't often them boys are wrong.

DAVE: I heard a rumble as I came over.

MABEL: It was your stomach, mate!

ELSIE: (laughing) Here---do you remember that storm just before the war, Mabel?

GEORGE: Blimey, you're going back, aren't you?

MABEL: (to GEORGE) You was underground, mate, so it didn't bother you.

ELSIE: (to ELLIS) He was in the mines.

GEORGE: (also to ELLIS) I'm not sorry I gave up that lark. Still, I don't see as it's much better on the railways.

DAVE: It's clean, for a start.

GEORGE: I don't see it's so clean! I shifted a cartload of coaldust this morning and didn't notice it, anyhow!

ELSIE: Well, you got your offer, didn't you, mate? To my mind, you looked a gift-horse in the mouth.

GEORGE: (shouting) I'm not walking into anything blindfold and that's a cert!

MABEL: (to ELLIS) My Dave mixes paints all day. I'm sure it's not doing him any good!

DAVE: (discouraging her) All right, all right!

MABEL: I heard it gets in their lungs and---!

(JOAN THOMSON, the BRIGADIER's wife, enters. A quick, anxious-looking, sporty woman in her fifties. Perceptive, alert eyes)

JOAN: Hullo, all! Lots left over for Sunday din, Mrs. Gorringe?

ELSIE: That's right, Mrs. Thomson!

JOAN: (with a chuckle) I'll have the old chap eating sandwiches for a fortnight! (they all smile politely) Well, Mr. Ellis, what about seeing the house?

ELLIS: Love to.

JOAN: I expect you want to get away?

ELLIS: Oh, no, I---

ELSIE: He's been having a natter with us, Mrs. Thomson, you know what I---

JOAN: (cutting her short) Well, let me lead the way. I'm afraid it's in a bit of a mess!

(She leads ELLIS out. ELSIE stands there looking abashed and mortified)

ELSIE: Well, I never! She makes you feel that big, don't she? (in the direction of the house) You old cow, you---for two pins I'd give you a piece of my mind!

GEORGE: I told you before, you've got to watch your step with them people! She's not one of us, you know.

(The BRIGADIER comes in. They brighten)

THOMSON: You can clear up now! No more music---thank God! Where's Ellis?

ELSIE: Who?

THOMSON: The foreign chap.

ELSIE: Oh, your wife took him in to see the house, Brigadier!

THOMSON: I see! Well, we can clear up! I never get any enjoyment out of these things... (gazing round)

GEORGE: Never mind, Brigadier. Have a drop of whisky.

THOMSON: (turning to him slowly with a slight smile) That's the nicest thing's been said to me this evening!

(GEORGE pours him a stiff glass)

GEORGE: There!

THOMSON: (taking it and sniffing it) That's my Isla Mist, if I'm not mistaken!

GEORGE: I kept your bottle aside.

THOMSON: Didn't the Captain smell it?

ELSIE: He sniffed round a bit but we waved some gin under his nose!

THOMSON: Well, here's to your health, good people---(stopping) but I'll not drink alone!

ELSIE: Oh, well, then! (as they all take up their glasses)

(They all drink, with 'Good health! ',  
'Here's health!')

THOMSON: Look at those trees---! (they follow his gaze) When you die you're like that, just the same. (silence) There's no point jumping and shouting and switching that blasted music on, you've got to come to it in the end. Ah, well! (he drinks off his glass with a gulp and raps it back on the table) Better take all this stuff to the barn, George---it'll rain tonight!

GEORGE: Right you are, Brigadier.

THOMSON: (peering through the trees at the guests) I suppose they'll go home some time. They only come for the boose. Good night, all!

- ELSIE: Good night, Brigadier!
- (He stalks off. They gaze after him)
- MABEL: I've never seen that man really smile. He laughs, but he don't smile.
- GEORGE: He's got nothing to smile about.
- ELSIE: If they were all like him, it wouldn't be so bad...
- (They assemble the cartons of food and the crates)
- MABEL: It makes me smile---she wouldn't dream of giving us a penny for this work, would she?
- DAVE: Oh well, we get a few drinks.
- MABEL: No, but we are piecans, aren't we? She's only got to say a word and we go all soft inside! I do, at any rate! I don't think I could give her a no if she asked me to put my hand in boiling water.
- ELSIE: It's the voice, Mabel. They're brought up to it, you see.
- GEORGE: She's not a bad old stick.
- ELSIE: (to MABEL) Remember that time she gave me five shillings for washing out nine pairs of sheets? Never again, Elsie Gorringe, I said!
- (They collapse the table. The fairy-lights go out behind the trees)
- GEORGE: (to DAVE) Fifty brace of fox! He must think we're mugs!
- DAVE: They say he's a proper martinet on the back of a horse. Cusses and blinds!
- GEORGE: I reckon that's why they do it---to work off their poisons.
- MABEL: It makes me laugh, all this 'captain' and 'brigadier' lark. Anybody'd think there was a war on!
- DAVE: Oh, they love their names!
- GEORGE: I'll call myself lance-corporal!

ELSIE: (laughing, to MABEL) It took him five years in the cook-house to get a stripe!

MABEL: (to GEORGE) I heard you was mentioned in despatches for your mashed potatoes, mate?

(ELSIE looks round to see if anybody is looking, then speaks in a lower voice)

ELSIE: Who is that young feller?

MABEL: I reckon they're selling the house!

ELSIE: Go on!

GEORGE: (to DAVE, with a smile) There they go!

MABEL: She said she'd never let it be sold, not over her dead body! That was a month ago.

ELSIE: I reckon he put his foot down...

MABEL: I wouldn't live over there, I can tell you that much!

GEORGE: (to DAVE) Last time I looked at the stairs there was dry rot all the way up. That was two years ago, so God alone knows what it's like now! The roof'd fall in if you breathed too hard!

ELSIE: (to MABEL) She says to me once, she says, Mrs. Gorringer, the best dinner for me is a nice piece of fish and six pennorth of chips, in a newspaper! I ---!

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS enters again)

SIMMONS: Seen the Brigadier?

ELSIE: Yes, he just went over to the house, Captain.

SIMMONS: I hear they're selling it! Know anything about it, George?

GEORGE: (turning away) Not me.

(DAVE shoulders some cartons and trudges off)

SIMMONS: (calling after him) Tell the Brig I'd like a word with him, Dave!

DAVE: (off) OK!

SIMMONS: Got another drink?

GEORGE: Well, we've packed up really, Captain.

SIMMONS: Come on, you artful old bugger, there's some whisky under there --- I can see it! (bending down to one of the crates) God above, Isla Mist!

GEORGE: (with a smile) It's the Brigadier's private bottle.

SIMMONS: Well, just milk a little off for me. (as GEORGE pours a glass) Now, what about it --- is he selling or not?

GEORGE: I told you, I don't know.

SIMMONS: What about that foreign chap?

GEORGE: Only a mug'd buy that place, Captain.

SIMMONS: What? I could turn it into a palace. You're like all the other Englishmen nowadays --- no bloody initiative!

GEORGE: All I say is you wouldn't get your value.

SIMMONS: I'd make the value! It's a business man's dream, that bloody house. Three hundred yards from one of the biggest highways in England, with a screen of poplars in front!

MABEL: It gives me the jitters. I only have to set foot inside that door and I come over liquid!

SIMMONS: It's got style --- the past ---! It's a house to sit and dream in. (his eyes gleaming) That's why they won't let me buy it. Because I'd love it!

(The BRIGADIER's voice:  
'Somebody want me?'  
He appears)

THOMSON: Oh, hullo, Jack! (evasively) Young Forbes said I was wanted.

SIMMONS: That's right. I've just been having some of your best unblended.

THOMSON: (irritated) Oh, that's the style. (with a glance at the others, who promptly go on with their work)

(He and CAPTAIN SIMMONS withdraw from the others a little, and BRIGADIER THOMSON puts his hand on the other's shoulder in a gingerly way)

What's it about?

SIMMONS: (pointing at the house) That.

THOMSON: (after a pause) What?

SIMMONS: You didn't invite me to make a bid, did you?

THOMSON: Well, it's --- (hesitating) This fellow needed a house pretty quick, you see. Friend of mine in the City more or less talked me into it.

SIMMONS: (cynically) Oh, yes?

THOMSON: If he don't meet the price I'll let you know ...

SIMMONS: Thanks!

(An awkward pause.

The helpers begin taking out the crates, cartons etc.

The BRIGADIER and the CAPTAIN wait until they're alone)

(with a fixed expression) You haven't paid your hunt subscription.

THOMSON: (his head ducked) Oh, really?

SIMMONS: Yes, really. I could sit and dream in that house. That's one thing I learned about the English early in life. They don't help your dreams.

THOMSON: Come, you're English, aren't you?

SIMMONS: (agressively) Well, I've never been outside except to kill Germans!

THOMSON: (parrying) Really?

SIMMONS: It's more than you did! You were warming your arse in Malta, I believe?

THOMSON: (abashed) I ---

SIMMONS: (looking across at the house again) We could have our hunt meetings over there. Instead of in the butcher's!

THOMSON: (his anger up) I can't see what's wrong with a butcher!

SIMMONS: (glaring at the house again) She might have had a baby over there!

THOMSON: What?

SIMMONS: You never know --- the right atmosphere!

THOMSON: You fool! She's fifty years of age!

SIMMONS: It's happened before!

THOMSON: It's never happened!

(Silence. Anger brooding like a volcano)

SIMMONS: (in an outburst) You never wanted me in that hunt!

THOMSON: I like your damned cheek ---!

SIMMONS: The two thousand quid comes out of my pocket, for all your bloody class! You're living on me when you hunt on Saturdays!

THOMSON: (flushed) I started in the family business, my war record's clear! My name was bandied about for Lord Sheriff of the County, I commanded a battalion in Malta for nearly two years --- I got the CBE ---!

(They shout in a black, blind, rhythmic way, as if not really speaking from their own thoughts)

- SIMMONS: Shut up! I've sat on thirteen boards and God knows how many tribunals! I dine at White's now and then, I'm a member of Savage's, Carlton's, the Traveller's! I was in the T.A. before the war and went in the Buffs as a major ---! I fought with my own hands, the soldiers under me loved the ground I walked on, It's just that the wife can't have any kids ---!
- THOMSON: (turning on him suddenly) That's always the trouble with mixing classes! You're not by any means a natural M.F.H.!
- SIMMONS: (almost in tears) I'm the only one with money!
- THOMSON: Tweed could have filled the job, or Denham, Crew, young Viscount Wallmaster --- but they've all been eaten away by death duties ---!
- SIMMONS: Like you, I suppose!
- THOMSON: My wife, not me! Mine's a trading family and I don't mind who knows it! In the war I was called to Corps Headquarters frequently to clear up points of supply --- I sat on the officer selection board --- I ---!
- SIMMONS: I built up my business from scratch --- I've earned my way to where I am now -- in the mess they used to get up when I came in -- I wasn't substantive major but that was my name --- Major Simmons --- the CHQ commended me for getting 'B' Echelon up two hours after consolidating my chaps on a hilly position --- point 287 --- a machine gun nest --- I ran up screaming!
- THOMSON: Two of my boards were banks, man! I've got five horses in my stables, I buy a new car every year, my brother-in-law's in the House of Commons, his wife has a title, they own some railways in South Africa!
- SIMMONS: My wife has distant relatives who ---!
- THOMSON: I inherited an estate in Scotland! I lunched the other day with a QC whose father was Speaker once and we talked about costly clarets for nearly two hours --- Lord Bligh came in --- he's on our board --- and we found we knew each other as kids!

SIMMONS: In the mess I used to lose my temper and make young subalterns feel a fool --- the Adjutant always came to my bivvy for a drink --- I made a standing order that nobody lower than a captain should talk at our table unless addressed --- I had two secretaries before the war --- I used to run a car in the days when that was something! We took a holiday on the Riviera in 1937 ---!

THOMSON: We go every year to France! We know the hotels like the back of our hands! We drive through the Loire and sometimes the Rhone. We go to the Bahamas, stay at a close friend's house ---! I---- (running out of ideas) I --- I never voted Labour in the post-war election!

SIMMONS: Nor did I! (remembering with a shock) Yes, I did!  
(They are out of ideas, out of breath, out of voice)

THOMSON: My father was a friend of old Lord Grey's and met Baldwin twice! In the crisis at the Fort he lunched with Edward the King --- I can't stand royalty myself, it's the Bosch in them, I suppose, but by God I'd fight ---!

(There is silence. They stare before them, panting. The recital is over)

(taking out his leather cigarette case) Have a cigarette.

SIMMONS: Thanks.

THOMSON: (showing him the case) Florence. Nice, isn't it?

SIMMONS: (smelling it) I love the smell of leather. My wife walked in with a leather coat on the other day. (helping BRIGADIER THOMSON to a light) My bank manager gave me the shock of my life when he showed me the bill.

THOMSON: That's one good thing --- my wife doesn't spend much on clothes. She's an untidy bitch, as you may have remarked.

SIMMONS: (confidentially) Oh, while I'm on it --- you might tell her to keep a check on her language when we're out ---! It's not swear words I mean --- it's the tone. The other women feel she's a bit upstage.

THOMSON: (reasonably) My wife has to be understood, that's all.

SIMMONS: Oh, I realise that. But I thought I'd just tell you.

THOMSON: Oh, yes.

SIMMONS: (glancing at him doubtfully) I'm sure she doesn't mean to be highhanded!

THOMSON: (also doubtfully) Oh, no!

SIMMONS: (holding out his hand) Well, it's been a nice evening, Brigadier. Hester's drunk in the car.

