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LORD ARTHUR SAVILE'S CRIME

Produced at the Royal Court Theatre, London on the 7th October 1952, with the following list of characters:

(in the order of their appearance)

BAINES, the butler
LORD ARTHUR SAVILE
SYBIL MERTON, his fiancée
THE DEAN OF PADDINGTON, his uncle
LADY WINDERMERE, his aunt
LADY CLEMENTINA BEAUCHAMP, his great-aunt
LADY JULIA MERTON, Sybil's mother
MR PODGERS, a cheiromantist
NELLIE, the maid
HERR WINKELKOPF, an anarchist

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the drawing-room of Lord Arthur's house in Grosvenor Square, London

ACT I
Evening

ACT II
SCENE 1 The following morning
SCENE 2 Morning, three days later

ACT III
SCENE 1 Early evening, several days later
SCENE 2 The following morning

Time—the 1890's

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(See also page ii)

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ACT I

SCENE—*The drawing-room of Lord Arthur Savile's house in Grosvenor Square, London. An evening in the 1890's.*

There are double doors in the back wall, another door up R and a window C of the wall L. The fireplace is R. The room is elegantly furnished and curtained. A sofa stands LC with a small table behind it. An armchair stands down L. There is an occasional table, L of the double doors, on which there are several pieces of silver plate, including an epergne containing roses. R of the double doors is a sideboard on which stand glasses and more silver ware. On it is also a card stand containing Lord Arthur's visiting cards. There is an armchair RC, with a small table R of it. An upright chair stands down R. An old-fashioned telephone is fixed to the wall R of the double doors. A small bookcase stands above the fireplace. A bell-rope hangs above the fireplace. There is an elegant clock on the mantelpiece, with a vase of flowers at each end. The empty grate is masked by a beautifully arranged bowl of flowers. Pictures of the period, in gilt frames, hang on the walls, and a mirror hangs over the mantelpiece.

When the CURTAIN rises, the room is empty. The door up R is open, and someone off R, can be heard playing on a piano, the music of "The Wedding March". BAINES, Lord Arthur's faithful butler, enters up C. He is aged about fifty. He carries a buttonhole on a salver. He moves C, pauses, listens to the music, then gloomily shakes his head, pulls out his handkerchief and loudly blows his nose. The playing ceases. LORD ARTHUR SAVILE enters up R. He is young and pleasant but not overburdened with brains. He is always beautifully dressed, and at the moment is wearing evening dress.

ARTHUR (*crossing to R of Baines*) Well, did you like my playing, Baines?

BAINES. The manner and the execution were beyond praise, my lord, as with everything your lordship does.

ARTHUR (*pleased*) Thank you, Baines. (*He takes the buttonhole and crosses to the fireplace*)

BAINES. But I regret I do not care for the piece, my lord.

ARTHUR (*turning*) But it was *The Wedding March!*

BAINES (*moving slightly down C*) I recognized it, my lord. It is a piece with which most men are regrettably familiar.

ARTHUR. And I thought you said I played it well.

BAINES. If one may allow for a certain *joie de vivre* not generally associated with the marriage service, my lord.

(*ARTHUR looks in the mirror over the mantelpiece and puts the buttonhole in his lapel*)

ARTHUR. Well, dash it all, I'm happy. You haven't by any chance forgotten I'm being married next week?

BAINES (*gloomily*) No, my lord, the fact had not escaped my memory. (*He moves up c and turns*) Will that be all, my lord?

ARTHUR (*turning*) No, it won't. (*He moves rc*) Now, look here, Baines, I want to know why you're taking up this attitude about my marriage. Miss Merton is beautiful, sweet, gifted . . .

BAINES. I own it, my lord.

ARTHUR (*crossing to the sofa*) She is rich, but so am I, so that is of no importance. But what is—she loves me to distraction.

BAINES (*moving c, level with the sofa; with emotion*) Who could not help it, my lord?

ARTHUR (*sitting on the sofa, at the right end; pleased*) Oh, that's very nice of you, Baines.

BAINES. Not at all, my lord. From a small boy you have always been accounted irresistible.

ARTHUR. Yes, now that you mention it, I have, haven't I? Do you remember when I used to figure as a page in almost every fashionable wedding?

BAINES. I do indeed, my lord. Whether in small white satin breeches or an abbreviated kilt, your lordship was always the cynosure of all eyes.

ARTHUR. Yes, I was, wasn't I? (*He recalls himself*) But look here, we weren't talking about me, we were talking about Miss Merton. I want to know what it is you have against her, Baines.

BAINES. Heaven forbid, my lord, that I should presume to have anything against so lovely and charming a lady, but . . . (*He pauses*)

ARTHUR. Well?

BAINES. It is only that I cannot bear to think of your lordship—so young—so happy—treading that undiscovered bourne from which no traveller returns.

ARTHUR (*puzzled*) Undiscovered what?

BAINES. "Bourne", my lord. A quotation from a play called *Hamlet*. (*He moves to the armchair rc and smooths the cushion*)

ARTHUR (*irritably*) I wish you wouldn't be so dashed literary, Baines. It's so depressing. (*He rises*)

BAINES (*humbly*) It is a fault, my lord. I own it.

ARTHUR. To hear you talk, anyone would think I shan't feel just as young and happy after I'm married as I do now.

BAINES (*gloomily*) One can only hope, my lord.

ARTHUR. Anyway, nothing you can say is going to alter my mind. Now, is everything ready for tonight? (*He moves behind the sofa*)

BAINES. A cold collation has been laid in the dining-room. A small gathering, I think your lordship said? (*He moves c*)

ARTHUR. That's right. Just a few of my relations and Miss Merton's mother to discuss the final arrangements for the wedding.

(*A knock is heard from the front door*)

Ah, that may be them, now. (*He moves down l*) If so, show them in here, Baines.

BAINES. Very good, my lord.

(*BAINES exits up c. ARTHUR, humming "The Wedding March" crosses to the fireplace and examines himself in the mirror.*)

BAINES *re-enters and stands r of the doorway*)

(*He announces*) Miss Sybil Merton.

(*ARTHUR turns in surprise.*)

SYBIL MERTON, *Arthur's fiancée, enters up c. She is young, lovely and charming. She wears evening dress.*

BAINES *exits up c*)

ARTHUR. Sybil! (*He crosses to rc*) Why, Sybil darling, what a lovely surprise.

(*SYBIL moves to l of Arthur*)

I thought you weren't coming tonight.

SYBIL. I wasn't, Arthur, but something happened, and I simply *had* to see you.

ARTHUR (*holding her hands*) I'm so glad.

SYBIL. I know you'll think it disgraceful of me to come here unchaperoned . . .

ARTHUR. No, I don't. I like it. I hardly ever see you alone. (*He attempts to kiss her*)

SYBIL. No, Arthur, you mustn't kiss me. (*She moves to the sofa*) We're not married yet.

ARTHUR (*following her; persuasively*) We kissed in the conservatory last night.

SYBIL. Yes, I know, but that was different. It was dark, and I couldn't see what you were going to do. If you tried to kiss me now, I could stop you.

ARTHUR. And would you? (*He moves close to her*) Would you, Sybil?

SYBIL (*looking away*) I'm not very strong.

ARTHUR (*taking her in his arms*) I hate strong women.

(*They kiss*)

Oh, Sybil, just think. Next week it will be like this all the time.

(*SYBIL moves away down l*)

What's the matter, darling?

SYBIL (*turning*) Arthur, that's what I've come to tell you. Prepare yourself for a shock, my love. We—may never be married.

ARTHUR. Sybil, what are you saying? It's all arranged.

SYBIL. Yes, I know.

ARTHUR (*moving to her*) You—you haven't changed your mind, have you? You do still love me?

SYBIL. Yes, of course I do—with all my heart. *I want to go on with it, but it's mother. (She crosses below Arthur to R of the sofa)*

ARTHUR. Lady Julia? But she's given her consent.

SYBIL. Yes, I know, but that was before she . . . Oh, Arthur, I hardly know how to tell you.

ARTHUR (*moving to her*) Sit down, darling. You're upset.

(SYBIL *sits on the sofa, at the right end*)

(*He sits L of Sybil on the sofa*) Now, tell me what it's all about.

SYBIL. Arthur, have you ever heard of a man named Podgers?

ARTHUR. No, I don't think so. Who is he?

SYBIL. He's a cheiromantist.

ARTHUR (*after a pause*) Do you mean a chiropodist, darling?

SYBIL. No, dear—cheiromantist. Palmist.

ARTHUR. Oh, a sort of fortune-teller, I suppose?

SYBIL. Y-yes, in a way.

ARTHUR. Well, what about him?

SYBIL. Well, you see, Arthur, Mr Podgers isn't an ordinary fortune-teller at all. In fact, he's the greatest cheiromantist in the world. With one glance at your hand he can tell you everything you've ever done in the past, and everything you're going to do in the future.

ARTHUR. Can he, by Jove? I wish I'd met him before the St Leger.

SYBIL. No, Arthur, not silly things like that. He's much more serious. He looks at your hand for crimes and—misdemeanours.

ARTHUR. Can he see those, too?

SYBIL. Oh, yes. Every disreputable thing everybody has ever done is recorded in the palm of their hand, and Mr Podgers can see it at once—no matter how well they may have concealed it from other people.

ARTHUR. The man sounds a positive menace.

SYBIL. Oh, no, Arthur, he's a benefactor, really. He's only been in London a month, and he's caused nine divorces and six separations already. So now of course, everyone in London is flocking to consult him.

ARTHUR. I'm dashed if I can see why.

SYBIL. Oh, it's quite understandable, darling. Previously, if a wife suspected that her husband was—well, not giving her his undivided attention, there was nothing she could do about it. Now, all she has to do is take him to have his hand read by Mr Podgers.

ARTHUR. From the results you've mentioned, it seems to be disastrous.

SYBIL. Only because there was something to find out, dear. If people had never done anything wrong, then Mr Podgers couldn't say anything against them, could he? I mean, he couldn't find out anything about *you*, for instance.

ARTHUR. Me? No—no, of course not.

SYBIL. Oh, Arthur, I'm so glad you said that. I was hoping you would, because now you won't mind what mamma has done.

ARTHUR. Done?

SYBIL. You see, dear, she's naturally very anxious that I shall be happy in my married life, and when she heard all about these divorces and separations she became more worried still. So when everybody told her how good Mr Podgers was at finding out about people's pasts and futures, she went to him at once, and . . . (*She breaks off*)

ARTHUR. Well?

SYBIL (*in a small voice*) She's bringing him here tonight to read your hand.

ARTHUR (*jumping to his feet*) *Mine?*

SYBIL (*rising*) You don't mind, do you, dear?

ARTHUR. But why does she want him to read *my* hand?

SYBIL. To find out all about you, of course, before we're married.

ARTHUR. But she *knows* all about me!

SYBIL (*crossing to RC*) Well—she only knows what you've *told* her, Arthur, and she says young men in love don't always tell the truth about their pasts.

ARTHUR. Does she think I've been concealing something?

SYBIL. No, not exactly, but she'd like to make sure.

ARTHUR (*moving down L*) Well, really!

SYBIL. I don't see why you should object, Arthur. If you've always told us the truth, then Mr Podgers won't be able to find out anything about you we don't already know. (*She crosses to him*) You *have* always told us the truth, haven't you?

ARTHUR (*nervously*) Y-yes, of course I have.

SYBIL. Well, then, we've nothing to worry about.

ARTHUR. That's not the point, Sybil. It's—it's the principle of the thing. I feel very hurt at being suspected like this. (*He crosses below Sybil to c*) Besides, I don't want my hand read.

SYBIL. Oh, Arthur, why not?

ARTHUR. I'd—I'd rather not, that's all.

SYBIL. Arthur—are you afraid?

ARTHUR. Certainly not. (*He moves up c*) I've nothing to be afraid of. I—I simply don't approve of that sort of thing.

SYBIL (*moving below the sofa*) Oh, Arthur, you *are!*

ARTHUR. I'm not, Sybil. Really I'm not.

SYBIL (*sitting on the sofa*) There's something you haven't told us. (*She weeps*)

ARTHUR. There isn't, darling. (*He sits R of Sybil on the sofa*) Really, there isn't.

SYBIL (*sobbing*) Yes, there is. If there weren't you wouldn't mind having your hand read.

ARTHUR. I tell you there's nothing, Sybil—at least, there's nothing I can remember.

SYBIL (*wailing*) Oh!

ARTHUR. Darling, you must realize I'm nearly thirty. I can't be expected to remember all my past life in a flash. There may be something I've overlooked.

SYBIL. But if you refuse, mother will break off the engagement.

ARTHUR. Oh, no!

SYBIL. She will, Arthur. That's why I came to tell you. She said if you refused she'd know at once you had a guilty conscience.

ARTHUR. But I haven't a guilty conscience. I'm only afraid there may have been something I've forgotten.

SYBIL. Couldn't we make sure?

ARTHUR. How?

SYBIL. Isn't there somebody we could ask about you?

ARTHUR. There's only Baines.

SYBIL. Would he know?

ARTHUR. He might. He's been with me for years and years.

SYBIL. Then do ring for him, Arthur, just to make certain.

(ARTHUR rises, crosses to the fireplace, pulls the bell-rope, then crosses and sits on the sofa)

I hate to seem so suspicious, darling, but I'm so afraid Mr Podgers may see something that would separate us, and I love you so much.

ARTHUR. I love you, too, Sybil, and nothing is going to separate us.

(BAINES enters up c)

BAINES. You rang, my lord?

ARTHUR. Yes, Baines, come in and shut the door.

(BAINES closes the door)

Baines, you know I'm expecting company tonight?

BAINES (moving down c) Your lordship has already informed me. Your lordship's aunts—Lady Windermere and Lady Beauchamp. Your lordship's uncle—the Dean of Paddington, and—(with an inclination towards Sybil) Lady Julia Merton.

ARTHUR. Yes, but now there's going to be somebody else. Have you ever heard of a man named Podgers?

BAINES. The name is not on your visiting list, my lord.

ARTHUR (irritably) No, of course it isn't. He's a palmist.

SYBIL. Cheiromantist.

ARTHUR. Yes, that's it. Cheiromantist.

BAINES (thoughtfully) Cheiromantist. (Suddenly) Not *the* Podgers, my lord?

ARTHUR. I suppose so. Then you have heard of him?

BAINES. But naturally, my lord. The man is famous.

ARTHUR (gloomily) Oh, is he?

BAINES. Hardly a week passes, my lord, without some evidence of his extraordinary powers of divination into the past, the present and the future.

SYBIL. There, you see, Arthur.

BAINES. Only the other day he discovered that a certain noble peer had contracted an unfortunate marriage in his extreme youth which he regretted in his maturity.

ARTHUR. Well, what of it? There's nothing wrong in that.

BAINES. Nothing at all, my lord, except that the noble peer in question omitted to discard his former wife before acquiring his present one. I understand the case is to be heard at the next sessions.

ARTHUR. You think he's infallible?

BAINES. Without question, my lord. A wonderful man indeed. A wonderful man.

ARTHUR (rising) Well, you needn't look so pleased about it. He's coming here tonight.

BAINES. Here, my lord?

ARTHUR (moving down L) That's what I said.

BAINES (drawing himself up proudly) I have nothing to fear, my lord.

ARTHUR. I don't care about you. It's not your hand he's going to read. (He moves up L) It's mine.

BAINES (startled) Yours, my lord?

ARTHUR (moving behind the sofa) Lady Julia is bringing him with her. She wants to find out before it's too late if I shall be a suitable husband for Miss Merton.

BAINES. I see, my lord.

SYBIL. I couldn't help it, Arthur. She'd arranged it all before I knew.

ARTHUR. It's not your fault, Sybil, I know.

SYBIL. And if your conscience is clear, we have nothing to worry about.

ARTHUR. Yes, but that's just the point. Is it? (He moves to L of Baines) Baines!

BAINES. My lord?

ARTHUR (leading Baines down c) You may be able to help us, Baines. You've served me a very long time.

BAINES. Man and boy, my lord, for twenty years. Ever since that terrible day in the gun-room, when your lordship's father inadvertently removed himself by cleaning a loaded sixteen-bore sporting gun.

SYBIL. Oh, how dreadful!

BAINES (crossing to Sybil) It was indeed, miss. The gun-room required complete redecoration. The mishap occurred after his lordship had returned home from duck-shooting. His late lordship was excessively fond of the sport, although he could never hit anything, owing to an unfortunate obliquity of vision caused by his being a diplomat in the foreign service during his early years. I am told it was a pretty sight to see the ducks playing without fear around him.

ARTHUR (impatiently) Never mind your reminiscences, Baines, we're wasting time. They'll be here soon.

BAINES. I beg your pardon, my lord, I was carried away. (*He moves to L of Arthur*) You suggested I might be of service, my lord.

ARTHUR. Yes. Now, in order to meet this crisis which may presently be upon us, I'd like to know if you can recall any reprehensible actions I may have committed during the last twenty years, and which might confound me when this redoubtable Mr Podgers arrives.

BAINES. You wish to know now, my lord?

ARTHUR (*annoyed*) Yes, of course I do. (*He moves down R*) I've only got about ten minutes.

BAINES. I will consider, my lord. (*He considers deeply and wavers up C*)

(*ARTHUR and SYBIL wait anxiously*)

ARTHUR. Come on! I haven't been as dastardly as all that.

BAINES (*with slight reproach*) I confess I cannot recall anything which might be termed a misdeed, my lord. (*He moves C*)

SYBIL (*joyfully*) Nothing at all?

BAINES. No, miss. A few peccadilloes, that is all.

ARTHUR (*moving above the table RC*) Podgers doesn't count peccadilloes?

BAINES. Oh, no, my lord. Forgery, larceny, burglary and bigamy are the things he unhesitatingly exposes.

ARTHUR. Well, I can confidently say I've never committed any of those. (*He moves to R of Baines. Anxiously*) Er—you don't think . . . ? (*To Sybil*) Excuse me, darling. (*He whispers to Baines*) Could he?

BAINES. Oh, no, my lord. There would be insufficient space on the hand for those.

ARTHUR (*looking cheerfully at his hand*) Yes, there isn't much room, is there? (*He crosses to Sybil*) Well, darling, it seems to be all right. My past, Baines can vouch for, my present is an open book, and my future is in your hands.

SYBIL (*rising*) Oh, Arthur, I'm so glad. I felt sure we had nothing to worry about. I always knew you were thoroughly noble.

ARTHUR. Darling!

SYBIL (*to Baines*) When I came in just now, completely unchaperoned, he only kissed me once. Wasn't that honourable?

BAINES (*moving down RC*) It was indeed, miss, though some might say it implied a want of initiative.

(*A knock is heard from the front door*)

SYBIL. Arthur, they're here. And I'm caught.

ARTHUR. Wait in the morning-room, darling. Then when Baines has shown them in, you can slip out.

(*BAINES exits up C. ARTHUR and SYBIL cross to RC*)

SYBIL. You may kiss me again, if you like.

(*They kiss*)

Oh, Arthur, were you as heavenly when you were little as you are now?

ARTHUR. Oh, I was sweet!

SYBIL. I must go. (*She moves to the door up R and turns*) Don't let them frighten you.

(*SYBIL blows Arthur a kiss and exits up R. ARTHUR moves to the fireplace.*)

BAINES enters up C and stands R of the doorway)

BAINES (*announcing*) The Dean of Paddington.

(*The DEAN OF PADDINGTON, Arthur's uncle, enters up C. He is a spry old gentleman, of some absence of mind.*)

BAINES exits up C)

ARTHUR (*moving up C*) Good evening, Uncle. (*He shakes hands with the Dean*) I'm delighted to see you.

DEAN. How are you, Arthur my boy? Upon my word, you're looking well. Did you have a good honeymoon?

(*They move down C together*)

ARTHUR. I'm not married yet, Uncle.

DEAN. You're not? Are you quite sure?

ARTHUR. Quite sure, Uncle.

DEAN. That's an extraordinary thing! I felt sure I married you last month—I mean—I performed the ceremony. (*He moves below the sofa*)

ARTHUR. Perhaps it was Lord Goring, Uncle.

DEAN. Goring? Yes, that's it. Goring, of course. Feller with a blank sort of face and no brains. That's what made me think of you. (*He sits on the sofa*) Well, my boy, and when is the happy day?

ARTHUR. Next Thursday, Uncle, and would you mind seeing if you've made a note of the date? It would be rather awkward if you weren't there. (*He sits in the armchair RC*)

DEAN. Don't you believe it, my boy. There are plenty of husbands who'd be only too grateful if the clergyman hadn't turned up on their wedding day. Still, I don't suppose you feel like that, do you? (*He takes out a diary*)

ARTHUR. Not at the moment.

DEAN (*consulting his diary*) Ah, yes, here we are. Safe and sound. Thursday, the twenty-fourth, marrying Arthur between Lord Jedburgh and Lady Stoke.

ARTHUR. I'd rather be married singly, if you don't mind, Uncle.

DEAN. Oh, you needn't worry, my boy. They won't interfere with you. They're being buried.

ARTHUR (*rising*) Buried!

DEAN. Yes. Old Jedburgh is being sent home pickled from India. It'll cause quite a stir. You ought to feel yourself honoured.

ARTHUR. Well, I hope you won't think me eccentric, Uncle, but I did rather want my marriage to be a cheerful occasion.

DEAN. My dear Arthur, there's nothing cheerful about marriage. The sooner you learn that, the better. As a matter of fact, I always recommend a funeral before a wedding. It puts all the parties in a proper frame of mind. *(He takes out his watch)* Is nobody else coming? *(He rises, crosses to the fireplace and compares his watch with the clock)*

ARTHUR. Auntie Clem and Aunt Margaret. They seem to be a little late. *(He crosses to the window and looks out)*

(A knock is heard from the front door)

DEAN. Thought I'd be the last. Spent half an hour at Frolland's looking at a beautiful little eighteenth-century clock they have there. Perfect period specimen.

ARTHUR *(moving LC)* Still adding to your collection, Uncle?

DEAN. 'Fraid so, my boy. Not likely to stop until I die.

(BAINES enters up C and stands R of the doorway)

BAINES *(announcing)* Lady Windermere, Lady Clementina Beauchamp.

(LADY WINDERMERE and LADY CLEMENTINA BEAUCHAMP enter up C. LADY WINDERMERE is a beautiful woman in the forties. LADY CLEMENTINA is a delightful woman of about sixty. Both are in evening gowns.)

(BAINES exits up C)

LADY WINDERMERE *(moving to R of Arthur)* Arthur, my dear, you look uncommonly well for a man about to be married.

(ARTHUR kisses Lady Windermere)

ARTHUR. So I've been told, Aunt Margaret.

(LADY WINDERMERE crosses to the Dean. LADY CLEMENTINA moves to Arthur)

Auntie Clem, how good of you to come. *(He kisses her)*

LADY WINDERMERE *(to the Dean)* Ah, Robert! *(She sits on the chair down R)*

(The DEAN stands above LADY WINDERMERE and they talk together)

LADY CLEMENTINA *(to Arthur)* Nobody but you could have brought me out so late, dear boy. I'm an old woman, now.

ARTHUR *(leading Lady Clementina to the sofa)* You look as young and beautiful as ever.