THOMSON: (chuckling) Just like her family.

SIMMONS: She says she'd like to pass out completely one day --- to the valley of no return!

THOMSON: That's the trouble with women. Too imaginative. I always describe imagination as 'overheads we can ill afford'.

SIMMONS: Did you ever try with the wife?

(A pause)

THOMSON: What?

SIMMONS: Did you try --- hard?

THOMSON: In what way?

SIMMONS: (confidentially) She started telling me I didn't --- pull my weight properly!

THOMSON: (frightened) Oh, yes!

SIMMONS: Did you?

THOMSON: Did I what? (backing up)

SIMMONS: Pull yours?

THOMSON: Good God! (he begins to chuckle) You ...

SIMMONS: (screwing up his eyes) What's that?

THOMSON: (almost to himself) You dirty old .....

SIMMONS: But tell me ---?

THOMSON: (confidentially) She hates it! (daring his teeth)  
I'd like to BITE her! (biting the air)

SIMMONS: In life (quietly) --- and my wife agrees --- there  
are two basic and what we call royal kinds of riding.  
One on a horse and one --.

THOMSON: (glancing round carefully) How often do you ride?

SIMMONS: Er --- (also glancing round) three times a week ---  
over very rough country!

(They both roar with laughter)

THOMSON: Not a bad average!

SIMMONS: By no means!

THOMSON: (about to leave) Well, goodbye, old chap! Drop in  
and have a drink some time.

SIMMONS: (shaking hands) I will!

THOMSON: (to himself, chuckling as he walks off) Over  
very rough country! Joan! Must tell 'er that!  
(calling) Joan!

(They disappear in opposite  
directions)

ACT ONEScene Two

Inside the house there is a roughly covered settee and an armchair with odd broken chairs and tables.

On the left, a porch leads into the garden; on the right a door leads into the dining room.

JOAN THOMSON is sitting on a table, smoking. Her skirt is hitched up as if only breeches made her feel comfortable.

- JOAN: That you, Charles?
- THOMSON: (entering) Has he gone?
- JOAN: Yes. He seemed to like it.
- THOMSON: I don't like him. I've got a feeling he won't be reliable - the cheque'll bounce or something.
- (He potters about in a drawer while he talks)
- JOAN: What are you looking for?
- THOMSON: (with a startled expression) My CBE ribbon. That blighter, Simmons, didn't believe me!
- JOAN: You are a goof sometimes, old boy.
- THOMSON: (straightening up) Sometimes I forget I ever had the CBE---it suddenly comes over me...
- JOAN: It is rather hard to believe.
- THOMSON: (blinking doubtfully) What?
- JOAN: (with a glint in her eyes) Never mind.
- THOMSON: I had occasion to mention it to old Simmons, that's all. I say, do you know what he said?
- JOAN: No?

THOMSON: He said, there are two kinds of bloody good rides in life, and I ride to hounds four times a week---no, three!

(A pause)

JOAN: What?

THOMSON: Well, he said there are two rides---and I said how many times a week---! (sulkily) Oh, I don't know,--- something like that! I can never bring a joke off with you!

JOAN: So what's wrong with my young man?

THOMSON: Simmons wants the house. But I'm buggered if I'll let him have it.

JOAN: He'll pay within a month. The whole thing.

THOMSON: (turning) Who?

JOAN: My young man.

THOMSON: Good God! Has he got the money?

JOAN: Apparently.

THOMSON: Idle rich?

JOAN: No, his company's buying the place.

THOMSON: His company? I wish my company bought me houses! What's his offer?

JOAN: A thousand more than you said.

THOMSON: (starting) What?

JOAN: (with cool triumph) That's right.

THOMSON: Oh!

(A pause)

JOAN: In other words, he's a mug.

THOMSON: (quietly) Well, we were after a mug, weren't we?

(She goes to the window)

JOAN: Intelligent chap. (gazing out)

THOMSON: The last intelligent chap you had drove his car into my stables. And then described it as an act of God!

JOAN: We'll see what this chap can do!

THOMSON: He treated me with great respect, though, I must say that. He called me sir. (gazing at her) He didn't seem won over by your libellous stories. Have you started on this one yet? (she hums and picks thread from her skirt) I say, he wasn't won over by your stories.

JOAN: Yes, I heard.

(Silence. There is a clap of thunder in the distance. She walks to the door abruptly - left)

JOAN: (going) I'd better get the gramophone in.

(She leaves and the BRIGADIER is alone)

THOMSON: (gazing out of the window) I smelt rain. The trouble is, I---! (he stops, looking round) I don't believe in a damned thing!

(Lightning and an enormous clap of thunder.

JOAN dashes in. She has thrown a kind of old sack over her head)

JOAN: Oh, come on, for Christ's sake---there's half the furniture out there! It isn't ours, either!

THOMSON: I'm sorry!

(He dashes out after her.

The rain grows heavier; there is more thunder and lightning.

We hear JOAN and the BRIGADIER puffing and blowing as they push upright chairs into the porch.

The chairs grow slowly until a pile of them almost blocks the doorway.

Then the BRIGADIER emerges at the top of the pile and climbs back into the room, soaked and out of breath. JOAN follows, jumping down in an agile way)

THOMSON: Well! I rather enjoyed that! (wiping himself with a handkerchief as he sits down) God knows why he does respect me. Because I'm a JP, do you think? Like that American I met in the City. Shook hands with him--- and I found he was trembling. Know that? Yes!

JOAN: (having thrown the sack off) Trembling?

THOMSON: I'm everything they're frightened of, perhaps.

JOAN: (ironically) Really?

THOMSON: In one word, class. (taking off his jacket) I can tell you one thing, I prefer your buffet suppers to the dinners you cook. (suddenly) By God, Hester's a fine piece, isn't she? I mean---! One shufti at her and I spent a restless night!

JOAN: All right, old boy, don't get beyond yourself!

(She walks across to the dining room door and as she does so he puts out a hand to touch her)

THOMSON: Joan---how do you think they enjoyed it?

JOAN: (suffering his hand on her arm silently) Oh, all right.

THOMSON: Let's have another drink. Joan---! (pulling her a little)

JOAN: (between clenched teeth) I'll get the drink!

(She then strides off)

THOMSON: (to himself again) She's always been like that. I used to sit on the bed and cry. (suddenly remembering something) Joan! I say, you haven't seen my embroidery, have you? The latest job? (jumping up rather frantically) I left it on the chair here!

(There is no reply and he stumbles in something of a panic towards the porch and manoeuvres the hill of chairs again, cursing to himself. The room is empty again.)

The rain continues. There is more lightning. We hear the BRIGADIER crash into a last chair on the porch: 'Damn'. Then there is silence.

JOAN reappears with the drinks in her hands. She looks round)

JOAN: Charles?

(Only the sound of the rain. She puts the drinks down and goes to the window. She peers out.

At last we hear a scraping at the porch again)

Is that you, Charles?

(We hear him climbing the chairs again. His head appears at the top. Then he climbs down)

THOMSON: It's ruined. It was in the flower patch. 'Three years' work.

(He stands gazing at her. The rain has soaked his shirt now)

JOAN: Here's your drink.

THOMSON: Aren't you sorry?

JOAN: (impatiently) Of course I'm sorry!

THOMSON: You left it in the mud.

JOAN: I left it?

THOMSON: You can be so cruel. That took me three years.

(She shrugs, though a little ashamed)

JOAN: The colours don't run, do they?

THOMSON: It's torn. Nearly ripped to pieces.

JOAN: Hester used it as a hare.

THOMSON: I thought so!

JOAN: (taking his drink to him) Here---come to mum!

(She holds the glass to his lips and he takes a sip. Then she takes one as well, from the same glass)

Pax?

(He nods sadly and they link little fingers. A little tug to confirm it)

THOMSON: Pax.

JOAN: (as they separate) Do you know, he said he'd buy the house without the land?

THOMSON: Did he? (suddenly realising what she has said) What? Without the garden?

JOAN: Yes.

THOMSON: But the land's worth---!

JOAN: I know!

THOMSON: But what sort of complete bally idiot is this man?

JOAN: He's intelligent. They're all idiots nowadays, didn't you know? And they get paid like film stars. Anyway, we can build up a real stables at last.

THOMSON: You're damned right we can! (with quiet astonishment) What a blasted mug! Here---(suddenly) he's not a Yank, is he?

JOAN: No!

THOMSON: I don't want this place colonised. I admire them and all that, but we do need a corner to ourselves!

JOAN: He's English, though you wouldn't know it.

THOMSON: (gazing at her with a slight smile) You are a blasted old swindler, you know.

JOAN: What was I to do---turn him down?

THOMSON: Oh, no! Certainly not!

(They sip their drinks)

JOAN: (chuckling) Hester caught her hare just by the switch-board tonight---brought the whole lot down, lights, radio and all!

THOMSON: (reminded) She caught my embroidery, too.

JOAN: You know what this deal means, don't you? I can run the garden.

THOMSON: It means you can come down and lead him hell when you like.

JOAN: That's right.

(Another pause)

THOMSON: The Master says I look down on him. Which I do. I can't stand him dressed up in that pink coat of his. Makes him look like a puppet!

JOAN: You men are frightful when you quarrel. Hester and I could run that hunt better.

THOMSON: Like hell you could. What about that time she called you the fox's best friend?

JOAN: She's a bitch, but so am I. That's why we agree. And another thing we've got in common---(glances at him)

THOMSON: What's that?

JOAN: We're both childless.

THOMSON: (mumbling) Oh, put a sock in it, for Christ's sake...

(There is silence between them)

JOAN: (almost to herself) I used to try so hard. I used to sit and will a baby. I used to pray even. But you can't do it like that.

THOMSON: All right, all right.

JOAN: (almost in tears) I was always picked on in the family. Always laughed at. All I heard was 'service'. I always fell short in 'service'. And it was such a hearty family! I had nothing I could call my own---they always smashed it up for me! (putting her handkerchief to her eyes) They took my socks---I had to come down to breakfast without any socks on, and then get shouted at.

- THOMSON: (his head bowed, with disgust) Oh, Christ!
- JOAN: I can see it in people's eyes. The Gorringses, for instance, Dave Forbes. They say, she puts her energies into the farm because...!
- THOMSON: (raising his voice) You haven't got a farm!
- JOAN: (in a steely way) I will have! That's where this money's going. A small stable. And a big herd of Guernseys!
- THOMSON: (in alarm) Oh, no, we're not having that again---not in the new house! Cows calving in the drawing room---
- JOAN: That happened once, you chump!
- THOMSON: ---and the clang of that bloody milk pail at four o'clock in the morning---
- JOAN: Five!
- THOMSON: It felt like four. Then young Dave Forbes sticking his grinning face round the door---(imitating him) 'One of your fences is down, Brig. Four or five missin' again!' Oh, no... And the tramps through the mud for the missing cow. The bloody agricultural inspectors, and the milk board, and pigs rooting in the lawn.
- JOAN: I broke even on it, anyway!
- THOMSON: But not again! Not in the new house!
- JOAN: All right--- no Guernseys, no sale!
- THOMSON: (menacingly) You'll leave my money alone!
- JOAN: I shan't touch your money. I'll just tell him the right price.
- THOMSON: (in a quiet, firm voice) You won't tell him the right price.
- (Another pause, during which they sip their drinks)
- JOAN: I wish you could dance, you know.
- THOMSON: I'd have started thirty years ago if I'd wanted to.
- JOAN: Our family quack told me once---

THOMSON: Yes, I know: it 'loosens the fluids'.

JOAN: You never loosened mine.

THOMSON: (his head lowered) Yes, yes.

JOAN: I still dream about a house full of children.

THOMSON: Yes.

JOAN: I swear I can understand them better than grown-ups.

THOMSON: (with a touch of reverence) I believe you can.

JOAN: I'd either like to be a child---or a horse.

THOMSON: I wish I could remember what old Simmons said---  
three times a week... Do you think he---? (he stops)  
I mean, do you think it's all right between some people?

JOAN: (quietly) Go to hell!

(They are silent)

THOMSON: Is his firm sending a surveyor down?

JOAN: He is the surveyor.

THOMSON: What?

JOAN: He says he'd pay twice as much on the Continent.

THOMSON: Did he, by God?

JOAN: He says the prices here are low. He says our position's  
shrunk.

(They are silent)

JOAN: I'll have to ask the Master to dinner. I don't want him  
cutting up about this house. Ask your cousin twice-  
removed---the honourable one---there's nothing like a  
title for softening old Simmons up.

THOMSON: Eddy, you mean? But he's potty! Anyway, this house  
is a bloody disgrace. I wouldn't even invite this  
foreign chap!

JOAN: (defensively) You find me a housekeeper, then.

THOMSON: I've found you a dozen. (they are suddenly in the middle of a blazing row) But they won't stand your clothes all over the floor and your filthy habits---the cow-dung in the kitchen---hay from the horse-box all over the beds---and finally---finally---that blasted mechanical saw cluttering up the dining room! (he is livid)

JOAN: (stung) I'll keep it there another week. It needs more work on the pistons.

THOMSON: I've got the chairman and his wife coming to dinner Saturday night! All that lovely panelling of mine ruined! And the inlaid sideboard with your grease all over it---your nuts, bolts, piston-rings, broken silencers---!

JOAN: I told you, the silencer's bust! You said you couldn't stand the noise.

THOMSON: I couldn't! No, I couldn't!

JOAN: All right! I'll clear it out of the dining room---you'll get your dinner party---but I'm afraid I can't get the silencer done yet. There won't be time.