(LADY CLEMENTINA sits on the sofa, at the right end of it. ARTHUR sits on the right arm of the sofa)

LADY CLEMENTINA. Nonsense! I'm a poor rheumatic creature with a false front and a bad temper. If it weren't for dear Margaret who sends me all the worst French novels she can find, I don't think I could get through the day.

ARTHUR. Auntie, you mustn't talk like that just when I'm about to be married.

LADY CLEMENTINA. I shall wait and see you made happy, dear boy, then I shall die in peace. Oh, that reminds me. Before I do that, will you let me have five hundred pounds?

ARTHUR. Oh, Auntie, you haven't been gambling again?

LADY CLEMENTINA. Surely you don't grudge me my poor pleasures? I haven't had a penny from you for six weeks, Arthur. After all, I'm a sick woman. I must have some little amusement.

LADY WINDERMERE. It's too bad of you, Clementina. Arthur will have a great many expenses after he's married.

LADY CLEMENTINA *(with a charming smile)* I know. That's why I'm asking him while he can still afford it. You won't refuse me, will you, Arthur?

ARTHUR *(good-humouredly)* Oh, very well, I'll send you a cheque tomorrow. *(He pats her shoulder, rises and moves up L)*

LADY CLEMENTINA. That's a good boy.

DEAN. And how is Frederick, Clementina? *(He moves to the arm-chair RC and sits)* Is he feeling better?

LADY CLEMENTINA. I hope so, Robert. There's not much point in dying if you still have the gout.

DEAN. 'Pon my soul, is he dead?

LADY CLEMENTINA. I trust so, dear. You buried him.

DEAN. Extraordinary!

LADY WINDERMERE *(looking about her)* Arthur, you've done wonders with this room. It looks perfectly beautiful.

(BAINES enters up C, carrying a tray with glasses of sherry. He serves the company, starting with Lady Windermere)

ARTHUR *(moving C)* I want you to see the rest of the house as well. It's entirely Sybil's doing. She chose every one of the decorations.

LADY WINDERMERE. Did she? Then she must have considerably better taste than her mother. No taste whatever in clothes or people. Have you seen her latest lion?

DEAN. Who's that?

LADY WINDERMERE. A perfectly dreadful little man named Podgers. Calls himself a cheiromantist.

LADY CLEMENTINA. What on earth is that?

LADY WINDERMERE. Palm reader. Fortune-teller.

ARTHUR. Then you know of him, Auntie?

LADY WINDERMERE. I not only know of him, I have actually had to meet him. I simply couldn't avoid it. He's asked everywhere. People seem quite mad to have their hands read nowadays.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Is that the man who predicted the Belton disaster?

LADY WINDERMERE. The very same. He foretold a marriage and a death both within the same week. And curiously enough, Lady Belton eloped with her daughter's dancing master, and Lord Belton died three days afterwards—of joy or grief, I forget which.

(BAINES exits up c)

ARTHUR (moving above the table rc) Do—you think he's any good, Auntie?

LADY WINDERMERE (rising and placing her glass on the mantelpiece) Oh, as to that, I should hesitate to say. He has made some extraordinarily accurate—guesses, shall we call them. But I have no patience with this rage for digging up what has been nicely buried. Far better to leave things as they are. People find out things quite soon enough for themselves. (She looks in the mirror over the mantelpiece and pats her hair)

DEAN. I quite agree.

LADY WINDERMERE (turning) I was delighted to come here tonight, Arthur, knowing this to be the one place in London where one could be quite certain of not meeting him.

(BAINES enters up c and stands r of the doorway)

BAINES (announcing) Lady Julia Merton. Mr Podgers.

LADY WINDERMERE. Really, Arthur! This is too much! (She moves down r)

(The DEAN rises.)

LADY JULIA MERTON and MR PODGERS enter up c. One feels instinctively that LADY JULIA is closely related to Lady Bracknell. PODGERS is a stout little man, with gold-rimmed spectacles. Both are in evening dress.

BAINES exits up c)

ARTHUR (moving up c; nervously) Good evening, Lady Julia.

LADY JULIA (pausing on the threshold; severely) I was under the impression you would be alone tonight, Arthur. I particularly wanted to talk to you, and now I find you surrounded by half London.

LADY WINDERMERE. I'm sorry if we give you that impression, Lady Julia. You may rest assured that I, for one, will not be staying much longer.

ARTHUR (crossing to rc) Oh, Aunt Margaret, please don't break up my little party. (To Lady Julia) I'm sure you must have misunderstood me.

LADY JULIA. It is unlikely. I am seldom wrong. However, I will overlook your error. (She crosses to lc) Arthur, this is Mr Podgers—Mr Podgers—Lord Arthur Savile.

PODGERS (moving c) A great pleasure, my lord.

(ARTHUR puts out his hand, then remembers and hurriedly withdraws it)

Permit me to congratulate you. I have heard your happy news.

(LADY JULIA sits L of Lady Clementina on the sofa)

ARTHUR. Thank you. Let me present you to my guests, Mr Podgers—Lady Clementina Beauchamp—

(PODGERS bows)

—Lady Windermere—

LADY WINDERMERE (coldly) We have met. (She sits on the chair down r)

ARTHUR. —and my uncle—the Dean of Paddington.

(PODGERS crosses below Arthur to L of the Dean)

DEAN. So you've taken a night off from your—what-d'you-call-it—fortune-telling, Mr Podgers?

PODGERS. Pardon me, if I correct you, Mr Dean, but I do not tell fortunes. I read the past, the present and the future from the palm of the hand.

(ARTHUR moves to the table up lc and stands listening)

LADY CLEMENTINA. But how exciting that must be.

PODGERS. Not so much for me, perhaps, my lady, as for my—
er . . .

LADY WINDERMERE. Victims?

PODGERS (with a bow) I was about to say "Consulters", Lady Windermere.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Do take a look at my hand, Mr Podgers, I don't know that I have very much future, but I have a great deal of past.

PODGERS (crossing to Lady Clementina) A pleasure, my lady. (He takes her hand and studies the palm)

LADY WINDERMERE. Clem, how can you?

(The DEAN sits in the armchair rc)

LADY CLEMENTINA. Be quiet, Margaret, I'm enjoying myself. (To Podgers) Now don't tell me I'm fond of music, because everybody knows that.

PODGERS. I should never have said you were fond of music, Lady Clementina.

LADY CLEMENTINA (astonished) No?

PODGERS. No. But exceedingly fond of musicians.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Oh, how lovely! Somebody's found me out at last.

LADY JULIA (acidly) I must say it explains something which has puzzled me for a very long time.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Do go on, Mr Podgers.
 PODGERS (*releasing her hand*) Forgive me, my lady, but I have very little time. And tonight I am here on business. (*He looks expressively over his glasses at Arthur, and moves slightly up c*)

LADY WINDERMERE. Business?

LADY JULIA. I have brought Mr Podgers here, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE. For what purpose, may I ask?

LADY JULIA. Certainly. To read Lord Arthur's palm.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Arthur's? But why?

LADY JULIA. To ascertain if he is fitted to be a husband for my daughter. He has assured Sybil, at some length, that he has never loved another woman. Though that is unlikely, it *may* be true, and in any event, I am not in a position to contradict it. What I wish to be convinced of, is that he will love no other woman in the future.

ARTHUR (*moving to R of the sofa*) But of course I won't.

LADY JULIA. In that case you need not object to Mr Podgers seeing your palm.

LADY WINDERMERE (*rising*) May I remind you, Lady Julia, that Arthur is *my* nephew.

LADY JULIA. I had not forgotten it, Lady Windermere. That, in itself, seemed more than sufficient reason for having his hand read before marriage.

LADY WINDERMERE (*furiously*) This is insufferable! (*She turns to the fireplace*)

DEAN. I must say, Lady Julia, I think your action a little high-handed. Arthur is also *my* nephew, and I have always endeavoured to inculcate in him the highest principles.

LADY JULIA. From the fact that you object to my little experiment it would appear that you are by no means certain of the success of your teaching.

DEAN (*rising; indignantly*) Upon my soul! Well, really! (*He joins Lady Windermere at the fireplace*)

LADY WINDERMERE (*returning to the attack*) Might I enquire, Lady Julia, whether you would have permitted your husband to have *your* hand read before marriage?

LADY JULIA. Would *you*, Lady Windermere? Might not *your* husband have learned of an unfortunate error about a fan?

LADY WINDERMERE (*crossing to RC; enraged*) Arthur, give this person your hand immediately. We will show Lady Julia that we as a family, have nothing to hide. (*She sits in the armchair RC*)

LADY JULIA. That remains to be seen.

LADY WINDERMERE. And if there is anything disreputable in it, Arthur, I shall disinherit you.

DEAN. Yes, and if you have in any way disgraced my teaching, I tell you here and now, I shall never see you again.

ARTHUR (*moving down c*) Oh, I say, that's not fair. After all, I don't know what's *going* to happen.

LADY JULIA. Give your hand to Mr Podgers at once, Arthur.

(*PODGERS moves to R of Arthur. ARTHUR nervously holds out his left hand*)

The right one.

(*ARTHUR holds out his right hand to Podgers*)

Examine it carefully, Mr Podgers. The slightest irregularity and I shall terminate the match.

PODGERS (*leading Arthur down R*) Do not be nervous, Lord Arthur. It is not in any degree painful. Ah, a young hand. The lines are not deeply marked. I shall have to use my other pair of spectacles.

LADY CLEMENTINA. This is wonderfully exciting, is it not?

PODGERS. Now we shall see. (*He peers at Arthur's hand*)

(*The others wait, breathlessly*)

What a fortunate young man you are, Lord Arthur. You have had riches, the best of health, and complete happiness.

ARTHUR. Are you looking at the past?

PODGERS. I am correct, am I not?

ARTHUR. Yes, quite correct.

LADY JULIA. Are there any irregularities?

LADY WINDERMERE (*rising and moving behind the sofa*) Really!

PODGERS. No, my lady, none at all. A singularly upright young man.

(*ARTHUR breathes freely*)

LADY JULIA (*disappointed*) Oh! Then kindly proceed to the future.

PODGERS. I am about to. I shall not be long now, my lord.

ARTHUR. Thank you.

PODGERS. The future—ah, yes . . . (*He suddenly catches his breath, looks aghast at Arthur, then bends to his hand again*)

LADY JULIA. Well? We are waiting, Mr Podgers.

PODGERS (*quickly dropping Arthur's hand*) The hand of a very charming young man, your ladyship. (*He takes out a handkerchief and mops his brow*)

(*ARTHUR stares at Podgers*)

LADY JULIA. But his future? What about his future?

PODGERS (*crossing below Arthur to c*) He—he will be married and have two children—a boy and a girl.

LADY JULIA. Is that all you can see?

PODGERS. That is all, your ladyship. A singularly uneventful life. The only incidents are purely domestic ones. (*He moves to the sideboard up RC*)

LADY JULIA. Oh! Then it seems you have been telling the truth after all, Arthur. I suppose I shall have to believe you. It is all very unsatisfactory.

DEAN. Enough of this jiggery-pokery. I want something to eat.

(*He moves to R of Arthur*) I suppose you have something to offer us, Arthur?

ARTHUR (*starting*) Yes, of course, Uncle. I beg your pardon. (*He moves to L of the doors up c*) In the dining-room. (*He opens the doors*)

DEAN (*crossing to the sofa*) Take my arm, Clementina.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*rising*) Thank you, Robert. (*She takes his arm*)

(*The DEAN and LADY CLEMENTINA move up c*)

(*She touches Arthur on the cheek*) I'm glad you're such a good boy, Arthur, but, oh, my dear, what you're missing.

(*The DEAN and LADY CLEMENTINA exit up c*)

LADY JULIA (*rising and moving to L of the sofa*) The decorators have finished upstairs, Arthur?

ARTHUR. All but the Blue Room, Lady Julia.

LADY JULIA (*moving up c*) Then I shall go and see what they've done. (*She turns to Lady Windermere*) Sybil chose the entire colour scheme, you know.

LADY WINDERMERE. Really? (*She crosses to Lady Julia*) And it's so tasteful. It's hard to believe she is your daughter, is it not?

(*LADY JULIA and LADY WINDERMERE exit up c*)

PODGERS (*moving to the doors up c*) If your lordship will excuse me . . .

(*ARTHUR intercepts Podgers and closes the door*)

ARTHUR. Mr Podgers, please wait.

PODGERS. My lord, I have an appointment . . .

ARTHUR (*interrupting*) What was it you saw in my hand? (*He moves down c*)

PODGERS. I've already told you, my lord. A happy marriage . . .

ARTHUR. Not that! There was something else—something you didn't tell me. I must know what it was.

PODGERS (*moving to L of Arthur*) What makes you think I saw more in your hand than I told you?

ARTHUR. You have an expressive face, Mr Podgers. What you saw was catastrophic. I insist upon knowing what it was.

PODGERS (*turning up c*) Lord Arthur, the duchess will be waiting . . .

ARTHUR (*moving up c*) I don't care if a dozen duchesses are waiting. I shall not allow you to leave this room until you've told me what you saw.

PODGERS (*moving below the sofa*) You will be wise not to insist, my lord.

ARTHUR (*moving down c*) But I do! If it's money you want, I'll pay you well.

PODGERS (*after a pause, during which his cupidity is evident*) How well?

ARTHUR. A hundred pounds.

PODGERS. Guineas? (*He moves down L*)

ARTHUR (*moving below the sofa*) Very well. Guineas. I'll send you a cheque tomorrow. Now tell me.

(*PODGERS glances around then moves to L of Arthur*)

PODGERS. I saw—blood on your hand, Lord Arthur.

ARTHUR. Blood? What do you mean—blood?

PODGERS. Do you still wish me to go on?

ARTHUR. Yes, of course I do. You can't just stop like that. Whose blood?

PODGERS. That I am unable to tell you, my lord. (*He smiles*) Let us hope it will be that of a person of no importance.

ARTHUR. Are you trying to tell me I'm going to—kill somebody?

PODGERS. Precisely, my lord. At some date in the future you will commit murder.

ARTHUR (*sitting on the sofa*) Murder!

PODGERS (*crossing above the sofa to the sideboard*) Would your lordship care for a brandy and soda? I find that generally helps in cases like yours.

ARTHUR (*staring out front*) Do you often tell people this sort of thing?

PODGERS (*pleasantly*) No, not often, but now and again, naturally.

ARTHUR. But I don't believe you. I refuse to believe you. It's utterly fantastic!

PODGERS (*moving down c*) Yes, my lord, that is what they all say, but you will get used to the idea in time.

ARTHUR. But I don't want to kill anybody. I've never dreamt of such a thing. Besides, I wouldn't even know how to go about it.

PODGERS. The ways and means will doubtless present themselves when the moment arrives, my lord. Now, if you will excuse me . . . (*He turns up c*)

ARTHUR (*rising and moving to Podgers*) No, Mr Podgers, please wait. Mr Podgers, are you really serious? Do you give me your word you saw this awful thing in my hand?

PODGERS. I not only give you my word—I am also infallible.

ARTHUR. And—there is no escaping it? (*He moves down L*)

PODGERS. No, my lord.

ARTHUR (*sitting in the armchair down L*) Murder! (*He jumps up*) But I can't possibly do a murder. I'm being married next week.

PODGERS (*moving above the sofa*) Oh, don't let it interfere with your arrangements, my lord. It's possible you may have many years of married bliss before the unhappy event takes place.

ARTHUR. Do you think I would marry now—with this hanging over my head? (*He crosses to R*) No, I must give Sybil up—yet how can I explain to her? How can I tell her that the man she loves . . . ?

PODGERS (*moving to L of the sofa*) Do not despair, my lord. There is also the chance that fate may have ordained you to do the deed

before next Thursday in which case you may marry Miss Merton with a clear conscience.

ARTHUR. Before—before? Yes, you are right. (*He moves above the table RC*) Since I must do this awful thing, it is my duty to do it before we are married. Then I can devote my life to her, knowing she will never have to blush for me, or hang her head in shame.

PODGERS (*moved*) You are noble, my lord.

ARTHUR (*convinced that he is*) No, no. (*He moves to L of the armchair RC*) It is the simple choice between living for oneself or living for others. I must not allow selfishness to triumph over love. I have no right to marry till the thing is done. By the way, you *did* say only one?

PODGERS (*moving up L*) Oh, yes, my lord. Only one.

ARTHUR. And there's nothing else in my hand?

PODGERS. Nothing, my lord. Just this murder. That is all.

ARTHUR. Thank you, Mr Podgers. I'm most grateful to you. My cheque shall be sent to you first thing tomorrow morning.

(LADY JULIA enters up c)

LADY JULIA. I am going now, Arthur—oh, are you in here, Mr Podgers. (*She looks from one to the other*) I hope you have not been telling Lord Arthur anything you did not tell me.

PODGERS. Certainly not, Lady Julia. I was merely telling Lord Arthur that if at any time he wishes to consult me, my hours are from ten till four, and I make a reduction for families.

LADY JULIA. Indeed? It seems to have taken you a remarkably long time to give him a singularly brief piece of information. I hope, Arthur, your future life will bear out the good character Mr Podgers has given you.

ARTHUR. I hope so, too, Lady Julia.

(LADY JULIA moves to Arthur)

LADY JULIA (*after a long look at him*) You look simple enough. You have never shown signs of genius of any sort, which has such an unfortunate way of cropping up in the English character, and yet I confess myself unsatisfied. I feel I shall have to ask you to read Lord Arthur's hand again at some future date, Mr Podgers.

ARTHUR (*crossing to the doors up c; cheerfully*) Any time after next Thursday, Lady Julia. I shall be rather busy until then.

LADY JULIA. Neither does this willingness set my mind at rest. Come, Mr Podgers, we are due at the duchess's, and duchesses must not be kept waiting. (*She moves to the doors up c*)

ARTHUR (*opening the door*) Good night, Lady Julia. I was *delighted* you could come.

LADY JULIA. May I remind you, Arthur, that although your white lies may not be written in the palm of your hand, they are undoubtedly engraven in the Book of the Recording Angel. Good night.

(LADY JULIA sweeps out up c.)

PODGERS follows her off. ARTHUR crosses to the fireplace, pulls the bell-rope, turns and paces down L.

BAINES enters up c)

ARTHUR. Oh, Baines, where are the others?

BAINES. The Dean is in the dining-room, my lord. Lady Windermere and Lady Beauchamp are still admiring the rooms upstairs.

ARTHUR. Oh, good. (*He moves to the sofa and sits*) Come in. I want to have a little talk with you.

BAINES (*closing the door and moving c*) I am honoured, my lord.

ARTHUR. It's possible, too, I may need your assistance. The fact is, Baines, Mr Podgers discovered something a little perturbing in my hand, and I have to do something about it rather quickly.

BAINES (*moving above the armchair RC*) Indeed, my lord?

ARTHUR. To put it briefly, I find myself obliged to murder somebody before next Thursday.

BAINES (*smoothing a cushion*) I see, my lord.

ARTHUR. You may wonder why there is such need for haste, but I feel it would be unfair to Miss Merton if I murdered somebody after we were married.

BAINES. Quite so, my lord. Apart from the fact that it is as well to keep such matters extremely private.

ARTHUR. Exactly. Now, being totally unused to this sort of thing, I find myself a little at a loss. If you were proposing to commit a murder, Baines, how would you go about it?

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) Might I first enquire, my lord, whether the victim is to be a member of your lordship's family, or a complete stranger?

ARTHUR. Well, I hadn't actually decided yet. It doesn't really matter.

BAINES. Then, since it appears to be immaterial, my lord, you could, of course, remove some leading politician and, whilst achieving your own object, earn the undying gratitude of the nation.

ARTHUR (*doubtfully*) Y—yes, that's true, Baines, but on the other hand, there would probably be a great deal of vulgar publicity and I might even be given some order or other. I should very much dislike to have my name appearing in the Sunday papers.

BAINES. In that case, my lord, I suggest we turn to the other sphere. There must be a large number of insignificant persons about, who could easily be spared by their relations. Would your lordship care for me to make a few discreet enquiries among the staff? (*He moves slightly up c*)

ARTHUR. No, I think not, Baines. On second thoughts, I feel I ought to keep this a purely personal matter. After all, I am extremely well-endowed with relatives myself.

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) One might almost say to the point of saturation, my lord.

ARTHUR. Yes.

(*They look at each other*)

Which would you choose, Baines?

BAINES. Since your lordship naturally wishes to avoid publicity I feel it would be as well to select one of your relatives who does not, so to speak, figure in the public eye.

ARTHUR. But all my relatives are public figures except . . . (*He breaks off*)

BAINES (*catching his eye*) Exactly, my lord.

ARTHUR (*rising*) Oh, but dash it all, I'm fond of Lady Clem.

BAINES. I think, my lord, that this is not a matter where you should allow your finer feelings to enter in.

ARTHUR (*wandering down L*) No, that's true.

BAINES. And the Lady Clementina, if I may make so bold, has cost your lordship considerable sums of money since your majority.

ARTHUR. Yes, I know, but I'm not doing this for reasons of economy.

BAINES. Nevertheless, my lord, there can be no harm in killing two birds with one stone.

(*ARTHUR catches his eye*)

My remark was not intended as a pun, my lord.

ARTHUR (*wandering to L of the sofa*) Of course, she has often remarked to me that she wished she was dead. (*He sits on the left arm of the sofa*) But I don't know that she really meant it.

BAINES. Have we any right to question the veracity of the lady, my lord? Who can tell but—if she could read your lordship's thoughts—she would not be more than grateful for your lordship's timely assistance.

ARTHUR. You really think it would be a good thing for her?

BAINES. Unquestionably, my lord.

ARTHUR (*rising and moving up L*) Then I'll do it. Poor Lady Clem! You know, Baines, somebody ought to have been humane enough to do this for her before.

BAINES. No doubt her physicians have done their best, my lord, but they have certain inhibitions.

ARTHUR (*moving to L of Baines*) Now, how do we do it? That's the next thing. It's got to be something completely painless, Baines. I couldn't bear to hurt her.

BAINES. With regard to method, my lord, I feel we might do worse than take a leaf from the book of the Borgias.

ARTHUR. The who?

BAINES. The Borgias, my lord. An Italian family with whom it was considered highly inadvisable to dine.

ARTHUR. Bad cooking, I suppose?

BAINES (*pained*) No, my lord. (*He moves down R*)

ARTHUR (*moving down C*) I'm sorry if I appear ill-informed,

Baines, but you must remember I haven't had your advantages. I only went to Eton and Oxford.

BAINES. I understand, my lord. We cannot all be so fortunate as to have been educated at elementary schools.

ARTHUR (*sitting on the right arm of the sofa*) These Borgias—they put something in the food—was that it?

BAINES. Precisely, my lord. A subtle poison. It was indeed an occasion when anybody *but* the Borgias rose from the table.

ARTHUR. Oh. You don't happen to know any subtle poisons, do you, Baines?

BAINES. By a curious coincidence, my lord, I was reading a murder case recently, in which a family of ten was wiped out at one sitting by a preparation known as Wolf's Bane.

ARTHUR. Here, steady on! I don't want to wipe out a family of ten.