THOMSON: (hushed, as if in pain) That's right. No silencer. (nodding to himself) Tit-for-tat. All the way through life. Dinner party---no silencer. Sell the house---a herd of Guernseys...

(Suddenly he strides across to her, overcome with rage, and seizes her savagely. He begins kissing and biting her violently, holding her hair in a great mass in one hand. She struggles and then begins to scream in a peculiar muted way)

JOAN: Char---! Charles! You swine! Swine!

(Screaming at the top of her voice, as she manages to tear herself away)

Swine! !

(She stamps out of the room like a soldier, into the dining room. There is some tearful-fumbling with machinery next door. The BRIGADIER stands there panting.

Suddenly the air is filled with the deafening roar of an engine, minus its silencer. A mechanical saw.

The noise is simply immense.  
BRIGADIER stands there bowed, like a defeated animal, staring in front of him.

There is a shout from the porch: 'Brig!  
Brig!'. Suddenly he realises he is being  
called. He turns this way and that, torn  
between the engine and the voice from  
the porch)

THOMSON: (thinking to appeal to JOAN to turn it off) Joan! Joan!

VOICE: (OFF) Brig! Are you there, Brig?

THOMSON: Yes, damn you! (swivelling) Joan! Joan!

JOAN: (appearing) What the devil---?

THOMSON: (shouting) There's---!

(He indicates the porch and as he does  
so CAPTAIN SIMMONS is seen climbing  
over the barrier of chairs. He is wet and  
bedraggled)

SIMMONS: (shouting at the top of his voice) HAVE YOU SEEN  
HESTER?

(JOAN disappears again)

THOMSON: (screwing up his face) What?

SIMMONS: HAVE YOU---(the engine cuts out) SEEN---! (he  
stops, stunned by the silence) What the devil have  
you got there?

THOMSON: Oh, it's---it's... A mechanical saw.

SIMMONS: In the dining room?

THOMSON: Yes---the---er---wife, she's having trouble with it.

SIMMONS: But what the hell can she be cutting up in the dining room?

THOMSON: (irritably) She's mending it, that's all!

SIMMONS: In the dining room?

THOMSON: Oh, shut up, for God's sake! It's bad enough with her!

SIMMONS: I'm sorry.

THOMSON: What's the trouble, anyway?

SIMMONS: Hester's not drunk in the car.

(A pause)

THOMSON: (staring at him) What?

SIMMONS: She hasn't gone to bed in the car.

THOMSON: I should hope she hasn't. Does she usually?

SIMMONS: I fix up a bed there. For when she chases hares.

THOMSON: (turning away and speaking quietly) You're drunk.

SIMMONS: (shouting) But everybody knows I keep a bed in the shooting break for when she gets tight!

THOMSON: (again furious) I don't know anything about your domestic arrangements, man!

SIMMONS: (quietly) Well, she's not there anyway.

(Another pause)

THOMSON: Why should she be?

SIMMONS: She always is --- after she's been chasing hares.

(BRIGADIER THOMSON looks at him slowly)

THOMSON: (calling out) Joan! Hester's missing!

SIMMONS: I've tramped miles.

(JOAN appears)

JOAN: (showing signs of her former tension) What's that? Oh, hullo, Master!

SIMMONS: Evening, Mrs. Thomson. I hope I'm not interrupting your---sawing...

JOAN: Oh, no, not a bit!

THOMSON: He's lost Hester. She isn't drunk in the car.

JOAN: What?

SIMMONS: She caught her hare---some sort of old embroidery---and then she didn't make her usual beeline for the car!

JOAN: Shall I call the police?

SIMMONS: Oh, for God's sake, no! She might be---well, you know---binge, hay, hare, singsong, that sort of thing.

(A pause while the others stare at him)

(continuing, to THOMSON) A habit of fifteen years suddenly goes phut!

THOMSON: Sit down, old chap.

SIMMONS: (sitting down) Thanks.

THOMSON: She can't have gone far.

SIMMONS: For fifteen years it's been like clockwork---binge, hare, hay, singsong. And now there's this!

(Silence. The others stare at him in bafflement again)

THOMSON: (screwing up his face) What's that?

SIMMONS: I say, it's been as---(lost for a moment)---fixed as the stars for fifteen years!

THOMSON: What was that you said---binge, hay...?

SIMMONS: Binge, hare, hay, singsong.

THOMSON: (gingerly, with a glance at JOAN) Oh!

SIMMONS: (with a trace of indignation) We haven't got children, you know!

THOMSON: (quietly) Quite.

SIMMONS: You see, we have a singsong in the car, on the way home, after the hare. She hits the hay and then we sing!

THOMSON: Ah, yes. She doesn't sleep in the car?

SIMMONS: Good God, no! Singing's all part of it. We've got some of the dirtiest Irish songs you've ever heard!

JOAN: Really?

SIMMONS: And it---! (he stops, eyeing them both) Works us up. For later.

JOAN: Oh!

THOMSON: (guffawing) Good Lord!

SIMMONS: The rest is silence, as they say.

THOMSON: (trying to get rid of his naughty-naughty smile) Well, what's to be done?

SIMMONS: We'll have to scour the countryside, that's all.

THOMSON: Right! What'll we do---spread out or recce all together?

SIMMONS: Spread out, I think.

THOMSON: Will you take command?

SIMMONS: (also rising) No, I think you'd better. (generously) Higher rank and all that.

THOMSON: Oh. Well, thank you very much.

JOAN: I'll get some greatcoats. They won't be very fine, I'm afraid.

THOMSON: As long as they keep the rain off.

(JOAN goes out right to get the coats)

You take the path down to the river, I'll go up to the farm and Joan can stay on the road, she's got high-heeled shoes on. Communication: voice. Synchronise. (looking at his watch)

SIMMONS: What?

THOMSON: Synchronise.

SIMMONS: (looking at his watch also) Oh!

THOMSON: It's coming up to 01. 13 hours. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, now. 01. 13 hours precisely.

SIMMONS: Thank you.

THOMSON: Headquarters, this house.

SIMMONS: Right.

THOMSON: Got any ammunition?

SIMMONS: Christ, I don't want to shoot her!

THOMSON: As you wish. It's your party.

(JOAN returns with three rough farm-coats. She throws one to her husband and one to CAPTAIN SIMMONS)

(watching SIMMONS as he struggles into it) Fit, old boy?

SIMMONS: Yes, thanks!

THOMSON: Right, let's advance. Joan, you stay up on the road.  
(he begins clambering over the chairs in the porch)  
There's a little climb, I'm afraid, Simmons.

JOAN: Shall I go ahead, Master?

SIMMONS: (meekly) Please.

(JOAN climbs after her husband)

JOAN: Damn!

(A chair falls in the porch)

THOMSON: (OFF) You all right, Joan?

JOAN: Yes, thanks.

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS begins climbing absent-mindedly)

SIMMONS: (to himself) After fifteen years---phut. (crash)  
Damn!

(He disappears and the stage is empty)

THOMSON: (OFF) Lovely night for a show like this!

SIMMONS: (OFF) Here I am!

THOMSON: (OFF) Very well, you know your orders. Spread out!  
Report back to headquarters by 03.00 hours (0-three hundred hours)!

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

The same: but all the furniture and the curtains have been removed. Builders' materials. One thing remains from the previous scene: the pile of chairs in the porch, forming a barricade nearly as tall as the doorway.

GEORGE GORRINGE and DAVE FORBES are stripping apparently endless layers of wallpaper off the walls. The floor is already ankle deep in various patterns and colours, old and new. GEORGE and DAVE are dressed in overalls.

GEORGE: A lot of paper here, mate! (rip)

DAVE: (rip) Eh?

(Silence)

GEORGE: (turning to look at him firmly) Either you don't wash your ears out, mate, or you daydream.

DAVE: (rip) I daydream.

GEORGE: Scats! (rip)

DAVE: (rip) Eh?

GEORGE: 'Eh'? You want to get on to B, mate, it's next in the alphabet! (rip)

DAVE: Everybody's 'scats' for you.

GEORGE: It's better than 'eh'. (rip)

(DAVE - rip.)

GEORGE (-rip, rip)

DAVE: (turning to help) Do you think he's right?

GEORGE: Who?

DAVE: That foreigner.

- GEORGE: What about?
- DAVE: He says we've got no initiative!
- GEORGE: (rip, rip, rip, rip) A-c-c-c-h! (exclamation of disgust)
- DAVE: It's true. There's no openings --- you can't get forward in this country. That's the truth.
- GEORGE: (half to himself) You and your bloody openings (rip)! You need a woman.
- DAVE: I need more than one!
- GEORGE: I never talked my chop off about openings when I was your age!
- DAVE: (careless rip) I'd work, real work, if I could get things a bit clear.
- GEORGE: You take after your mum. (rip)
- DAVE: Sometimes I think I've got that fatal disease.
- GEORGE: What --- putting lids on paint-tins? You're scats!
- (A pause)
- DAVE: (rip) What a way to spend Saturday!
- GEORGE: It was your idea, mate.
- DAVE: It was Ellis's. He said it was a good opening.
- GEORGE: Listen, he lives abroad, and he's very big and he comes over here with his pockets full and all that's very fine; he's bought a nice house riddled with dry rot and woodworm and Christ knows what else and he's paid three times as much as it's worth and he talks French fluid -
- DAVE: Fluent.
- GEORGE: - and I expect he's seen the Folly Bergear and he's been in the red-light district like the Brigadier said, and his clothes are dandy, he combs his hair nice and he's very charming to my wife, she's going to wash out his dirty clothes for him and make his beds, but we're not French, mate, we're workers, and --- !

- DAVE: Ellis was born near the docks. His dad works on the barges.
- GEORGE: Get out --- (rip) he's foreign! You can see it! 'Docks'! We never ought to have started this job. It's like damming up the sea! (rip. He stands back with a puzzled air) Blimey, how many more layers of this stuff? I reckon it stretches back to the middle ages!
- DAVE: You're getting paid for it.
- GEORGE: I'm getting paid for this. Then what?
- DAVE: Ellis said his company'd help us!
- GEORGE: That sounds to me like a French promise.
- DAVE: Get out!
- GEORGE: (rip) In the 1914 war, they tell me, the generals used to order up a French division, start the bloody battle, then find out they wasn't there!
- DAVE: I like French girls, anyway.
- GEORGE: (turning to face him and using his tool as a pointer) Listen, there's too much parlee-voos and comprenees and madermeselle-from-Amentears over there, if you ask me!
- (DAVE gazes at him with bafflement but says nothing. A pause)
- DAVE: He says I should give up my job at the paint works.
- GEORGE: Don't do it!
- DAVE: I won't.
- GEORGE: Good.
- DAVE: (ironically) Because I don't want to do anything brave, do I? You wouldn't, would you? You'd do this job week-ends, then go back to the railways Monday and twiddle your bloody thumbs till somebody found you another wall to strip!
- GEORGE: That's right.

DAVE: So would I. But it's not my instinct. My instinct's to give up that paint job. It's already given me a fatal disease.

GEORGE: Don't talk scats!

DAVE: (earnestly) I can feel it! It crawls up my lungs --- it's --- !

(ELLIS comes in, holding a bottle of wine and some glasses)

ELLIS: I thought you might like some wine. Anything wrong?

GEORGE: No --- it's --- Dave's fatal disease, that's all.

ELLIS: (staring at DAVE) He's got one?

GEORGE: No, he thinks he has.

ELLIS: Oh. (putting the bottle and glasses down) I've just been up on the roof. It seems a bit rickety.

GEORGE: Oh that roof's all right.

ELLIS: Think so?

GEORGE: I know so.

ELLIS: The Captain's on his way over. He wants to use this house for his hunt meetings.

(He pours wine. GEORGE is eyeing the process gingerly, between rips)

I suppose I'm changing classes really. I mean I thought classes didn't exist any more. You know, I used to sit in my Paris flat and dream about having a house in England. Then I got this transfer from the Paris branch. And my company's put up the money. It seems unreal. I feel unreal. I thought I'd feel real when I got back home but I don't.

GEORGE: Yes I expect you feel more at home over there. (rip)

ELLIS: In a way I suppose I do. I mean, it's real. I don't suppose you follow me at all, do you? (glancing round) I have to keep a watch-out from my bedroom window every morning, in case she comes.

- DAVE: Who?
- ELLIS: The Captain's wife. Hester. She chases me. She chased me all night, that first night. They had search parties out for her. She was upstairs with me. She sang dirty Irish songs all night. People drink a lot here, don't they?
- GEORGE: Well we all like a drop now and then. I daresay you do.
- ELLIS: Hester does nothing else. I bolt the door when I see her coming. I start work next week. I shall have to be out of here by eight-twenty-five in the morning to catch the City train, and if she chases me in my office suit... I mean, she tears you, like a piece of cloth. Do you think it's a bit big for me, this house?
- GEORGE: Well, it is a bit big for one.
- ELLIS: You see, it was so cheap. I had to buy it. My firm's American. They thought it was chicken-feed. You see, we deal in property, among other things. I can develop this house and sell it back to the firm when they post me somewhere else.
- GEORGE: Very nice too. (rip)
- ELLIS: I love travelling. I've surveyed jungle, Australian bush.
- DAVE: Have you really?
- ELLIS: I've got a three-year stint at the London office in front of me. It goes against the grain, office-work, but I felt like coming home. We have property in Malta, Spain, the Bahamas. I hope for a posting to the Bahamas next. Mind you, it's a hard grind wherever you go. Property's only a small part of it. We develop whatever's undeveloped. Like this house.
- GEORGE: I see.
- ELLIS: How's the work coming along by the way?
- GEORGE: Well there's more paper than we bargained for?
- ELLIS: There does seem a lot doesn't there?