BAINES. I will ascertain the amount needed for the disposal of one, my lord. (*He moves to the bookcase up R*) I imagine *Erskine's Toxicology* will inform us on that point. (*He looks on the shelves and selects a book*)

ARTHUR. And then—after we've made all our preparations—all I have to do is to invite Lady Clementina to dinner?

BAINES (*blowing a cloud of dust from the book*) If I might suggest it, my lord, that would be impracticable. (*He moves C*)

ARTHUR. Oh? Why?

BAINES. It is just possible it might create suspicion, my lord, if the Lady Clementina were discovered lying about the house.

ARTHUR. You mean, the police would think it funny?

BAINES. Not unless they have a warped sense of humour, my lord. No, my lord, a better method would be to have the poison conveyed to her in a disguised receptacle—sweets, or something equally innocuous in appearance. (*He looks through the book*)

ARTHUR. You seem frightfully knowledgeable about all this, Baines. Are you sure you haven't done this sort of thing before?

BAINES. No, my lord. I am merely drawing on the moments when I have been sorely tempted to. (*He refers to the book*) Here is the chapter on poisons, my lord. Perhaps you would care to examine the properties peculiar to Wolf's Bane. (*He hands the book to Arthur*)

(*ARTHUR rises and moves down L, running his finger down the page*)

ARTHUR. Ah, yes, here it is. "Painless, tasteless, acts within half an hour. Gives every appearance of heart failure."

BAINES. Nothing could be more convenient, my lord. And the fatal dose?

ARTHUR. One drop. I say, it must be pretty potent stuff. (*He sits in the armchair down L*)

BAINES. Evidently, my lord. Would you care for me to obtain the requisite amount from the chemist's tomorrow?

ARTHUR. Yes, I think so, Baines. There's no point in wasting

time. Then you can pop round with it to Aunt Clem's first thing in the morning.

BAINES (*glancing up c*) Take care, my lord. Someone is coming. (*He moves quickly R*)

(ARTHUR *springs up and hides the book behind his back.*

LADY CLEMENTINA *enters up c*)

LADY CLEMENTINA. I'm going now, Arthur dear. It's long past my bedtime, and unless I take care of myself I shall be fit for nothing at your wedding.

ARTHUR (*crossing above the sofa to her*) You ought to have a nice long rest, Auntie.

LADY CLEMENTINA. How right you are. But how to get it? Sometimes I'd give anything just to go to sleep and never wake up again.

(ARTHUR and BAINES *exchange glances*)

Still, I mustn't worry you with my troubles. Good night, dear boy. I'm so glad Mr Podgers didn't find out anything horrid about you.

(BAINES *moves to R of the door up c and opens it. ARTHUR kisses Lady Clementina*)

ARTHUR. Good-bye, Auntie Clem. (*Emotion catches him by the throat*) Good-bye. Good-bye. (*He kisses her again*)

LADY CLEMENTINA. Dear me, we are affectionate suddenly. Good night, dear. (*She moves to the door up c and turns*) Oh, and Arthur, you won't forget to send me what I need, will you?

ARTHUR. No, Auntie, it's coming tomorrow morning.

LADY CLEMENTINA *waves and exits up c.*

BAINES *looks once more at Arthur and follows her off. ARTHUR, the book behind him, looks off after them as—*

the CURTAIN falls

ACT II

SCENE I

SCENE—*The same. The following morning.*

When the CURTAIN rises, ARTHUR is pacing back and forth behind the sofa. He goes to the window and looks out. BAINES enters up c, carrying a large, beribboned box of sweets.

ARTHUR (*turning eagerly*) Ah, are those the sweets, Baines? (*He crosses to Baines*)

BAINES. They are, my lord. (*He moves to R of the table RC and puts the box on it*) Would your lordship care to see them?

ARTHUR. Oh, yes, open it. (*He moves to L of the table*)

(BAINES *opens the box*)

I say, they do look appetizing, don't they?

BAINES. They are the best that money can buy, my lord. I felt you would wish to spare no expense on this occasion.

ARTHUR. Certainly not. I wouldn't like to be thought mean about murdering my aunt. (*He turns to Baines*) Have you got the fatal one, Baines?

BAINES. Not yet, my lord. The messenger has not yet returned from the chemist's. But she should not be long.

ARTHUR. She?

BAINES. A young person I recently engaged to supplement the staff, my lord, in preparation for the increase in your lordship's family.

ARTHUR (*moving below the sofa*) Increase? You're being a bit premature, aren't you, Baines?

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) I did not express myself clearly, my lord. I meant Miss Merton.

ARTHUR. Oh, I see. What did you tell this young person to say?

BAINES. My exact words, so far as I can recall them, my lord, were that she should request, on your lordship's behalf, a gelatine capsule containing the preparation known as Wolf's Bane, for the destruction of a Norwegian mastiff which showed signs of incipient rabies, and had twice bitten the coachman. I felt it best to be a trifle circumstantial, my lord. People are so suspicious.

ARTHUR. Quite right, Baines. You don't think we ought to get a dog, do you?

BAINES. Oh, no, my lord. Quite unnecessary.

ARTHUR. I expect you're right. One other thing strikes me, though. Supposing Lady Clementina doesn't like the look of it?

BAINES. She will, my lord. I have taken care of that. I gave instructions that the capsule should be both appetising in appearance and palatable to the taste. I explained that the mastiff had a sweet tooth, my lord.

ARTHUR. You know, I'm exceedingly grateful to you, Baines. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have known where to begin in this business.

BAINES. I am glad to have been of service, my lord.

ARTHUR. As it is, the thing is simplicity itself. I can't think why people go wrong with murder. It's so easy.

BAINES (*moving to the table RC*) It is the careful preparation beforehand that counts, my lord.

ARTHUR. Oh, I forgot to tell you, Baines. I'm postponing my marriage for a fortnight.

BAINES (*turning to Arthur*) Indeed, my lord?

ARTHUR. Yes. I felt after all, it wouldn't be quite the thing to have the wedding immediately after the funeral. I wrote to Lady Julia last night.

BAINES. Your feelings do you credit, my lord.

(*There is a knock on the door up c*)

BAINES (*moving to the door up c*) Ah, that will be the young person. (*He opens the door*)

(NELLIE, a young parlourmaid, enters up c. She carries a small white box)

NELLIE (*handing the box to Baines*) The box from the chemist's, Mr Baines. (*She sees Arthur*) Oh, my lord! (*She curtsies*)

BAINES. This is the young person I spoke of, my lord. She answers to the name of "Nellie".

ARTHUR. Good morning, Nellie. I hope you'll be very happy with us.

NELLIE (*overcome*) Thank you, my lord.

BAINES (*stately*) Run along, child.

NELLIE. Yes, Mr Baines. (*She curtsies*) My lord!

(NELLIE exits up c. BAINES closes the door)

ARTHUR. Seems a nice girl.

BAINES (*moving to the table RC*) A simple little thing, my lord, but not uncomely.

ARTHUR (*crossing to Baines*) Now, let's see the capsule. (*He takes the box and opens it*) Why, Baines, it's superb. Look at that delightful pink colour and that glowing little bubble inside. Nobody could resist it.

BAINES. Let us hope not, my lord.

ARTHUR (*crossing to LC*) There are some instructions here. (*He reads*) "The capsule may be swallowed or masticated, or if preferred will dissolve in liquid." Obliging, isn't it? Now all we have to do is

to place it among the sweets in this box—(*he crosses to the table RC*) dispatch it to my Aunt Clementina, and the deed is done. (*He places the capsule in the box of sweets*) Now, hand me one of my cards, Baines. I must write a suitable message, and you shall take it round after luncheon. (*He closes the box*)

(BAINES moves to the sideboard, collects a card and hands it to Arthur. A knock is heard from the front door)

If that's Lady Julia, show her in here.

BAINES (*moving up c*) Very good, my lord.

(BAINES exits up c. ARTHUR takes out a pencil, sits in the armchair RC to write, and chews the end of the pencil for a moment)

ARTHUR (*writing*) "From your affectionate nephew, Arthur."

(BAINES enters up c and moves down c)

BAINES. My lord, there is a person outside who insists upon seeing you.

ARTHUR. What sort of person?

BAINES. He appears to be foreign, my lord, but otherwise I can see nothing against him.

ARTHUR. Oh, well, let him come in.

(BAINES exits up c. ARTHUR rises, puts the card on top of the box, under the ribbon, then crosses to the fireplace.)

BAINES enters up c and stands R of the doorway)

BAINES. Will you come this way, sir?

(HERR WINKELKOPF enters up c. He is a voluble, excitable German of about forty, dressed in a knicker-bocker suit and deer-stalker hat. He carries a Gladstone bag)

WINKELKOPF (*moving down c*) Lord Arthur Savile?

ARTHUR (*moving RC*) Yes. Don't go, Baines.

(BAINES closes the door. WINKELKOPF puts his bag on the table behind the sofa, goes to Arthur and vigorously pumps his hand)

WINKELKOPF. I am delighted to make your acquaintance, my lord. It is indeed a privilege to meet von of the English aristocracy wid the same interests as myself.

ARTHUR. I'm afraid I don't quite follow . . .

WINKELKOPF. You vill, Lord Arthur, you vill when I haf given my card. There, you read him. (*He hands a visiting card to Arthur*)

ARTHUR. "Frederick Winkelkopf."

WINKELKOPF (*proudly*) Me! (*He moves below the sofa*)

ARTHUR. "President of the Royal Society of Anarchists. Humanitarian Branch."

WINKELKOPF. Now you understand, ja?

ARTHUR. I'm afraid not. (*He moves to R of Winkelkopf*) If it's a

subscription you want, I'm always willing to support a good cause . . .

WINKELKOPF. No, no, no. It is not for money I haf come to see you. It is because you and I, Lord Arthur—(he pokes Arthur in the chest) are brothers in der blood.

ARTHUR. I beg your pardon? (He backs R)

WINKELKOPF (following Arthur) Your object is the same as mine—murder.

ARTHUR (hemmed against the chair down R) What—did you say?

WINKELKOPF. Ha, ha, ha, you need not look so frightened, Lord Arthur. (He crosses to LC) I will not gif you away.

ARTHUR. You're not from the police?

WINKELKOPF. No, no, I am the great Winkelkopf. I do not work wid the police. I support private enterprise. Now tell me, it is a member of the degenerate class you vish to remove, hein?

ARTHUR. Well, as a matter of fact, it's my Aunt Clementina.

WINKELKOPF. Ha, dat is gud!

ARTHUR (moving up RC) Yes, but you know I really didn't want it to get about. Have you been talking, Baines?

BAINES. Not a syllable, my lord.

WINKELKOPF. People do not need to talk for Winkelkopf to know. You like me to tell you how I find out?

ARTHUR (moving down RC) I'd much sooner you went away and forgot about all this.

WINKELKOPF. Ah, but it is so clever. Ven I think of it, I am filled with admiration for myself. Sometimes I say to myself, "Frederick—that is my first name—Frederick, how can you be so clever?"

ARTHUR (sitting in the armchair RC) And what do you reply?

WINKELKOPF. Oh, I am modest, Lord Arthur. I gif a little shrug and pass it off. But now I tell you how I find out all about you, ja?

ARTHUR. Ja—I mean, yes.

(BAINES moves to the table behind the sofa)

WINKELKOPF. Last night I am passing by this house, doing nothing but minding my own business . . .

ARTHUR. How was that?

WINKELKOPF. I haf nothing on hand, you see. It is the off season for revolutions. When suddenly I see this man—(he points to Baines)

(BAINES jumps)

—come out of the area and slip noiselessly round the corner.

(BAINES coughs nervously behind his hand)

Out of curiosity I follow him. He disappear into a newsagent's shop and presently come out wid a copy of the *Police Gazette*.

ARTHUR (with a wealth of reproach) Oh, Baines!

BAINES. I did it for the best, my lord. I thought it might assist us with our researches.

WINKELKOPF. Instantly I am on the alert. You ask me why?

(ARTHUR opens his mouth to speak)

(He goes straight on) Because this man, he has not the look of one who buy the *Police Gazette* for legal information. He read it with a furtive air.

(BAINES hangs his head)

I watch him come back into the house—then I go away.

ARTHUR. Ah!

WINKELKOPF. Ah, but this morning early I am back. This time a—what you say—a maiden come up the steps.

ARTHUR. Eh?

BAINES (moving behind Lord Arthur's chair) I fancy he means the maid, my lord.

WINKELKOPF. She go along the road muttering to herself, as though endeavouring to remember some complicated message.

ARTHUR (irritably) I must say, Baines, you seem to have handled your part in this extremely badly.

BAINES. I am abject, my lord.

WINKELKOPF. Do not blame him, Lord Arthur. He could not know the great Winkelkopf was on his track.

ARTHUR. And I suppose you followed the girl?

WINKELKOPF. That is right, my lord, and ven, at the end of her journey, I see the maiden plunge into a chemist's shop, I say to myself, "Heinrich . . ."

ARTHUR (referring to the card) "Frederick."

WINKELKOPF. Sometimes I call myself "Heinrich". It is my second name.

ARTHUR. I beg your pardon.

WINKELKOPF (graciously) It is not your fault. You were not to know.

ARTHUR. Thank you.

WINKELKOPF. I say to myself, "Heinrich, there is some dirty work afoot. Go in." I go in, placing myself beside the maiden, and ven I hear her ask for a capsule containing Wolf's Bane for the destruction of a mastiff on the account of Lord Arthur Savile, I know my suspicions is confirmed. Never in my vigils around this house haf I heard the baying of dogs.

ARTHUR. I told you we should have got a dog, Baines.

WINKELKOPF. Then I say to myself, "Perhaps there is someone who may need your help." So I come straight to you, Lord Arthur.

ARTHUR (rising) It's very kind of you, Herr Winkelkopf, but I really think I'm capable of committing my own murders, thank you all the same.

WINKELKOPF. I am glad to hear it. It is gud to meet a really capable man. Is it permitted to ask how it is to be done?

ARTHUR. Certainly. (He picks up the box of sweets) The capsule has been placed among the sweets in the box—that's it, the pink

one with the globule of liquid inside—and I shall send it to my Aunt Clementina after luncheon. My aunt is particularly fond of sweets.

WINKELKOPF (*moving and looking at the box*) But that is superb! It is so simple. It has the stamp of genius. She eat and she pop off. You are the true artist, Lord Arthur. Always the artist choose the simple method of approach. You permit that I embrace you?

(*Whether ARTHUR permits it or not, he finds himself embraced and kissed on both cheeks by WINKELKOPF*)

Never, except for myself haf I met with such ingenuity.

(*BAINES coughs and moves down R*)

ARTHUR (*surveying his nails; modestly*) Well, now that you mention it, I confess it is rather neat.

WINKELKOPF. Neat! It is brilliant! Never haf I seen the like. You shall be awarded the Ribbon and Medal of the Anarchists' Society, First Class. Oh, it is a beautiful medal, my lord. We award it for all ingenious murders. On von side is a picture of Ivan the Terrible, and on ze other—Jack the Ripper.

ARTHUR (*modestly*) Well, I really didn't expect any sort of recognition for this, you know.

WINKELKOPF. Ach, but I insist. You shall receive it tomorrow in a plain wrapper, by registered post.

(*BAINES coughs more loudly*)

ARTHUR. Well, in that case, I feel I ought to mention that my servant Baines has been of very great assistance to me. I shouldn't care to take all the credit. (*He puts the box of sweets on the table RC*)

WINKELKOPF (*to Baines*) You, too! Two such men in von house. It is too much. (*He crosses to Baines*) Permit me. (*He embraces and kisses Baines*) You also shall have the Ribbon and Medal of my Society.

BAINES (*much pleased*) Thank you, sir.

WINKELKOPF. Second Class.

(*BAINES' pleased smile fades*)

And now I must be on my way. I haf two or three explosives to deliver. (*He crosses and picks up his bag*)

ARTHUR (*moving up C*) I'll come with you to the door.

BAINES (*much upset*) My lord . . .

ARTHUR. What is it, Baines?

BAINES (*moving up R*) I do not wish to boast, my lord, but I feel Herr Winkelkopf should know it was I who thought of the Wolf's Bane.

ARTHUR. Yes, I must be fair. He did think of the Wolf's Bane.

BAINES. And if your lordship remembers, I also suggested we should emulate the methods of the Borgias.

ARTHUR. Yes, he did that, too.

WINKELKOPF. The Borgias! A race of incompetents. Nine out of ten of their murders were unsuccessful.

ARTHUR. Oh, Baines, and you told me hardly anyone ever rose from the table.

BAINES. I must have been misinformed, my lord. I was not there at the time.

ARTHUR. And you must admit you blundered rather badly over the *Police Gazette* and the messenger.

BAINES (*stung*) It is true, my lord, that in my zeal I may have erred a little, but may I remind your lordship that you have done nothing whatsoever but place the capsule in the box.

ARTHUR. Baines, I'm surprised at you. I never thought you'd be so petty about a medal.

BAINES. I am sorry, my lord, but I am keenly disappointed. I should have thought if anyone in this house had earned the First Class medal, it was I. It is nothing else, my lord, but class distinction.

WINKELKOPF. Do not be despondent, my friend. It is not given to all, like Lord Arthur, to achieve the First Class medal on their first attempt. And the Second Class medal is very nice. It has pictures of Guy Fawkes and King Henry the Eighth.

ARTHUR. There, you see, Baines? I haven't got King Henry the Eighth.

BAINES (*still uppish*) No, my lord.

(*A knock is heard from the front door*)

Excuse me, my lord.

(*BAINES exits up C*)

WINKELKOPF. And now I must be going. Oh, von thing more, my lord.

ARTHUR. Yes?

WINKELKOPF. My Society would esteem it an honour if you would favour us with your presence at the Anarchists' Annual Meat Tea. It is on Thursday next and vill be followed by indoor fireworks.

ARTHUR. I'd be delighted, only I'm rather expecting my aunt's funeral round about that date. In fact, I've had to postpone my wedding because of it.

WINKELKOPF. I understand. Business before pleasure. Perhaps some other time.

ARTHUR (*moving to R of him*) I hope so.

WINKELKOPF. And if in the future I can be of service to you . . .

ARTHUR. Thank you. I'll certainly keep your card.

(*BAINES enters up C and stands R of the doorway*)

BAINES (*announcing*) Lady Julia Merton. Miss Merton.

(*LADY JULIA and SYBIL enter up C and move RC*)

WINKELKOPF (*pointing to Lady Julia*) Ha, der victim?

LADY JULIA. I beg your pardon?

ARTHUR. No, no, no. Good morning, Lady Julia. Good morning, Sybil. You'll excuse me now, Herr Winkelkopf?

WINKELKOPF. But of course. I leave you to the good work. (*He pumps Arthur's hand*) It has been a privilege to meet you, my lord. I like you almost as much as I like myself. Aufweidersehen. (*To Baines*) Aufweidersehen.

(WINKELKOPF *exits up c.*)

BAINES *follows him off and closes the door*

LADY JULIA (*moving down c*) May I ask who that was?

ARTHUR. Oh, a mere acquaintance, Lady Julia. He rather admires me.

LADY JULIA. Yes, I noticed he seemed peculiar. (*She sits on the sofa, at the left end of it*)

ARTHUR (*moving to Sybil*) Sybil. (*He goes to kiss her*)

LADY JULIA. One moment, Arthur. Before you salute my daughter I should like to know the meaning of that extraordinary letter I received from you this morning.

ARTHUR (*moving c*) I'm sorry you thought it extraordinary, Lady Julia. I simply asked if you'd mind postponing the wedding for a fortnight.

LADY JULIA. May I ask for what reason?

ARTHUR (*moving to R of the sofa*) Well—I'm expecting the death of a near relative.

SYBIL (*moving down R*) Oh, Arthur, I'm so sorry. Who is it?

ARTHUR. Lady Clementina.

SYBIL. Oh, darling! And it's really serious? (*She sits on the chair down R*)

ARTHUR. Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose she'll last out the day.

SYBIL. When did you know she couldn't live?

ARTHUR (*moving to Sybil*) Only last night.

SYBIL (*taking Arthur's hand*) You poor thing! It must have been a shock for you.

ARTHUR. Yes—it was rather.

LADY JULIA. I must say this is very sudden. When I spoke to her yesterday she made no mention of the fact. I should hardly have thought it was the sort of thing to slip her memory.

ARTHUR (*crossing to R of the sofa*) Oh, she doesn't know it yet, Lady Julia.

LADY JULIA. You mean it is being kept from her?

ARTHUR. That's right. It's a secret. I'm the only one who knows.

LADY JULIA. Her physicians have informed you privately, I suppose?

ARTHUR (*moving to the table RC*) Well—I have private information, certainly.

LADY JULIA. I see. And you expect the sad news at any moment?

ARTHUR (*fingering the box of sweets*) Yes, any time after she gets it—I mean, any time after luncheon.

LADY JULIA. After luncheon? And why not before, pray, if her condition is so serious?

ARTHUR. Oh, no, it couldn't be before—at least, it's not very likely.

LADY JULIA. You seem strangely positive on that point. I can only conclude the trouble concerns her digestive organs. Has she eaten something which has disagreed with her?

ARTHUR. Not yet, Lady Julia, but it's confidently expected she will.

LADY JULIA. It seems a most unusual case. However, I suppose I have no alternative but to accede to your request.

ARTHUR. Thank you, Lady Julia. (*He moves to Sybil*) I'm so sorry, Sybil.

(*A knock is heard from the front door*)

SYBIL. I understand, darling.

LADY JULIA. All the same, Arthur, I trust this will be the only delay, and that your relatives will not make a habit of this sort of thing.

ARTHUR. Oh, no, all the rest are in the best of health.

LADY JULIA. The poor lady is quite unconscious, I suppose?

ARTHUR. Oh, yes, she hasn't a notion what's coming.

LADY JULIA. Then anything we can do for her in her last hours we must do. (*She rises*) Come, Sybil, we will make a point of calling upon Lady Clementina.

ARTHUR (*moving up RC*) Oh, no—I shouldn't do that.

LADY JULIA. And why not?

ARTHUR. I—I feel sure she wouldn't want to be disturbed.

LADY JULIA. Since she is quite unconscious, our presence will hardly disturb her. Come, Sybil.

(SYBIL *rises.*)

LADY CLEMENTINA *sweeps in up c*)

LADY CLEMENTINA. Arthur dear, good morning. (*She kisses him*) Do you know, your stupid man tried to tell me you weren't in. Why, Lady Julia and dear Sybil. How nice to see you. Isn't it a perfectly beautiful morning? It feels wonderful to be alive.

LADY JULIA. In your condition, Lady Clementina, it would appear to be little short of miraculous.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*moving c*) My condition? Oh, has Arthur been telling you about my heartburn? You shouldn't take any notice of him. The dear boy exaggerates so.

LADY JULIA (*grimly eyeing Arthur*) So it would seem.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*sitting in the armchair RC*) It has completely gone this morning, and so has my rheumatism. In fact when I woke

up I felt so well I decided to give a little party tonight. I came to ask Arthur to arrange my music for me. He is so good at that sort of thing.

LADY JULIA (*looking at Arthur*) This is a most remarkable recovery.

ARTHUR (*nervously*) Yes—isn't it?

LADY CLEMENTINA. Now go and find me some nice French music, Arthur. (*To Lady Julia*) I always have French songs at my parties then people think they're hearing something they shouldn't, and it makes them so much happier. Go along, dear boy, and I shall sit here and have a nice gossip with Lady Julia and Sybil.