GEORGE: If I was you I'd settle for the next layer and size it over. It's none of my business, mind.

ELLIS: (carrying the glasses to them) Here you are.

(They take their glasses, GEORGE in a gingerly way)

GEORGE: (eyeing the bottle on the table) It's very dusty, isn't it?

DAVE: It's old, that's why.

GEORGE: Can't they get fresh stuff out there, then?

DAVE: What are you talking about?

GEORGE: (heatedly) Well, he's been to the bloody country, hasn't he?

ELLIS: (holding his glass up to the light) Like blood, isn't it? Chambertin, the lord of the wines.

GEORGE: Blood?

ELLIS: That's it!

GEORGE: (under his breath) Blimey!

DAVE: (raising his glass with a wink at ELLIS) Well, here goes, get in touch with my lawyer, won't you?

ELLIS: Chin-chin!

(ELLIS and DAVE drink with satisfaction. GEORGE watches them. Then he too plunges in)

GEORGE: (spitting it out at once) Ph-th-a-a-h-h-h!

ELLIS: What's the matter?

GEORGE: (handing his glass back firmly) Here.

DAVE: What's wrong?

GEORGE: It is blood. I read about it in the papers. And you can taste it. I had some blood in the war and it turned me up!

- GEORGE: It's nice, mind you, but, I don't know, it's always  
(contd) brought me out in a rash!
- DAVE: (ironically) Whereas me, I'm hooked on blood, see?  
(he drinks)
- GEORGE: Yes, well, you was never in a war, was you?
- ELLIS: Can I get you something else? Champagne? That's  
pig's bile.
- GEORGE: Now you're pulling my leg. (turning back to his  
work, rip, rip) You see, Mr. Ellis, I was down the  
mines, I didn't learn things like other people. The  
old man called me the soul of ignorance once when I  
stepped out of the shaft. Those things cut deep, you  
know.
- ELLIS: Yes, well, my dad too - he was -
- GEORGE: (without stopping) We was the toughest unionists  
there was. When we picketed (stopping work and  
swelling his shoulders) we picketed and nobody got  
past us. We stood there like men of iron (standing  
there stiffly) --- 'Where you off to?' 'Work? There  
is no work!' (yelling at the top of his voice, to the  
astonishment of the other two) 'Get back, blackleg!  
Get back!' (advancing on DAVE) Blackleg, BLACK-  
LEG!
- DAVE: (backing) All right, all right!
- GEORGE: (finally) BACK!! (pushing DAVE and then turning  
back to ELLIS to go on with his narrative) I mean,  
when you've had a day at the seams --- drilling so as  
the whole of your body shakes --- you start to wonder  
if coal was ever really necessary --- Look! Suppose  
you've got a seam --- remember, we're a mile and a  
half underground, don't overlook that --- ! (he is about  
to demonstrate the drilling)
- ELLIS: (following him with his eyes) Yes!
- GEORGE: (lifting up a large flap of the wallpaper on the floor)  
Now suppose this is your seam --- here, take this!  
(he offers the flap to ELLIS, who takes it so that it  
forms a sort of burrow under which GEORGE proceeds  
to grope his way) It's a narrow seam, and ---

GEORGE: (interrupting himself as he bends down) of course,  
(contd) I've got a drill in my hand, that's a weight and encum-  
brance to start with --- then there's my helmet and I  
might need an extra lamp --- but I'm fitted up with a  
light in my helmet which should do --- right, now!  
I'm just going down into the seam --- (sliding into  
the burrow) just a bit higher, will you, Mr. Ellis?

ELLIS: Certainly.

(GEORGE's head disappears and we  
only see his feet)

GEORGE: (from under the paper) B-b-b-b-r-r-r-r-r-r!

ELLIS: What?

GEORGE: I'm drilling.

ELLIS: Oh!

GEORGE: B-r-r-r! B-b-b-r-r-r!, B-b-r-r! Now I'm getting  
right into the seam --- can you hear me, Mr. Ellis?  
(his feet now disappear)

ELLIS: Yes.

GEORGE: Right, well you can let that paper go now, because I'm  
as you might say tucked right into the seam, it's dan-  
gerous work, I could easily bring the whole bloody lot  
down on my head, so you've got to know where to drill  
--- (suddenly) B-B-B-R-R-R-R! There, now,  
that's made a kind of platform for me --- (the paper  
moves, and GEORGE has begun to burrow his way along  
the floor) and I can just --- there now! (rising his  
voice like an instructor) I've reached a very good  
vantage-point --- I've got no way back unless I drill it  
back --- I'm completely stuck here and I've got my  
head in a tunnel --- !

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS enters from the  
dining room, unseen by the others. He  
stares at the wallpaper in astonishment,  
watching it rise and fall)

(suddenly) B-r-r-r-r-! Brrr! There, now, it's  
cleared another space --- I'm edging (the paper moves  
and heaves, as he burrows his way further along)  
forward --- slowly --- slowly --- and --- now --- let  
'em have it! Brrrr! B-B-B-R-R-R-! B-r-r-r-r-r!  
Br-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-! Bup! Bup! Bup!

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS watches with increasing fascination)

GEORGE: (suddenly) GAS! GAS! I can smell gas --- let me  
(contd) get back --- ! Back!

SIMMONS: (plunging forward) Gas, man?

(ELLIS and DAVE turn in astonishment)

ELLIS: (almost a whisper) Oh, hullo, Captain.

(GEORGE's head slowly appears through the paper)

SIMMONS: (as GEORGE moves) Stay there! That's an order!

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS dashes across the room, to ELLIS and DAVE's combined astonishment, and reaches the window with, apparently, a light machine-gun under his arm)

If you're creeping up on Point 287 with enfilade fire - (as GEORGE moves again) STAY there, man! Are you afraid or something? By God, these bloody conscripts nowadays! (red in the face) You don't CRAWL and FIRE at the same time, man, and you don't cry GAS because you can be bloody sure Jerry'll never use it! You FIRE, man, on a fixed line, and then wait for your orders! And don't answer back! I'm dug in for the night half-way up the slope, it's been pouring with rain, and before light comes up I'm putting in an attack on a two-section front --- I've got a section out on the left (pointing at GEORGE) to give me covering fire, and the rest of the company is lying in reserve. All right, George, give us the fire --- ! I'm (crouching in the direction of the porch, which he has apparently designated Point 287) advancing --- !

(Silence. GEORGE is lying low)

SIMMONS: Fire, you bastard!

GEORGE: B-b-r-r-r-! Brrr! Brrr!

SIMMONS: That's more like it!

GEORGE: B-b-b-r-r-r-!

SIMMONS: Follow me, chaps! (signalling to his men, who are apparently DAVE) Follow, you bloody cowards! By God, the men I've been landed with in this war, I don't blame Jerry for thinking he's going to win! (shrieking suddenly) Follow, follow, follow! (after a desperate glance at ELLIS, DAVE follows him helplessly) FIRE, you bastard!

GEORGE: Brrr!

SIMMONS: (to DAVE) FIRE!

DAVE: Brrr! Brrr!

GEORGE: Brrr!

SIMMONS: Right (he's nearly at the porch): Now I'm sending a runner back to say I'm ADVANCING! Now, come on --- ! (with a terrific blood-curdling yell) A-h-h-h-h-h-h! (running at the porch and firing with his machine gun. A-a-h-h-h-h!)

GEORGE: Brrr! Brrr!

DAVE: Brrr!

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS makes a sudden athletic leap up the pile of chairs and all we see of him now is trousers and shoes)

SIMMONS: A-h-h-h-h-h!

GEORGE: Brrr! Brrr! Brrr!

SIMMONS: A ----- ! (suddenly he stops)

(Silence. His legs are motionless)

GEORGE: Brrr!

(Silence again. The legs are frozen)

SIMMONS: (speaking to someone off in a polite voice) Oh, I say, I'm sorry.

(His legs gradually return to the room, and he lowers himself down backwards.)

Then JOAN's head appears at the top of the chairs. She is in riding kit.)

GEORGE: Brrr!

JOAN: (as she lowers herself into the room) May I? Thank you, Master. (with a charming smile)

(They all stand there sheepishly. The paper over GEORGE doesn't move)

ELLIS: Good morning, Mrs. Thomson.

JOAN: (pleasantly) Hullo! Morning, Dave!

DAVE: Morning, Mrs. Thomson.

JOAN: (to ELLIS) I hope you don't mind the chairs. They said they'd come and pick them up a week ago but you know what these hiring firms are like!

ELLIS: Oh, that's all right!

JOAN: (looking at the floor) What an awful lot of paper! Did all that really come off the walls?

ELLIS: Oh yes.

JOAN: (with a quick glance at ELLIS) I think it would have been nicer to leave it, you know. In a house as old as this you have to be careful! (kicking among the pieces of wallpaper) Good Lord, I'd never have said there was so much on the walls --- there's stuff from the Thirties (kick), I swear it's the damask you used to see in the very old houses --- (kick, kick, kick)

GEORGE: (in pain) A-a-hhh!

(JOAN jumps back)

JOAN: What the devil's that?

DAVE: It's George, Mrs. Thomson.

JOAN: George?

(GEORGE raises himself up slowly, nursing his calf, his face contorted with pain)

- GEORGE: (limping away) Right on my war-wound!
- JOAN: But --- what were you doing on the floor?
- DAVE: He was mining, Mrs. Thomson.
- JOAN: Mining??
- SIMMONS: (puzzled) Do you mean to say that wasn't enfilade fire?  
(to everyone, apologetically) Oh, I say, I'm sorry!  
(to DAVE) I rather made you run, I'm afraid.
- DAVE: Oh, that's all right.
- JOAN: Did I hurt you, George? (as he limps back to his wall)  
I'd no idea you were on the floor --- I mean, there was no way of telling.
- GEORGE: (rip) That's all right, Mrs. Thomson.
- (JOAN and the CAPTAIN glance at each other in perplexity.)
- DAVE: -- rip)
- ELLIS: (to GEORGE) Half a minute.
- (GEORGE stops working grudgingly as ELLIS walks over to examine the wallpaper he has just revealed)
- That's just the wallpaper I want. Let's strip it all down to that.
- (JOAN walks over to examine it)
- JOAN: It seems a bit bright to me. I mean, the house has a certain character, Mr. Ellis. You challenge it at your peril.
- ELLIS: I'm not challenging anything. Some people must have lived here with that pattern on the wall.

- JOAN: (abruptly) Oh, well, the 'fancy' isn't in my line! I imagine you cultivate that on the Continent!  
(businesslike) What I really came to ask is would you mind awfully if I left the mechanical saw in the shed?
- ELLIS: No, not a bit.
- JOAN: (with renewed charm) How nice of you! There's always a bit of tree wanting cut down, don't you think? And as I'm looking after the garden I may as well have the tools here.
- ELLIS: That's right.
- JOAN: I hope you've settled in nicely?
- ELLIS: Oh, yes! There's just the roof --- I was --- !
- JOAN: (cutting him short) That's good. Well, good morning, all. I'll see myself out! (going to the door right) Sorry about the leg, George, but I'd no idea we had coal under the house!
- (She leaves)
- GEORGE: (to DAVE) What do you want to say that for?
- (JOAN returns at once)
- JOAN: (to ELLIS) Oh, by the way, my husband asked me to tell you, in case you have queries, not to bother him, but get in touch with his lawyer.
- ELLIS: I see!
- (She leaves again)
- (to GEORGE) That's nice, isn't it?
- GEORGE: It's her sort been kicking our sort for too long --- !  
(turns back to his work in a bitter way --- rip)
- SIMMONS: (to ELLIS, seeing the wine-bottle) Is that the juice of the grape I see?
- ELLIS: Yes, have some.
- SIMMONS: Very civil of you.

(ELLIS pours him a glass, which  
CAPTAIN SIMMONS drinks at once, to  
the bottom)

SIMMONS: (smacking his lips) By God, that's an attack I shan't forget in a hurry --- point 287! They had a trench cut along the brow of the hill and every time we moved a hair they fired. They gave me an M.C. for it, by God! We had 'em in the bag inside half-an-hour, thirty Jerries shouting Kamarad! It's the same principle in the hunting field, you've got to lay down a covering line of fire and swing on an axis; when I didn't swing on an axis I always found myself in Shit Creek--you've got to swing on something! (the others nod in bemused silence) Don't you agree?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: You see, partly it's because I haven't got a child. I've got absolutely no blasted interest in this interior-decoration game, really --- I'm only in it for the gold. That's why I called this conference. (suddenly, to ELLIS) Listen, why did you buy this house? It's falling to pieces.

ELLIS: I know but - !

SIMMONS: You're just like me! In love with class! But be careful. He always pulls a title out of the drawer when he wants to lay his hands on some cash. (pouring himself some more wine) He's a JP, too, so watch your step if he tries it on you, he's a twister, the Brigadier I mean, and he'll come out of it with a title himself one of these days, if he twists hard enough. I wouldn't have got my M.C. if I hadn't dropped the C.O. a bottle of scotch and told the Mess about point 287 until I was blue in the face. (stopping, in a perplexed way, blinking) Why did you buy this house?

ELLIS: I didn't.

SIMMONS: What?

ELLIS: My firm did. I surveyed it for them.

SIMMONS: And then they bought it?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: A real firm --- under a board of directors?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: Are they all crazy?

ELLIS: No. I gave them a false report. And they're financing the repairs.