(ARTHUR *moves reluctantly to the door up c*)

LADY JULIA. We were on the point of leaving.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Oh, but you mustn't go.

(LADY JULIA *sits on the sofa*. SYBIL *sits on the chair down r*)

I shall have no-one to talk to. (*She puts her gloves on the table r c and sees the box of sweets*) Oh, Arthur, is this a box of sweets? How nice!

ARTHUR (*moving quickly above the table r c*) Oh, Auntie, please don't touch them.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*seeing the card*) Why, they're for me. Oh, Arthur, how perfectly charming of you.

ARTHUR. I—I was going to send them round to you. I didn't want you to have them yet.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*opening the box*) Then I'm very glad I came. I shall enjoy them all the sooner. (*She displays the box*) Don't they look delicious? And the dear boy never said a word about them.

SYBIL. Arthur is always so kind.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*her hand hovering over the box*) Now, where shall I begin? Oh, how rude of me. I haven't offered them to you. (*She rises and crosses to the sofa*) Now, which will you have, Lady Julia? How about that nice pink one with the liquid centre?

(ARTHUR *moves behind the sofa and holds his breath hopefully while*

LADY JULIA *hesitates*)

LADY JULIA. No—none of them, thank you.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Oh, won't you? (*She crosses to Sybil*) Well, Sybil, then?

SYBIL (*rising and hesitating*) That pink one does look lovely. Are you sure you don't want it?

LADY CLEMENTINA. No, of course not. Do take it.

(SYBIL *puts out her hand to take the capsule*. ARTHUR *plunges forward*)

ARTHUR. No, Sybil, I forbid you. (*He snatches at her hand*) Here, have this one. (*He takes a sweet from the box and thrusts it into Sybil's mouth*)

(SYBIL *nearly chokes*. *There are exclamations from the others*. SYBIL *collapses on to the chair down r, coughing*)

LADY JULIA. Arthur, really!

LADY CLEMENTINA. Arthur, whatever are you thinking about?

ARTHUR. I'm sorry, Auntie, but if you knew the trouble I've been to—I mean, I chose them specially for you.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*sitting in the armchair r c*) Now, isn't that nice of him? To choose sweets specially for me. Do you know, I believe Arthur is the only one of my relatives who'll be really sorry when I die.

(BAINES *enters up c and stands r of the doorway*)

BAINES (*announcing*) Lady Windermere—the Dean of Paddington.

ARTHUR. Oh, Lord! (*He moves to the fireplace*)

(LADY WINDERMERE *and the DEAN enter up c*. *The DEAN carries his umbrella*. BAINES *remains by the door*)

LADY WINDERMERE. Good morning, Arthur. Your uncle was driving by so I said I'd come with him. Why, Clementina and Sybil, how nice. (*She glances briefly at Lady Julia, crosses and sits in the armchair down l*)

DEAN (*crossing to Arthur and shaking hands*) You're not looking very well, my boy. Too much excitement at the moment, that's what it is. Well, Clementina—Lady Julia . . .

LADY CLEMENTINA. Robert, look at this beautiful box of sweets Arthur has just given me. You must each have one.

DEAN (*moving to r of Lady Clementina*) Don't mind if I do. (*He takes a sweet*)

(LADY CLEMENTINA *rises and crosses to Lady Windermere*)

LADY WINDERMERE. How nice. (*She takes a sweet*)

BAINES (*to Arthur; questioningly*) My lord?

(ARTHUR *moves to Baines and draws him aside up c*)

ARTHUR. Baines, she found them and I can't stop her. I don't even know if it's still there.

BAINES. One moment, my lord. (*He crosses to the Dean*) May I have your umbrella, your reverence?

DEAN. What? (*He realizes he still carries his umbrella*) Oh, I thought I'd left it in the hall. Thank you.

(BAINES *takes the umbrella and returns to Arthur*)

BAINES. It is still there, my lord. (*He puts the umbrella l of the side-board*)

(LADY CLEMENTINA, LADY JULIA *and* LADY WINDERMERE *are talking together*)

ARTHUR. Thank heavens! Baines, get that box away from her. I don't care how, but get it away until she goes.

BAINES (*nastily*) Your lordship forgets I am only a Second Classer.

ARTHUR. Oh, Baines, don't bear malice at a time like this. I'll speak to Winkelkopf.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Arthur, do go and get my music, there's a good boy. I can't stay long.

ARTHUR. Yes, Auntie, I'm going. (*Imploringly*) Oh, Baines!

BAINES (*relenting*) Leave it to me, my lord.

(*ARTHUR exits up R. BAINES goes to the sideboard and pours six glasses of sherry*)

DEAN. What's this nonsense about Arthur postponing his marriage?

LADY CLEMENTINA. Arthur? (*She sits R of Lady Julia on the sofa*)

DEAN (*sitting in the armchair RC*) Yes. Sent me a note about it. That's why I came round.

LADY JULIA It appears he is expecting some tragic news.

DEAN. What? Not lost any money, has he?

LADY CLEMENTINA. Of course he hasn't. Arthur doesn't gamble. But why should he put it off? Is somebody ill?

LADY JULIA. I hate to appear morbid, Lady Clementina, but he seems to think *you* are.

LADY CLEMENTINA. I? What nonsense!

LADY JULIA. Unless, of course, this is some subterfuge for putting off the marriage altogether. I thought he had a furtive look when I came in—if Arthur's face can be said to convey any reasonable expression.

(*BAINES picks up the tray of sherry and crosses to Sybil*)

SYBIL (*taking a glass of sherry*) You know that isn't true, Mamma. He was dreadfully anxious, and to be quite truthful, Lady Clementina, it *was* about you.

(*BAINES crosses to LADY WINDERMERE, who takes a glass of sherry*)

LADY CLEMENTINA. I suppose it was because I told him I felt a little unwell yesterday. But I shall be fit as a fiddle for your wedding, my dear, and you must tell him not to dream of a postponement.

(*BAINES moves to LADY JULIA, who takes a glass of sherry*)

Now, who is going to have another of my delicious sweets?

LADY WINDERMERE. Not just now, Clem, thank you.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Then Robert? (*She rises and moves to the Dean*) Do try that exciting looking pink one with the liquid centre.

DEAN (*about to take the capsule*) Oh, thank you.

(*BAINES moves quickly to the Dean*)

BAINES. Sherry, your reverence?

DEAN. What? Oh, after my sherry, Clementina. (*He takes a glass of sherry*)

BAINES (*offering the tray to Lady Clementina*) My lady?

LADY CLEMENTINA (*moving and sitting R of Lady Julia on the sofa*) No, no sherry for me. I am forbidden it. There is really no pleasure in being an invalid nowadays. They have so many disagreeable devices for getting one well again. (*She places the box on the right arm of the sofa*)

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) May I recommend a little port, your ladyship? His lordship keeps a very superior brand. (*He rests the tray on the box*)

LADY CLEMENTINA (*doubtfully*) Well . . .

LADY WINDERMERE. Just this once, Clementina, to drink Arthur's health in.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Well, just this once. A very little, Baines.

BAINES. Yes, my lady. (*He manages to pick up the box with his tray and goes to the sideboard. During the next speech, he pours a glass of port, with his back to the others*)

LADY CLEMENTINA. And now that I have the opportunity, I want to invite you all to my little party tonight. I hope none of you will refuse an old woman whose last pleasure this may be.

(*There are general murmurs of "delighted", "a great pleasure", etc.*)

BAINES, *unseen by the others, takes the capsule from the box of sweets, and holds it poised over the glass of port*)

Good. That's settled. Baines, you are giving me only a very little? I mustn't have anything that will make me ill.

BAINES (*dropping the capsule in the glass*) I assure you you will feel nothing, my lady. (*He gently revolves the glass and takes it to Lady Clementina*)

LADY CLEMENTINA (*taking the glass*) Thank you. Now, see if my carriage has returned. I sent my maid in it to do a little shopping.

BAINES. Very good, my lady. (*He moves to the doors up C*)

(*ARTHUR enters up R, carrying some music*)

ARTHUR. Everybody being looked after, Baines?

BAINES (*significantly*) All is well, my lord.

ARTHUR (*excitedly*) You mean . . . ?

(*BAINES opens his mouth and points to it, then points to Lady Clementina and nods*)

ARTHUR (*fervently*) Thank you, Baines. (*He puts the music on the table behind the sofa*)

(*BAINES exits up C. ARTHUR, in high spirits, moves down C*)

LADY WINDERMERE. Ah, Arthur, you're just in time. We were about to drink your health and Sybil's.

ARTHUR. Thank you, Auntie.

LADY CLEMENTINA. I am indulging in some of your excellent port, Arthur, although it is really poison to me. But I would suffer anything for you, dear boy.

ARTHUR. Oh, you won't suffer anything now, Auntie. Do you feel all right? *(He sits on the right arm of the sofa)*

LADY CLEMENTINA. Perfectly well, darling. *(She raises her glass)*
Now—to Sybil and Arthur.

DEAN

LADY WINDERMERE } *(together)* To Sybil and Arthur.
LADY JULIA }

(They are about to drink when SYBIL speaks)

SYBIL *(rising)* Lady Clem, I know it's dreadful of me, but . . .
LADY CLEMENTINA *(lowering her glass)* What is it, dear?

SYBIL. I would love you to drink our healths—really I would—but please don't if it means it would make you ill.

ARTHUR. Oh, I don't think it would make any difference now, Sybil. *(To Lady Clementina)* Are you still feeling all right, Auntie?

LADY CLEMENTINA. A little tired, that's all. It's the excitement.

ARTHUR. Yes, of course. I should go home and lie down quietly on your bed if I were you. I'll send round in a couple of hours to see how you are.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Dear boy, he is always so solicitous for me. *(To Sybil)* Very well, child, I won't drink this if it will make you unhappy. Arthur shall have it instead. It will do him good.

(SYBIL resumes her seat)

ARTHUR. Are you sure you don't want it, Auntie?

LADY CLEMENTINA *(handing the glass to Arthur)* No, no, you have it. *(To the others)* He looked so pale when I came in, but now he's looking much better.

DEAN. And you'll feel a lot different, my boy, with that inside you. *(He rises)* Now—to Sybil and Arthur. *(He drinks)*

(LADY JULIA and LADY WINDERMERE rise and drink)

SYBIL *(rising and raising her glass)* To you, Arthur.

ARTHUR *(rising and raising his glass)* To you, Sybil darling, and all the years ahead of us.

(SYBIL and ARTHUR drink. ARTHUR drains the glass of port to the dregs then puts the glass on the table RC)

LADY JULIA *(putting her glass on the table behind the sofa)* Now, Sybil, it is time we were leaving. You are due at your milliner's. I take it, Arthur, there need be no more talk about postponing the wedding? *(She moves up LC)*

ARTHUR *(moving up C)* Oh, no, Lady Julia. Now I know how I stand with Lady Clem we can carry on with our original arrangements.

(SYBIL moves up RC. The DEAN takes Sybil's glass and puts it with his own on the mantelpiece)

LADY JULIA. I am very glad to hear it.

(BAINES enters up C and stands R of the doorway. LADY WINDERMERE puts her glass on the table behind the sofa. LADY CLEMENTINA rises and picks up the music from the table behind the sofa)

Are you coming, Lady Windermere?

DEAN *(moving C)* I'm going along now, Margaret. I can give you a lift. *(To Arthur)* Good-bye, my boy. *(He moves up C and collects his umbrella)*

(ARTHUR is kissing Sybil)

LADY JULIA. Good morning, Arthur. Sybil!