(A long silence)

(breaking the silence) It's usual practice. I mean it's accepted business. We sort of rook ourselves - for the books, if you see what I mean. But the report mustn't be too false. Mine was a bit too false. As long as the roof holds, it's O.K. It means striking a balance, you see - between a report that mentions no dry rot and a repairs bill that does.

GEORGE: (turning away) Well, my ears are sealed, I don't want to hear anything. (rip) I used to be in the reserve constabulary.

SIMMONS: (gazing at ELLIS with admiration) You and me can do business together! You're in the money, George!

GEORGE: (shaking his head vigorously) Oh, no, no!

DAVE: (angrily) What do you mean, oh, no, no? It's a big opening!

GEORGE: I'll keep on the right side of the law, thanks!

ELLIS: But I'm the company's lawyer, too!

SIMMONS: What?

ELLIS: That's right. We're a development firm. I fell in love with this house. I mean, we develop undeveloped properties, but they can't be as undeveloped as this. So I cooked a report. As a matter of fact, I fell in love with the trees outside, more than anything. So here I am.

SIMMONS: And you sell the house back to the firm at a hundred percent profit later, eh? (ELLIS nods) Good, then we're in business! We share fifty-fifty.

ELLIS: Only on the repairs bill. The sale's different.

SIMMONS: You're a bigger crook than I am, which is saying something.

ELLIS: There's a point about the roof. I was up there this morning and something shifted. It didn't feel too safe.

SIMMONS: That roof's safe enough. You know, I always compare it to the ribs of a fourteenth-century ship!

(Barking of hounds outside. CAPTAIN SIMMONS freezes at once)

Hullo, isn't that Hester?

ELLIS: (jumping) Hester? I think I'll have another look at the roof! Like to give me a hand with the ladder, Dave? (he dashes off right)

DAVE: Right'o!

(DAVE follows him)

GEORGE: (calling after him) Mind how you go up there, Dave! (turning back to the CAPTAIN, who is absorbed at the window) He's not used to scaffolding, that's another thing --- !

SIMMONS: She's running!

GEORGE: Eh?

SIMMONS: Towards the house. (the barking outside becomes more excited) Go it, old girl! Head 'im off! That's it! Send Brave round the trees. Then Fortune. That's it! Back! Hark back! (jumping up and down with excitement) Hark away! Hark forward, forward! Back, damn you, hark back, hark back, Pat and Brave and Fortune, hark back! B --- ! (he stops suddenly) I say, she's beagling him up the --- ! (the barking grows even more excited) She's chasing Ellis up the ladder!

GEORGE: Ellis?

(They are interrupted by the most tremendous crash from above. It begins in a slow rumble and rises to a crescendo that shakes the whole house. And it goes from one cascading crash to the

next, like tons of coals being tipped down a staircase.

CAPTAIN SIMMONS and GEORGE clutch whatever they can get hold of, and finally they clutch each other, their bodies are tensed against the crash that promises to bring the ceiling down on their heads.

At last it stops. They look up slowly. A cloud of dust drifts peacefully in from the porch, over the piled chairs)

GEORGE: (coming to his senses first) Dave! Are you all right? (frantically) He's like a son to me, he's --!  
DAVE!

DAVE: (off, faintly) Hullo?

GEORGE: Are you all right?

DAVE: I'm in the daylight!

GEORGE: Eh?

DAVE: I can see the sky. Half the bleed'n roof's fallen in!

GEORGE: (turning to SIMMONS in astonishment) The roof!

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS sits down disconsolately and stares before him)

(gingerly going to the window) I reckon we'll need danger-money after this. Blimey! It looks like a desert! Dust everywhere!

SIMMONS: (as if answering him) We made up a search-party, you know, the Brig. and his missus and me, and we were out two hours before we tracked them down by the river. Then he joined us for a cup of tea.

GEORGE: Who did?

SIMMONS: Ellis.

GEORGE: (lowering his voice) My wife says he's always on the phone talking a foreign lingo. Fancy silk pyjamas too. A bath every morning. And squirts scent all over hisself. And he keeps calling out a foreign name. 'Frosty' or something.

(DAVE appears, dusty)

DAVE: He won't come down.

GEORGE: (mysteriously) Just you keep your nose out of it and you'll be all right.

DAVE: Out of what?

GEORGE: (grimly) Never mind out of what. Just keep it out.

DAVE: Your wife's gone up the ladder, Captain.

GEORGE: Now, then!

SIMMONS: What?

DAVE: It seemed a bit dangerous.

SIMMONS: She's --- she's never minded danger. (he gets up) I think I'll go. (walking out blindly, via the porch) I'm going home! (beginning to cry silently as he scrambles over the chairs) I won't be a witness! Hester... Hester...

(But suddenly he stops.

We hear him whisper in an astonished voice, 'Ellis!'

He then retreats back into the room, and we see ELLIS's head coming over the chairs. He also is covered with dust)

ELLIS: (to the CAPTAIN) Ssssh! I got away.

SIMMONS: (standing back) You what?

ELLIS: I got away! I escaped!

SIMMONS: From --- from the hunt?

ELLIS: Yes!

SIMMONS: But I understood --- ! Ellis!

ELLIS: (out of breath, brushing himself off) Yes?

SIMMONS: Do you mean to say --- ? Ellis! (his mouth open)  
you --- ?

ELLIS: The roof collapsed!

SIMMONS: (military) Damn the roof! She went up the ladder  
after you, didn't she, man?

ELLIS: Yes!

SIMMONS: She chased you on the night of the party, didn't she?

ELLIS: Er ---

SIMMONS: (yelling, his head lowered) Did she?

ELLIS: Yes.

SIMMONS: And then what happened?

ELLIS: Er --- !

SIMMONS: You played hounds-and-hares, didn't you?

ELLIS: (with a panic-stricken glance at GEORGE) What?

SIMMONS: Hare, hay, singsong?

ELLIS: Hare, hay --- ?

SIMMONS: Hare, hay, singsong! Irish songs?

ELLIS: She did sing some Irish songs, yes.

SIMMONS: (with quiet patience) That's why I ask you --- hare,  
hay --- ?

ELLIS: Hey?

SIMMONS: (shouting) Did you hit the hay?

ELLIS: With her? Of course I didn't!

SIMMONS: But I want a baby, man! Don't you see? I'm relieved  
that you didn't but I wish you had!

ELLIS: But she's close on fifty! And the roof's fallen in! Two  
thousand quids'worth of roof down the drain and you're  
thinking of babies that can't happen!

**SIMMONS:** I'm sorry. You'll have to forgive me if I seem to dwell on it. But she's always chased embroidery before, never a man. It gave me hopes, you see. For a moment I thought of her as --- fertile --- pregnated!

(He goes off over the chairs)

**ELLIS:** My bedroom's in a fine mess. There's a rafter lying across the bed. And it's open to the sky. My photograph of Francine, smashed.

**DAVE:** Is that your girlfriend?

**ELLIS:** She could have been.

**GEORGE:** Oh, you can do without photographs of women. They're bad enough in the flesh.

**ELLIS:** God knows what's going to happen to me. The only good thing is that property values are going up all the time. But nobody wants a shell, even so! I've got to make it a house again. The bill's going to be enormous. They'll have kittens when they see it! Unless they sack me on the spot. I should never have come here. I should have taken that job in Bangkok. (to DAVE) They wanted to post me to Bangkok, instead of England. But I said no, it was too hot. But I've never had anything as hot as this.

**GEORGE:** Well, it's none of my business, Mr. Ellis, but you went travelling in the first place. You can't come breezing back here and expect to find everything the same.

**ELLIS:** I went abroad with a reason. I had something to forget. You'll think me a fool, but I went abroad to find out what civilisation was.

**DAVE:** Couldn't you find it here, then?

**ELLIS:** All I mean is, I wasn't civilised myself. And I thought I was! It was over a French girl called Francine. She's haunted me ever since. I was never in love with her.

**DAVE:** What are you worried about, then?

ELLIS: She was in love with me. I treated her badly, you see. She said she loved me, in her little French voice, and I just laughed at her! Every night she cried herself to sleep. And I thought love wasn't important. I thought it was something you kidded about. And I didn't give her a thought. I was --- well, you know --- just like you!

DAVE: Like us?

ELLIS: The only thing that counted for me was my routine. France was a funny name! And then a friend of hers --- she was a nice girl too --- came to see me months after. And she talked to me as if I was a worm. She said, Francine tried to kill herself --- but for what kind of person? For nothing, nothing! She was so contemptuous. And then I got this job. And I asked to go to France. I never saw her again. But I remembered. And I changed. Oh well, I'd better clear my bedroom up. I suppose I'll move downstairs. It's like a war, isn't it? Except there's no bullets. I look out of my window in the morning and think to myself, as long as those trees are there it's all right. I mean, we're all mechanised nowadays, aren't we? There's not a spot on the earth where people don't feel mechanised. And trees make you feel there's hope yet.

DAVE: I go to sleep at night dreaming of the wide open spaces.

ELLIS: Well keep it a dream. Because they don't exist.

(They watch him leave via the dining room)

DAVE: There's not one of them people happy!

GEORGE: They're happy, all right! They're scats, that's all!

DAVE: And what are we?

GEORGE: Hungry. I'm off to my dinner.

(ELSIE'S VOICE, OFF: 'GEorge, George! Are you all right?')

GEORGE: (going to the porch) Of course I'm all right!

ELSIE: (off) Whatever happened?

GEORGE: The roof's fell in. I said it would, to the year and the month, but no, she wouldn't have it!

ELSIE: (off) Your dinner's on the table! And tell young Dave!

GEORGE: (to DAVE) Come on, mate. It's Saturday. I'm in my garden this afternoon.

(They scale the chairs at the porch.  
The scene is empty)

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREEScene One

The same: but the walls are now uniform.  
The hill of chairs in the porch is still there.

ELSIE is sweeping while MABEL looks on.

- ELSIE: Your Dave's put the first lot down for a car, then?
- MABEL: That's right. He'll be driving me out on Sunday afternoons, I don't think!
- ELSIE: (with a smile) He'll be driving out a girlfriend, more likely!
- GEORGE: (off) Elsie!
- ELSIE: (going to the porch) Yes?
- GEORGE: (off) Got a cup of tea, mate?
- ELSIE: I'll just finish this sweepin'!
- GEORGE: (off) Make it snappy, gal!
- ELSIE: (walking back into the room) That man - he's a regular teapot!
- MABEL: They're all the same.
- ELSIE: Still, that roof's damned hard work, isn't it? There's new joists and everything. Here --- (lowering her voice and glancing round) do you know how much he's putting down for that roof?
- MABEL: Who?
- ELSIE: Young Ellis.
- MABEL: No?
- ELSIE: The best part of three thousand.
- MABEL: Go on! I reckon he needs his brain tested.
- ELSIE: (with another glance at the door) He don't, you know! He's cleverer than you and me -- his company's paying the lot!

MABEL: Go on!

ELSIE: He's gone into this decorating lark with the Captain, and now he's paying himself three thousand quid. Not bad, is it?

MABEL: My Dave says he's only on the outside of it, though.

ELSIE: Eh?

MABEL: They're not telling him the real price.

ELSIE: Who's not?

MABEL: Your George and the Captain.

ELSIE: (stopping work) Go on!

MABEL: That's right. He thinks it's costing two thousand. And it's only costing one. And they're splitting the other thousand between themselves.

ELSIE: (shocked, putting her hand up to her mouth) Oh, dear!

MABEL: That's right. They're going fifty-fifty.

ELSIE: Well, I never did!

MABEL: Five hundred for the Captain, and five hundred for your George and my Dave. They're going fifty-fifty, too. (a pause) Why, didn't they tell you, then?

ELSIE: You bet they didn't!

MABEL: My Dave says it's high finance. It's always like that.

ELSIE: It sounds like a swindle to me!

MABEL: Oh, no, I don't think so!

ELSIE: (going on with her sweeping resolutely) Oh, well! Least said, soonest mended!

GEORGE: (off) Elsie!

ELSIE: (going to the porch rapidly) Yes?

GEORGE: (off) What about that tea?

- ELSIE: (angrily) Just you wait for your bloody tea!
- GEORGE: (off) All right, all right, keep your shirt on!
- ELSIE: (walking back into the room) I'll give him tea!
- (She continues sweeping, with quick movements)
- MABEL: Is your young Frenchman up yet?
- ELSIE: (with another glance) He's been sniffing round with the Brigadier. I saw him sticking his penknife in the wood - showing him the dry rot, you see.
- MABEL: Go on!
- ELSIE: I reckon he's getting wise, don't you? (in a cautious half-whisper) He's taking her to court. He told me this morning.
- MABEL: Go on!
- ELSIE: He's not such a bad feller, is he, really?
- MABEL: I wouldn't mind a chase of him myself, would you?
- ELSIE: (smiling conspiratorially) She's a scream, that Hester, eh? Turned fifty and expecting twins!
- MABEL: My Dave says he's the best hare she's ever had. (she looks uncomfortable) I don't like the way my Dave talks sometimes.
- ELSIE: Did you hear him carrying on the other night?
- MABEL: Who?
- ELSIE: Young Ellis. He calls out a foreign name. Something like 'frosty'. 'Frosty, Frosty!' (they laugh) And he leaves all the windows open, you know. It turns your blood cold, it does, honestly, at night.
- MABEL: There's one thing I will say, he's brought us out of ourselves, hasn't he? You never used to catch me putting lipstick on. I reckon it's all that wine he gives us!
- ELSIE: I have to drink it on the sly. My husband don't like it. He says it tastes of blood.

MABEL: Men seem so bigoted, don't they?

ELSIE: That's right!

MABEL: (lowering her voice) Did you see that bite on the side of Mrs. Thomson's face?

ELSIE: No!

MABEL: I said, Hullo, Mrs. Thomson, been having a scrap with one of your Guernseys - you know, having a joke, like! And do you know what she says?

ELSIE: No?

MABEL: She says, the Brigadier bit me!

ELSIE: No!

(They both laugh, ELSIE leaning on her broom)

He must have got hungry!

MABEL: That's right!

(A murmur of voices in the dining room.)

BRIGADIER THOMSON enters followed by ELLIS)

THOMSON: Splendid panelling, don't you think?

ELLIS: It's not so splendid up on the roof.

THOMSON: There is no panelling up on the roof. Good morning, Mrs. Gorringe!

ELSIE: 'Morning, Brigadier!

MABEL: 'Morning, Brig!

ELLIS: (as THOMSON sits down comfortably) I just want to know what you're going to do about it, that's all.

THOMSON: (after a pause) Invite you down to Chevenham.

ELLIS: What?

- THOMSON: My cousin Lady Maude's place. She married a Chester. (with a wink at ELSIE)
- ELLIS: What are you talking about?
- THOMSON: She'd love to have you. Nice morning, Mrs. Forbes!
- MABEL: That's right, Brig!
- ELLIS: You know it put a cool three thousand quid on the buying price, don't you?
- THOMSON: Listen, Monsieur -
- ELLIS: And for God's sake stop calling me Monsieur!
- THOMSON: I'm sorry.
- (A pause)
- ELLIS: I mean, your wife swindled me into buying it - !
- THOMSON: You swindled yourself. You cooked a report, didn't you? Simmons told me!
- ELLIS: Well, (helplessly) I liked the trees. My mother and father are coming down - I - (he trails off)
- THOMSON: (respectfully) Fair enough.
- ELLIS: They could be comfortable here, watch television all day.
- ELSIE: That's right, Mr. Ellis!
- ELLIS: (also sitting down) You see, I could easily get the sack if they find out I put a wrong report in.
- THOMSON: Oh come, come!
- ELLIS: What do you mean, 'come, come'? Suppose one of your employees put three thousand quid on your bill unnecessarily, what would you do?
- THOMSON: Sack him!
- ELLIS: Exactly. You see, I told them it was a sound house, from cellar to chimney. Then the roof caves in!

- THOMSON: It's old, that's why!
- ELLIS: I know, but what I mean is, didn't she ever go up and have a look?
- THOMSON: No.
- ELLIS: Why not?
- THOMSON: (after another pause) She doesn't like heights. That's why she was in the submarines! (with another wink at ELSIE)
- ELLIS: I don't know - people seem mad! It's beginning to affect me too. I was sane enough in France.
- THOMSON: What - you pay three times the proper value of a house and then say we're crazy? Eh, Mrs. Gorringer?
- ELLIS: You took the money all right!
- THOMSON: That's not crazy!
- ELLIS: Well, you'll have to get her to fork up three thousand quid, that's all.
- THOMSON: She hasn't got it. It went on the Guernseys. And a couple of chargers for me, short in the arse and their knees knocking together! (with an enormous guffaw, and this time a wink at MABEL) She told me they cost five hundred quid apiece, and I know she got 'em at the knacker's yard for fifty each! That's the sort of wife she is!
- ELLIS: I give up!
- THOMSON: In fact, she only let me out this morning to soften you up, as she put it. 'Invite him down to Chevenham', she said. 'Wave a title under his nose'.
- ELLIS: If only I'd never seen those trees outside!
- THOMSON: (to ELSIE) She likes to keep me away from people. She tells 'em I don't want to be disturbed, that sort of thing. All perfect rot, of course. I love being disturbed. (to ELLIS) What were you saying about trees?
- ELLIS: I said I only bought this house for the trees.
- THOMSON: Don't tell her that.

ELLIS: Who?

THOMSON: My wife. She'll have 'em down in a second. For instance, I made a big mistake with those horses - if I'd have asked for a couple of brewers' drays she'd have given me thoroughbreds! (guffawing with enormous satisfaction) I'm enjoying myself this morning! It's being let out for the first time since the war! I had an awful time when she ran a farm. Were you ever married?

ELLIS: (uncomfortably) I - I - !

THOMSON: I thought you were. Chaps have pimples when they don't marry. I've often noticed it. Yes, we had rats in the barn in those days - everything! I'll never forget the clank of that bloody milkpail, which is supposed to be a nice rural sound. I - I'm not really a strong man, Ellis.

ELLIS: What?

THOMSON: (putting out his hand) Feel my handshake. How do you do?

ELLIS: (shaking hands) How do you do?

THOMSON: It's weak, isn't it? No grip to it. It's a matter of generation. My old dad had a grip of iron. They call me a rock of justice round here. That right, Mrs. Gorringer?

ELSIE: That's right, Brigadier!

THOMSON: The reason is, I can always see the other chap's motive. All law is motive. Stick to what people think of you. People called me a rock of justice so I became one. Take that Simmons chap. He's all right. But you couldn't depend on him for the truth.

ELLIS: Really?

THOMSON: I've been studying my wife for years. She's a rock of pride. Can't give way, you see. Ever seen a man on the edge of a precipice? If he took a step back he'd fall. That's her. You see (leaning forward to whisper something to ELLIS) she never ...

ELLIS: Oh, yes?

(A pause during which the BRIGADIER looks round guardedly)

- THOMSON: (to ELSIE) She isn't in the garden, is she?
- ELSIE: I haven't seen your wife this morning, Brigadier!
- THOMSON: (again to ELLIS) You see, she doesn't like me biting her!
- MABEL: (to herself) Oh, dear!
- ELLIS: Really?
- THOMSON: That's another silly thing you did, old chap - going in with old Simmons. He's charged your company three thousand for the roof but he's taking -!
- ELSIE: (flushed) No, he isn't! I'm sure my George wouldn't be a parcel to that kind of thing, Brigadier. My old dad wouldn't have liked it, for one thing!
- THOMSON: (baffled) Oh, I see. (he is silent)
- ELLIS: I'm supposed to trust you and not the Captain, is that it? At least, he hasn't sold me a ruin!
- THOMSON: It wasn't his to sell.
- ELLIS: Well - (out of patience) I can tell you one thing, I'm not having my mother and father messed about like this - I'll - !
- THOMSON: (earnestly) Look, why don't you bring them down to Chevenham, too?
- ELLIS: I'll bring them down to Chevenham all right, and stick a lump of dynamite under the rafters and blow the whole lot up, Lady Maude and all - then we'll see how she likes living without a roof - ! I - !
- (The sound of a mechanical saw in the garden. THOMSON makes a leap in the air, at once agile)
- THOMSON: It's her, by God! (as he makes a dash for the porch) Goodbye, all, nice to have known you! She'll flay me alive if she catches me here!

(He makes a clean leap to the top of the pile of chairs and promptly disappears.

The others are left staring after him. The mechanical saw ceases)

ELLIS: (bitterly) There's that bloody instrument again. She woke me up with it at half-past six this morning - God knows where she finds all the dead trees!

ELSIE: You've only got to get to know her a bit, Mr. Ellis.

ELLIS: (so preoccupied that he hardly hears her) I - I feel like a prisoner in my own house. It is my own house, isn't it? I bought it, I paid good money for it, three times the value . . .

(JOAN appears in the doorway of the dining room)

JOAN: 'Morning, all!

(ELLIS makes a start)

ELSIE: 'Morning, Mrs. Thomson!

JOAN: My husband been here? (sniffing) I can always get his scent. (pleasantly) Smells like a horse!

ELLIS: Good morning. (a weak voice)

JOAN: (to MABEL, taking no notice of him) You look seedy, Mrs. Forbes.

MABEL: (gushing at once) It's my pain, Mrs. Brigadier, right down inside, I'm too scared to go to a doctor!

JOAN: (capably) Don't you know that women shouldn't suffer pain right down inside?

ELSIE: That's what I always tell her, Mrs. Thomson!

JOAN: I had the same myself once. And there was the farm to run, a herd of Jerseys, a couple of hacks to groom. (sitting down) Well, Mr. Ellis, how do we all strike you?

ELLIS: As batty.

- JOAN: (with a slightly defensive chuckle) Really? I think that's rather a compliment. Everybody's so serious nowadays! Mind if I smoke?
- ELLIS: Not at all.
- JOAN: (lighting a cigarette) I've always found the French sympathetic. So orderly - I suppose that's because I'm so messy myself!
- ELLIS: The roof was certainly messy. It was hanging by a thread, in fact.
- JOAN: You aren't one of the Shropshire Ellises, are you?
- ELLIS: No. Your husband asked me that.
- JOAN: You look like Nigel, that's why. One of the finest farmers in the land. Completely inefficient, of course. Produces a marvellous crop, first-class livestock, but not the right amount per square acre, which I believe is what counts nowadays. He doesn't believe in machines, you see.
- ELLIS: Oh.
- JOAN: I do, though. (puffing thoughtfully) I believe in machines.
- ELLIS: So I've noticed!
- JOAN: Do you know, Mr. Ellis, (the tone seems to be getting dangerous) I think you belong more on the Continent than here?
- ELLIS: You're dead right. And I'm going back as soon as I've had you in a court of law!
- (A stunned silence)
- JOAN: (a glint of defensive amusement in her eyes) Really? It won't get you very far.
- ELLIS: It's worth trying, for three thousand quids' worth of damages.
- JOAN: (shaken) How's the pain, Mrs. Forbes?
- MABEL: Oh, it seems better now!

JOAN: (to ELLIS) Well, there's nothing more to be said, then, is there? If you're bent on being nasty, that's that.

(A contrite silence from all parties)

ELLIS: (looking down) I've never been to law before. I never thought I would.

(Another silence)

ELSIE: Don't let's part enemies - eh, Mrs. Thomson?

JOAN: (reasonably) You see, Mr. Ellis, I can't really help it if the roof falls in. It's been there for over four hundred years and this was bound to happen some time.

ELSIE: And that was with two world wars, wasn't it, Mrs. Thomson?

JOAN: That's right.

ELLIS: But you don't seem to realise my position, Mrs. Thomson. Any other firm would have sacked me for putting in that bill!

JOAN: Couldn't you tell them it was an act of God?

ELLIS: How the hell does a roof suddenly cave in like a pack of cards, even if God wills it? He's got to have some earthly agency.

JOAN: The wind.

ELLIS: There wasn't a wind. They can check up on that.

JOAN: A tree could have fallen on it.

ELLIS: (after a pause during which he considers this) Yes, that's not a bad idea. But they'll want to see the tree.

JOAN: Oh, we can cut down a tree all right. My machine's first-class. American job.

ELSIE: As long as they don't send a surveyor down, Mrs. Thomson. He could tell.

JOAN: Mr. Ellis is a surveyor.

ELSIE: Oh!

JOAN: (to ELLIS) It just means cooking two reports instead of one, it seems to me.

ELLIS: Yes, I suppose it does! Well, I can try. There's just one other thing.

JOAN: (pleasantly) Yes?

ELLIS: I wonder if you'd mind using your saw a bit later in the morning?

JOAN: (danger again) I beg your pardon?

ELLIS: The saw. It makes a hell of a noise. It doesn't seem to have a silencer on it.

JOAN: It hasn't.

ELLIS: Well, I think half-past six in the morning is a bit thick.

JOAN: You do?

ELLIS: Yes, I do.

(A silence)

JOAN: Country populations are up by five or six, you know.

ELLIS: I'm not county population.

JOAN: Then why do you come and live in the country?

ELLIS: Because I want to.

JOAN: In that case you must adjust yourself to its habits!

ELLIS: (angry) What - you think you can just come round and make my life hell when you feel like it? There must be laws about such things!

JOAN: (plunging in) I've never liked you in this house, and that's that! You're not the type. You don't co-operate.

ELLIS: Co-operate?

- JOAN: You've done nothing but complain. But you must have known what you were buying. It's an old house, and all this fancy wallpaper (waving her arm) doesn't do at all.
- ELLIS: What the devil's it got to do with you? I bought the house and that's that!
- JOAN: You didn't buy the garden. And you didn't buy me! And if you don't like it -
- ELLIS: Don't like - !
- JOAN: If it's too old and primitive for you, sell it back! I'll pay you every penny you gave me!
- ELLIS: But I tell you, I like those trees - I - (he stops, remembering what the BRIGADIER told him)
- (A pause)
- JOAN: (quietly) My husband always said he hated them. That's why I kept them.
- ELLIS: (in hushed desperation) It's my home. I - I bought it. I haven't had a restful day in it so far.
- JOAN: I think you misunderstand one thing, Mr. Ellis, (sharply) It isn't money we're after round here - it's people, and a certain type of people! Ever since you came there's been trouble!
- ELLIS: ???!
- JOAN: And we'd better come to some arrangement quick because my husband's impatient to get you out!
- ELLIS: (struggling valiantly for words) You - you - you can get out! (waving a trembling finger towards the door) At once!
- JOAN: (standing up and planting her feet astride) I'll stay in this house as long as I like!
- ELLIS: I'll call the police! (dashing wildly for the dining room door) Where's the phone?
- JOAN: (shouting after him) I'll make your life hell! I'll stand at the porch all day!

- ELLIS: (returning abruptly) You've made it hell already!
- JOAN: I'm glad!
- ELLIS: (his fury breaking bounds) It's always people like you! All my mum and dad wanted was a holiday in the country with their only son - they haven't seen him for over four years! Every time I want to invite them down a roof falls in or the light goes out or you work your bloody saw! I won't have those chairs in my porch!
- JOAN: You'll have them there as long as I wish! (suddenly bursting into tears) Get out of my house! You're in my garden! You're standing in my garden!
- ELSIE: (sorrowing) Oh, Mrs. Thomson!
- JOAN: I know you all hate me! (screaming frantically) I HATE tenants, I hate you all, I don't want you near me! - (breaking down into tears)
- MABEL: Oh, dear!
- (A pause, in which only JOAN's sobs break the silence)
- ELLIS: (relenting) I'm sorry.
- ELSIE: He didn't mean it, Mrs. Thomson.
- JOAN: (screaming again) He DID! (to ELLIS) I'll have you out of the house - and your mum and dad - I'll stand by the door and spit in their faces!
- ELSIE: Oh!
- ELLIS: (wild again) It's always people like you - taking our dreams away - telling us how to live - that's why I left England - you've put your dirty mark everywhere - you - (suddenly)! No wonder your husband hates your guts!
- JOAN: Oh! (advancing on him) You're mad! MAD! (suddenly) You've got my socks on! He's got my socks!

(She dives down towards his legs and makes a grab at one of his socks)

ELSIE: Oh, dear!

JOAN: They're MINE!

ELLIS: (apparently brought to his senses by her hand) Take your hands off!

(JOAN pulls at him savagely by the sock and begins dragging him round. He hops along helplessly after her)

MABEL: Oh, I say!

ELLIS: How dare you - !

JOAN: My socks!

ELLIS: Off! You - ! There! (he gives her a smart smack across the back of the hand)

JOAN: (withdrawing the hand) Oh! On my wedding ring! (suppressing an immense cry of rage) Now you're for it! Just wait and see!

(She dashes out through the dining room.

ELLIS stands panting and dazed, staring after her.

The women have their hands to their mouths)

ELLIS: (in a whisper) Wh - what's she going to do?

(Suddenly the mechanical saw is heard again outside, but much closer)

ELLIS: She's - !

ELSIE: (out of her wits) Here, she's coming in here with that saw, Mabel - !

MABEL: (with a piercing scream) Oh!

ELSIE: She's coming to cut us down!

(The saw draws nearer to the house and seems just by the dining room door.

The two women scream frantically and try to climb over the chairs in the porch, unsuccessfully because in their panic they push each other down as fast as they take a step up)

**ELSIE:** She's coming! Mabel!

(The saw becomes deafening.

**ELLIS**, his eyes starting out of his head, dashes to the dining room and slams it closed, then locks it twice. He stands there panting)

**MABEL:** She can cut her way through that door!

(**ELSIE** screams again, in brief, helpless bursts, holding her mouth)

**ELLIS:** (shouting) She can cut through those chairs, too!

(But there is now a different sound. The saw is getting to grips with something. They stop and all go to the window slowly, staring.

There is a wrenching sound, like cloth tearing, and then a slight whistling noise, followed by a crash.

A moment's silence)

She's cutting the trees down!

(A head appears above the chairs in the porch, startled and pale. It is the **BRIGADIER**. He crawls into the room)

**THOMSON:** The trees!

**ELSIE:** Oh, Lord, I never did!

(The saw deals with more trees: a wrench, a whistle, a crash)

**THOMSON:** My trees!

ELLIS: (shouting above the saw) I'll stop her - ! (about to dash off)

THOMSON: (grabbing his arm) Stay here! She'll kill you, man, if you touch her now!

(The saw goes on with its work, while they all watch aghast)

(shouting, to ELLIS) They were planted when I was a boy!

(Another tree goes)

She was in the war, you see!

(ELLIS looks at him in a baffled way but says nothing.

Suddenly the saw gets louder again)

ELSIE: (screaming) She's coming!

MABEL: Brig!

(The two women cling to the BRIGADIER)

ELLIS: Go out to her, Brig!

THOMSON: (as the saw gets closer) It's the tree by the house! The elm! She's going to cut it down.

ELLIS: The roof - !

ELSIE: My George's up there! GEORGE! GEORGE!

MABEL: DAVE!

(But their voices cannot be heard above the saw.

MABEL rushes for the dining room door but ELLIS holds her.

The saw begins its work close to the house. This is quite a long job. Then slowly and surely the immense elm falls, on to the roof, and again there is a prolonged crash,

reminiscent of the one in the last scene.  
Again there is the slow drift of dust through  
the porch.

Silence. They all stand there listening)

GEORGE: (off) You all right down there?

(ELSIE tries to speak but can't)

MABEL: Dave!

DAVE: (off) You all right, mum?

MABEL: Thank Christ! Oh, thank Christ!

DAVE: (off) We're in the daylight again!

THOMSON: (quietly) The old trees ...

(The dining room door is tried. We can  
see the doorknob moving.)

THOMSON walks over to it firmly, unlocks  
and then opens it.

JOAN stands there, sweating and dishevelled)

(leading her to a chair) Let me get you a drink.

JOAN: (to herself, her head sunk) The trees ...

(The others stand staring at her)

END OF SCENE ONE

ACT THREEScene Two

A garden party as in the first scene. But there are no trees now. A series of arches has been made with trellis-work and fairy lights, incorporating the tree-stumps.

GEORGE, ELSIE, MABEL and DAVE are helpers as before, behind a buffet-table.

There is music, people are dancing beyond the arches. The chairs from the porch are again in evidence.

SIMMONS: (off) Anybody seen the Brig?

GEORGE: (to ELSIE) You'd better hide old Thomson's whisky, mate. The Captain's on the prowl.

(The music suddenly becomes deafening)

THOMSON: (off) Turn that bloody music down!

(It is abruptly lowered again)

ELSIE: (in a low voice) Where's old Ellis, that's what beats me!

MABEL: I reckon he's ---!

GEORGE: (checking them) All right, all right! (glancing round furtively as he polishes glasses) If you know anything, keep quiet.

ELSIE: It's not like the old garden parties, I don't care what you say. There's not the old spirit, is there?

MABEL: (quietly) Well, she put paid to that, didn't she? Remember how we used to complain the trees was damp? I wouldn't mind 'em now they've gone!

GEORGE: I can tell you one thing, it's knocked half the value off the property. There's no screen in front of that highway now.

- DAVE: No wonder he's never been known to smile!
- MABEL: It's a wonder she didn't murder the lot of us. (to ELSIE) I can still hear that blasted saw, can't you? Trying to get up on them chairs, then old Ellis saying, 'She'll cut her way through the door!' (to GEORGE and DAVE) Elsie let out such a scream, and I had a go, too, and there was both of us struggling with each other ---! (they all smile and nod) We can laugh about it now but it wasn't so funny then, was it?
- ELSIE: It put me in mind of the war.
- GEORGE: Me, too!
- ELSIE: You know, when you read in the papers how people was trapped. I kept thinking to myself, 'Who's going to get George's dinner tonight?' I did, honestly!
- MABEL: (with a furtive glance round) She had such a wild look in her eye, didn't she? I thought to myself, 'She wants us all for today's mincemeat!' Talk about scream! Well, honestly, I don't think I've been so frightened since I was a kid and got caught down the coal-hole!
- GEORGE: I'm glad Dave and me was taking a smoke on the chimney, anyhow!
- ELSIE: (to MABEL) That was the first thing I said, wasn't it? I said, Well, thank God George and Dave are all right! Then we sat down and had a good cry!
- GEORGE: I'd have given her saw the trees down if I'd been her old man!
- DAVE: He ought to have put his foot down twenty or thirty years ago, if you ask me.
- ELSIE: He didn't even budge, did he, Mabel? And he wouldn't let old Ellis go out after her. 'She'll kill you!' he said.
- MABEL: It's funny, he didn't even seem very worried, did he? He seemed to think, 'Oh, well, if the trees have got to come down, let 'em!'

- ELSIE: And then there was young Ellis! (to GEORGE and DAVE) You'll never believe it ---
- MABEL: 'Give me my socks!' she says. 'You've got my socks on!'
- ELSIE: Do you remember that first night he came? So shy and humble!
- DAVE: I reckon he's learned a lot since then!
- ELSIE: You're telling me!
- GEORGE: All I know is she's undone a good fortnight's work on that roof!
- MABEL: I reckon it's not meant to stay up. It's been down twice in as many weeks!
- GEORGE: It'll stay up now, don't you worry, I'm going to see the Brigadier about it.
- (The music is deafening again)
- THOMSON: (off) Joan! Joan! Turn that bl ---!
- (It is lowered again)
- MABEL: Well, I can tell you one thing --- I won't be so keen giving her a helping hand in the garden, not after this!
- DAVE: (quietly) I reckon you will.
- MABEL: Eh?
- DAVE: I said, you will. She knows how to twine you round her fingers.
- ELSIE: Well, she does! She makes me feel all unworthy, I ---!
- (CAPTAIN SIMMONS comes in)
- SIMMONS: Hullo, all!
- MABEL: Evening, Captain!
- SIMMONS: Seen the Brig?

GEORGE: Wasn't that him shouting just then?

SIMMONS: (approaching the table) I'm keeping an eye on Hester tonight. She mustn't stoke up too fast. (peering at the table) Well, George, what have you got for me tonight?

GEORGE: Usual, Captain?

SIMMONS: That's right. Glass of gin and breathe the word Martini over it!

(Polite laughter)

GEORGE: (pouring) How's that, Captain?

SIMMONS: Fine! (taking the glass) Well, folks, I've been dreaming about this place for twenty years or more and I'm now within an ace of getting it!

ELSIE: Go on!

SIMMONS: (as they look at him) Mum's the word, George!

MABEL: Mr. Ellis leaving, then?

SIMMONS: (awkwardly) He's in town at the moment. Board meeting. Telling them a tree fell through his roof. Which it did. That'll cost their insurance people a pretty penny.

GEORGE: Oh, I'm glad he's insured.

SIMMONS: He isn't. His firm is. That tree was the best thing that happened to the house, from his point of view.

GEORGE: Oh?

SIMMONS: (drinking) We can build our company on that, George. (looking round) If somebody puts up a cry of hare I'll throttle them!

(The BRIGADIER comes in)

THOMSON: Somebody call?

SIMMONS: Come and have a drink.

THOMSON: (approaching the table) Your wife's threatening to go berserk again, Simmons.

GEORGE: Drink, Brigadier?

THOMSON: Yes, please, George.

SIMMONS: (taking the plunge) I want you to come in on this decorating lark.

THOMSON: This what?

SIMMONS: With George and Dave. What I was telling you about.

THOMSON: Wouldn't dream of it. (to the others) Trifle bare without the trees, isn't it? Still, she can't cut 'em down again, can she? That's one blessing! (with a conniving guffaw)

ELSIE: That's right, Brigadier!

SIMMONS: My second proposition is this -- you come in on the lodge scheme as well.

THOMSON: (as GEORGE hands him his drink) What are you talking about?

SIMMONS: The hunting lodge. (pointing at the house) That one.

THOMSON: It's not a hunting lodge.

SIMMONS: It soon will be.

THOMSON: (glancing at the others enquiringly) Where is he, by the way? Doesn't he look after his own guests?

SIMMONS: He'll never be happy in this house, Brig. I agree with your wife.

THOMSON: He won't if she can help it.

SIMMONS: Exactly. I'm just facing facts. It'll make a first-class hunting lodge. George and Dave can be the caretakers.

GEORGE: Eh?

SIMMONS: We'll have hunt balls, supper parties, bloody great log-fires, a garden party once a month in the summer! We'll liven up this blasted hole if it kills us, eh, Dave? What do you think?

DAVE: (with a shrug) Well ---!

THOMSON: There's nothing I hate more than hunt balls and supper parties.

DAVE: (with a big effort) I don't think it's very nice scheming against Mr. Ellis at his own garden party.

SIMMONS: It isn't his garden party.

THOMSON: What? Whose is it, then?

SIMMONS: Your wife's!

THOMSON: My ----? Good God!

SIMMONS: He doesn't even know about it. He's up in town at a board meeting.

THOMSON: Do you mean to say she coolly gives a party in somebody else's house?

SIMMONS: It's her garden.

THOMSON: Yes, I suppose it is. But suppose the poor blighter comes back?

SIMMONS: She invited him as well.

THOMSON: Oh, she did? Well, that's civil!

SIMMONS: And if I know anything about the French, he'll jump at the chance of free booze.

THOMSON: He isn't French. I made that mistake. He pulled me up for calling him monsieur.

SIMMONS: Anyhow, I reckon he'll get at least a couple of thousand quid out of the insurance --- I worked it out for him before he went up this morning --- and if we put that into our new company and you fork out another thousand, together with my lot, we can buy it all back from him at the price he paid.

THOMSON: But the value's gone down enormously. We'd be mugs to pay the same.

SIMMONS: That's an incentive for him. Compensation for getting out --- put it that way. Trust me, Brig, I know my man. He won't budge otherwise.

THOMSON: Oh.

SIMMONS: The lodge board then becomes the owner of the house and the decorating firm. Anyway (downing his drink quickly) come over and look at the place with my idea in mind. You'll see the point right away!

THOMSON: But I've seen it hundreds of times. I used to live in it.

SIMMONS: But you never saw it as a hunting lodge.

THOMSON: No, I can't say I did.

SIMMONS: Well, here's your chance.

THOMSON: How do we get in?

SIMMONS: Your wife's got the key.

THOMSON: Good God!

SIMMONS: She's over there now, pottering about.

THOMSON: (with an astonished glance at the others) Well---!

SIMMONS: It means we'll have to leave Hester alone for a minute, but as long as Ellis doesn't turn up she's all right. (to GEORGE, as he goes out) You'll be making a cool two thousand a year on this job, George! So will Dave if he's lucky.

(THOMSON follows the CAPTAIN out in a mesmerised state)

DAVE: Blimey! Did you hear that?

GEORGE: Did he say two thousand a year? That's manager's money!

ELSIE: But what a damned cheek, shoving a fellow out of his own house like that!

MABEL: Well, she always said she --!

(A crash.

The lights go out and the music runs down)

GEORGE: What's up now?

HESTER: (off) Hare! HARE!

DAVE: Oh, blimey, there we go!

SIMONS: (off) Hester!

GUESTS: (off) Lights, lights!

SIMMONS: (off) It is the hare! Hark, hark back!

HESTER: (off) HARE!

THOMSON: (off) Is that my embroidery?

(Another crash - probably glasses)

(The sound of pursuit and laughter)

SIMMONS: (off) Forward! Hark forward! To the river!

GUESTS: (off) The river!

HESTER: (off, screaming with laughter) HARE! My darling hare!

THOMSON: (off) Get the lights on! She can't see me!

GUESTS: (off) The river!

(The sounds begin to die away gradually)

HESTER: (off, very distant) I've lost the scent!

(Silence.)

The lights suddenly go up again and the music whines back. An air of desertion beyond the archway.

ELLIS stands in the middle of the stage, looking shattered, trying to get his breath)

ELSIE: It's Mr. Ellis!

GEORGE: Hullo, Mr. Ellis!

ELLIS: H-h-h-h----! (he makes a pathetic gesture)  
What the h-h-h----?

ELSIE: It's a garden party, Mr. Ellis. Didn't you get  
your invitation, then?

ELLIS: (shaking his head) N-n-n-----!

ELSIE: The Captain said you was invited.

GEORGE: Shall I fix you a nice drink, Mr. Ellis?

ELLIS: (nodding) Th-th-th-th-!

GEORGE: There's some of the Brigadier's three-guinea  
special here!

ELSIE: It's a bit of a cheek, really, isn't it, Mr. Ellis?

(ELLIS sits down on one of the  
chairs heavily, gazing round him with  
his mouth open, speechless)

ELLIS: (recollecting himself suddenly) Cheek?

ELSIE: Not telling you!

ELLIS: Oh!

(He simply gazes before him.)

GEORGE comes round the table and  
hands him his drink politely.

ELLIS takes a long draught)

A-h-h-h-h-h!

ELSIE: That's better, eh?

ELLIS: I fooled her that time.

ELSIE: Who, Mr. Ellis?

ELLIS: Hester. I headed her off to the river.

ELSIE: (comfortably) Oh, well, that's good!

ELLIS: (suddenly looking down at the chair he's sitting on)  
How the hell did this get here?

ELSIE: Mrs. Thomson brought them out.

ELLIS: How did she get in?

ELSIE: I think she's got a key, Mr. Ellis.

ELLIS: Oh! (looking through the arches) Lights on in the house. Anybody there?

MABEL: They're looking it over.

ELLIS: Looking it over?

DAVE: The Captain and the Brig.

ELLIS: Not the Brig. He's down at the river trying to get chased.

GEORGE: Trying to get chased?

ELLIS: Yes, he seems to like it. (holding his glass up to the light) It's a marvellous thing to come home tired from the office and get a first-class unblended whisky thrust into your hand. At a garden-party you know nothing about, in your own garden, given by people who a week before cut down all your trees, tried to take your socks off your feet and sent an elm-tree crashing through your roof. If it wasn't England I'd say it was all a dream!

GEORGE: (with a smile) As long as you keep your humour, eh, Mr. Ellis?

ELLIS: That's right!

MABEL: What about your board meeting, Mr. Ellis? Did it go all right?

ELLIS: (after giving her a look of surprise) I said it was an act of God. They said it sounded more like an act of the devil. Still, the insurance money's the same.

(CAPTAIN SIMMONS dashes in)

SIMMONS: Ah, there you are!

ELLIS: What's the bad news?

SIMMONS: It's yours I'm after.

ELLIS: We'll get about three thousand.

SIMMONS: (overjoyed) Three thousand? My God ---! (sitting down in a business-like way and drawing his chair up to ELLIS's) First of all, I want to set up a board with the Brigadier on it. We need his name, CBE, JP, all that sort of bilge ---- apart from his money. The lodge board.

ELLIS: What lodge board?

SIMMONS: Haven't you heard?

ELLIS: No.

SIMMONS: We're turning the house into a hunting lodge.

ELLIS: We are?

SIMMONS: Well, come, come, old chap, you said you wanted to re-sell!

ELLIS: I never said anything of the kind!

SIMMONS: You didn't?

ELLIS: No, I didn't!

SIMMONS: Well, look, I hope you won't mind me saying this, but I wonder if you'll ever really settle down here?

ELLIS: To tell you the truth, I've wondered that myself.

SIMMONS: You know what Mrs. Thomson's like. She'll make your life hell.

ELLIS: But she's sorry about the trees. She asked me to forgive her. She even cried!

SIMMONS: Not for long, I bet.

ELLIS: No, not for long.

SIMMONS: You see, old chap, there's one basic fact: she's always wanted me in that house. And when she wants something she usually gets it.

ELLIS: Of course.

SIMMONS: She could do all sorts of things --- run a water channel into your basement, cut your telegraph pole down (that's still standing, after all). Cement the lawn over and use it as a car-park. Keep her blasted mechanical saw going all day. These are only the first things that come to mind. I'm just spilling them out as they occur to me.

ELLIS: Oh, yes.

SIMMONS: You see what I mean?

ELLIS: But --- what's she got against me?

SIMMONS: That you're not me.

ELLIS: That's not my fault!

SIMMONS: Yes, but she doesn't see it like that.

(ELLIS sits thinking it over in a resigned way)

ELLIS: (with a quick glance) How much would you give me for the place?

SIMMONS: Ah, now you're talking! We'd give you the price you paid.

ELLIS: (astonished) You would? But half the value's been knocked off!

SIMMONS: That doesn't matter. Shake on it! (he seizes ELLIS's hand and pumps it)

ELLIS: (gazing before him) Perhaps you're right. There doesn't seem anything to stay for....

SIMMONS: (peering at him) It's a bargain?

ELLIS: (after another pause, without looking at SIMMONS)  
All right.

SIMMONS: (rising at once with great relief) Why don't you  
come and look the place over? You'll see what  
I mean!

ELLIS: (also rising) Of course.

(The CAPTAIN strides out  
hurriedly and ELLIS follows him  
in a thoughtful way, without  
glancing at the helpers.)

(Then he stops and turns to them)

ELLIS: You see, they offered me Bangkok. And I  
took it.

(He goes out)

ELSIE: Bangkok?

DAVE: They're posting him there. His job!

ELSIE: Oh! What a pity!

MABEL: He looked real sad, didn't you think so? You  
can't help feeling sorry for him can you? I  
mean, it wasn't his fault really!

GEORGE: He shouldn't have cooked that report. He started off wrong, if you ask - !

(JOAN peeps round one of the arches)

JOAN: Was Mr. Ellis here?

ELSIE: That's right, Mrs. Thomson, he went to look over his own house with the Captain!

JOAN: (with a shrewd glance at her) Really? Well, I hope they come to some arrangement. (sitting down comfortably where ELLIS had sat) Really, you know, it is extraordinary how you can look at a place for ten or twenty years and not realise what it's absolutely made for! The Master's quite right. That panelled dining room's made for hunt suppers!

(The BRIGADIER comes in)

THOMSON: (to JOAN) Ah, there you are. What's all this about throwing the French chap out?

JOAN: Buying him out, you mean.

THOMSON: We can't do that! I mean, the poor fellow comes over here after four years to see his mum and dad and sniff the old English air, and we don't let him have one fair night's rest! He told me so himself - 'I haven't had a peaceful night since I came,' he said. 'There's either a garden-party or no roof, and tonight there's both!' I must say (sitting down heavily) I do sympathise.

JOAN: If I'd had my way the Master would have come here in the first place. It always seemed to me better than having a complete stranger walking round the place in stolen socks.

THOMSON: (gaping) Stolen socks?

JOAN: Yes, he took my socks out of the attic.

THOMSON: Good Lord! That sheds a new light!

DAVE: (half to himself) I think it's a damned shame myself.

JOAN: (quick to hear him) What good's he done you since he came?

- DAVE: Well, I've got a car and a new job. I haven't done so bad!
- JOAN: Oh, he's been a catalyst. He's certainly been a catalyst.
- THOMSON: (gaping at her again) A what?
- (CAPTAIN SIMMONS comes in with ELLIS. He has a paternal hand on ELLIS's shoulder)
- JOAN: Well, how did the negotiations go, Master?
- SIMMONS: (brightly) Very well! Mr. Ellis agrees to sell!
- (THOMSON takes the glass of whisky from GEORGE to ELLIS)
- THOMSON: There. It'll do you good.
- ELLIS: Thank you.
- THOMSON: (confidentially) Do they play rugger in your part of France?
- ELLIS: I don't know.
- THOMSON: (to himself) Soccer, perhaps.
- ELLIS: (also to himself) I'll go to a foreign country where they think I'm English.
- SIMMONS: (to ELLIS) I must say, I've never seen anybody head her off like you!
- THOMSON: (as if at a meeting) By the way, I think Mr. Ellis may not altogether want to forget about us in the future, and if ever he likes to come back and spend a few days with us, for old times' sake, I think there'll be a room in the lodge for him, won't there?
- SIMMONS: Hear, hear!
- JOAN: (also at a meeting) I think it might be a good idea to keep two or three rooms for guests permanently.
- THOMSON: Quite!

- JOAN: Is there anything more while we're about it, Master? It's your brain-child, after all!
- SIMMONS: Well, I worked it out yesterday and I reckon ten or twenty guineas a year should be about the subscription, I favour twenty - I mean, you expect to pay at least that for the facilities of a club-house, don't you?
- THOMSON: Oh, yes!
- SIMMONS: I'd like to say on behalf of the board that we appreciate Mr. Ellis's offer -
- THOMSON: Hear, hear!
- SIMMONS: - and hope he'll be prepared to serve us - even from abroad - as an honorary director.
- ELLIS: Thank you. Thank you very much.
- JOAN: (smiling at ELLIS) I hate these formal occasions, don't you?
- ELLIS: (dazed) Yes.
- JOAN: (confidentially) I didn't really mind about the socks, you know. I'm only glad you thought they were worth wearing.
- ELLIS: (still dazed) Oh, thank you! (looking round) We've - we've had some exciting times, haven't we, really?
- GEORGE: I expect you'll be glad to get back, eh, Mr. Ellis?
- ELLIS: (used to being baffled by now) Oh, yes!
- GEORGE: It's sunnier over there, by all accounts!
- ELSIE: It's a pity your mum and dad didn't get down, isn't it, Mr. Ellis?
- ELLIS: Oh, well, I'll give them a good treat in town instead.
- GEORGE: That's right. I think they're doing a French show up there now, aren't they, Dave?
- (DAVE shrugs gloomily)
- ELLIS: It's so peaceful now. Sometimes I think I could -

(A great cry from the direction of the house,

They all turn)

SIMMONS: What's that?

(A pause while they listen. The BRIGADIER goes to the arches and peers through)

THOMSON: It's your wife, Simmons! She's on the roof!

ELLIS: There isn't one!

SIMMONS: (striding forward) My wife?

(They all gaze through the arches)

THOMSON: Good God! She's got half the guests up there!

(Shouts of 'Lights out! Lights out!', off)

JOAN: Come on, chaps, this might be fun! (going) Get the lights out, Charles!

THOMSON: Right! (calling back as he strides off) Bring some bottles up, will you, George? We'll have a roof party!

SIMMONS: (grabbing a bottle) My wife has the most wonderful ideas!

(He follows JOAN and BRIGADIER THOMSON)

ELSIE: Come on, fly round, you know what she is if she don't get her way!

(GEORGE, ELSIE and MABEL hurriedly collect bottles and crates and go off.

DAVE and ELLIS are alone.

Sounds of drunken singing, "It's a long way to Tipperary.")

ELLIS: Three years in Bangkok. But it's funny. I feel at home here. Now I'm going. It was exciting really, getting nothing done. I mean, it's a way of keeping mechanisation off isn't it? Of course they won't

ELLIS:  
(contd) make a hunting lodge over there. I don't expect they'll even buy the house. All they want is a good time, really. And tonight I'm going to have one too! I'll let Hester chase me as far as she likes!

DAVE: Well you can't say you've been bored over here can you?

ELLIS: And when she's finished chasing me I'll be off. And they'll never see me again.

DAVE: What, off tonight?

ELLIS: Well, I haven't got a house to sleep in. And if I stayed here much longer I'd be without a job too. I mean, it gets into your bones, having fun. I bet there aren't many places left where people can have fun like here - New Guinea, or some of the head-shrinking tribes in Mexico, or Central Africa - or - !

(He is interrupted by cries of 'Hare! Hare!' and the lights promptly go out)

(in the darkness) I'm ready for you Hester! Come on!

('Hare! Hare!' draws nearer. There is running across the stage. We hear ELLIS shouting, 'Hare, hare!' and CAPTAIN SIMMONS shouting, 'Hark forward! Hark forward!'

The voices and steps die away.

There is silence)

DAVE: (in the darkness) I wish I could go to Bangkok. So I would if it wasn't for my fatal disease.

(Cries of 'Hare, hare!' come up again, with ELLIS's voice uppermost. 'Well done, Ellis!' comes from JOAN. The voices die away)

END OF ACT THREE, SCENE TWO

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