(The DEAN, LADY WINDERMERE, LADY JULIA and SYBIL exit up C. LADY CLEMENTINA moves up C)

BAINES *(to Lady Clementina)* Your carriage has returned, my lady.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Thank you, Baines. Now, where are my lovely sweets? Oh, they're on that sideboard. Get them for me, Arthur. I can't think how they came to be over there.

(ARTHUR collects the box of sweets and hands them to Lady Clementina)

I've nearly eaten them all. Wasn't that greedy of me? But they were so delicious.

ARTHUR. I'm so glad you enjoyed them. Go home and lie down quietly now.

(LADY CLEMENTINA kisses Arthur)

LADY CLEMENTINA. I shall see you tonight, dear boy, and afterwards in church.

ARTHUR. That's right, Auntie.

(LADY CLEMENTINA exits up C.)

BAINES follows her off. ARTHUR exhales triumphantly and moves down RC, humming "The Wedding March".

(BAINES enters up C)

So you did it, Baines. I'm extremely grateful to you. When I went out I was paralysed with fright that something would happen to Miss Merton. How did you get Lady Clem to take the right one?

BAINES *(moving down C)* It was quite simple, my lord. I foresaw the danger the indiscriminate handing round of the sweets might lead to, so on serving the sherry I took the opportunity of surreptitiously removing the box.

ARTHUR *(crossing below the sofa)* Ah, yes, and then?

BAINES. Lady Clementina requested a glass of port, my lord. I was just pouring it out when I suddenly remembered that the capsule dissolved readily in liquid. I took the fatal potion from the box and dropped it in the port.

ARTHUR. The glass of port—you gave to—Lady Clem?

BAINES. Yes, my lord.

ARTHUR. You—put the poison in it?

BAINES. I did, my lord, and as you see, her ladyship drained it to the dregs. (*He picks up the glass from the table and displays it*) We should expect the happy news in about half an hour, my lord.

ARTHUR (*collapsing on to the sofa*) You blithering idiot! You infernal nincompoop!

BAINES. My lord!

ARTHUR. I drank it!

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

SCENE—*The same. Morning, three days later.*

When the CURTAIN rises, it is a dull wet morning. A large vase of arum lilies stands on the mantelpiece. BAINES is C. NELLIE is RC, holding a vase of June roses.

BAINES. There—no, there, I think. (*He gestures to the mantelpiece*)

NELLIE (*moving to the fireplace*) What shall I do with the lilies, Mr Baines?

BAINES. Remove them. They might depress his lordship if he came down and saw them.

NELLIE. But Lady Julia sent them the moment she heard his lordship was ill, Mr Baines. (*She takes the vase of lilies from the mantelpiece*)

BAINES (*crossing to Nellie*) I am aware of it. (*He takes the lilies from her and looks at them with distaste*) Her ladyship's expression of sympathy appears to border on the macabre or the hopeful. I am not sure which.

NELLIE (*putting the vase of roses on the mantelpiece*) Oh, you do talk beautifully, Mr Baines. It's better than a lantern lecture to listen to you.

BAINES. Thank you, child. (*He moves and puts the vase of lilies on the table behind the sofa*) It is pleasant to be appreciated.

NELLIE (*moving RC*) I appreciate you, Mr Baines. I really do.

BAINES. Do you, my child?

NELLIE. Ever since I came here I've looked up to you, as it were.

BAINES (*moving down C*) Er—Nellie, you have an evening out, I suppose?

NELLIE. Oh, yes, Mr Baines. It's Thursdays.

(*BAINES takes a step towards Nellie, then stops*)

BAINES. No. My first duty is to his lordship.

NELLIE. Duty?

BAINES (*moving below the sofa*) His lordship has a difficult task to perform. He looks upon me as a friend and adviser. Such confidence require single-mindedness. I must not think of dalliance.

NELLIE (*disappointed*) Oh. (*She moves to him*) Will you always have to advise his lordship, Mr Baines?

BAINES. I trust his lordship will shortly be able to bring his task to a satisfactory conclusion.

NELLIE. Well, then—it'll still be Thursdays, Mr Baines.

BAINES. Delightful child! (*He moves closer to her*)

(*A knock is heard from the front door*)

Ah, that will be more visitors, I expect. Efface yourself, Nellie.

(*BAINES exits up C.*)

NELLIE *crosses to the fireplace, examines her reflection in the mirror, then collects the vase of lilies and exits up R.*

BAINES *enters up C and stands aside.*

LADY JULIA and SYBIL *enter up C*)

LADY JULIA (*as she enters*) You will kindly inform Lord Arthur that I wish to see him *at once*. (*She moves down C*)

BAINES. I will enquire whether his lordship is well enough to see you, my lady.

SYBIL (*moving RC*) Is he still unwell, Baines?

BAINES. He is no longer causing us grave anxiety, I am thankful to say, miss, but he is still far from being himself.

LADY JULIA (*sitting on the sofa*) That might easily be an improvement. What is supposed to have been the matter with him?

SYBIL (*moving below the table RC*) Mamma, you know poor Arthur has been most dreadfully ill.

LADY JULIA. Three days ago he informed us that his Aunt Clementina was most dreadfully ill. Not ten minutes later she practically danced into this room and announced she was giving an evening party. I can scarcely be blamed for considering Arthur's statements to be, at the least, unreliable.

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) He has indeed been greatly indisposed, my lady. It was something he swallowed.

LADY JULIA. By accident or design?

BAINES. By accident, my lady. A beverage he erroneously supposed to be innocuous. Had I not been on hand to summon a doctor immediately, we might easily have lost him.

LADY JULIA. Hmm! Since I have no desire to hurt you, Sybil, I will not comment on that. (*To Baines*) But he is up and about now?

BAINES. He is up, my lady, but to say he is about would be an exaggeration. He must take things very quietly for the next few days. Now, if your ladyship will excuse me, I will inform his lordship you are here.

(BAINES exits up c)

SYBIL (*sitting in the armchair RC*) Mamma, you won't be hard on dear Arthur, will you? He couldn't help being ill. He'll be well again in time for the wedding.

LADY JULIA. I wonder. I shall be interested to see.

SYBIL. Mamma, you don't mean you think Arthur will ask for another postponement?

LADY JULIA. I shall be very surprised indeed if he does not.

SYBIL. But—why should he?

LADY JULIA. Has it not struck you as suspicious that he should first invent an illness for his Aunt Clementina, in order to obtain a postponement, and then, when that is proved false, conveniently fall ill himself?

SYBIL. But he *has* been ill. Baines said so.

LADY JULIA. The loyalty of such as Baines may be purchased by means of a small coin.

SYBIL. I can't believe it. He always said I was the first love of his life.

LADY JULIA. There is nothing satisfactory in being a man's first love. It is better by far—not to say safer—to be his last.

SYBIL (*rising and moving down R*) If Arthur asks for another postponement I shall never forgive him. And yet—if he really is ill . . .

(ARTHUR enters up c. He is in his dressing-gown and looks pale and wan)

ARTHUR. Sybil . . .

SYBIL (*running to him*) Arthur! Oh, Arthur, how pale you look. You see, Mamma, he *has* been ill.

ARTHUR. I feel better already for seeing you, Sybil. Lady Julia, how good of you to come.

LADY JULIA. Speaking for myself, my motives were not entirely prompted by solicitude. However, I am glad to see you *look* ill, and this is not another subterfuge.

SYBIL. You mustn't stand, Arthur. Come and sit down. Lean on me. (*She leads Arthur to the armchair RC*)

LADY JULIA. Surely one can *walk* with a weak stomach.

ARTHUR (*sitting in the armchair RC*) Thank you, darling.

SYBIL. Another cushion?

ARTHUR. No, thank you, dear. I'm quite comfortable.

SYBIL (*kneeling by his chair*) Mamma and I were so afraid you'd have to postpone the wedding, but now you're so much better . . .

ARTHUR. Sybil—I don't want you to misunderstand me . . .

LADY JULIA (*triumphantly*) Ah-ha!

SYBIL (*rising*) Arthur, you don't mean to say you *want* to postpone it . . .

ARTHUR. No, darling, I don't *want* to, only . . .

SYBIL (*moving down R; her face crumpling*) Oh, Arthur!

ARTHUR (*desperately*) I don't want to, darling, really I don't . . .

SYBIL (*collapsing on to the chair down R and sobbing*) You don't love me any more.

ARTHUR. I do, darling. (*He rises and moves to Sybil*)

SYBIL. No, you don't.

ARTHUR. I do, Sybil, I do, I do, I do, I do.

SYBIL. Mamma said you would—and now you have.

ARTHUR (*kneeling by her chair*) It's not my fault, Sybil. Please stop crying and listen to me. I'd do anything to please you, dearest, you know that.

LADY JULIA. Ha!

ARTHUR. But I'm not at all strong yet. I don't feel I could walk up the aisle with any confidence.

LADY JULIA. To my mind, it is Sybil who is unlikely to walk up the aisle with any confidence. And how long a postponement are you suggesting this time?

ARTHUR. Well, I think I could manage with a month.

SYBIL. A month!

LADY JULIA (*rising and moving to L of the sofa*) Let us go, Sybil. (*She moves above the sofa*) It is quite apparent that Arthur wishes to break off the match and is choosing this roundabout way of doing it. The longer we stay the more we demean ourselves.

ARTHUR (*rising and moving c*) But I don't want to break it off, Lady Julia. Nothing is further from my mind. (*He moves to Sybil*) You believe me, don't you, Sybil?

SYBIL. I want to, Arthur, only you are behaving very strangely. Is something troubling you beside your health?

ARTHUR. Yes, Sybil, something is.

LADY JULIA. Ah, now we are getting at the truth.

ARTHUR (*crossing to RC*) Lady Julia, I beg of you to let me speak to Sybil alone for a few minutes.

LADY JULIA. Alone? Certainly not!

ARTHUR. But all I wish to do is to set her mind at rest about the sincerity of my affection and the honesty of my intentions.

LADY JULIA. This is most irregular. (*She moves c*) Do you wish to hear him, Sybil?

SYBIL (*rising*) Yes, Mamma, I do.

ARTHUR. Thank you, darling.

LADY JULIA. I cannot say that I approve of these confidences between engaged couples. It is far better to reserve them until after marriage, when you will probably have nothing whatever to talk about. However, as Sybil wishes it, I will give you five minutes. (*She moves to the doors up c*)

ARTHUR (*moving and opening the door*) I'm most grateful, Lady Julia.

LADY JULIA. Five minutes, remember. Not a second more. You are by no means sufficiently ill for me to allow a longer tête-à-tête.

(LADY JULIA exits up c. ARTHUR closes the door and moves down c)

ARTHUR. Oh, Sybil, I am the wretchedest of men.

SYBIL (*moving to him*) Arthur dear, don't look like that. What is it? What's troubling you?

ARTHUR. Sybil, you remember Mr Podgers?

SYBIL. The palmist? Yes, of course.

ARTHUR. He read my hand.

SYBIL. I know, dear. Mamma told me. A happy, uneventful life . . .

ARTHUR (*crossing to L*) Oh, if only that were true!

SYBIL (*sitting on the sofa*) He told you something more?

ARTHUR. Much more. Sybil, I must confide in you or go mad.

SYBIL. Confide in me, dear.

(ARTHUR sits L of Sybil on the sofa)

ARTHUR. He told me—I was to commit—a murder.

SYBIL. A murder! Oh, my poor darling!

ARTHUR. Imagine my cruel dilemma. On the brink of marrying you, the sweetest girl in the world, I was told this dreadful thing. But in a moment, my mind was made up. I would commit this crime *before* our marriage, so that no shadow of infamy or disgrace should fall across our married life, and you should never have to hang your head in shame for me.

SYBIL. Oh, Arthur, how noble of you.

ARTHUR. I know.

SYBIL (*enthusiastically*) When did you do it?

ARTHUR. Do what?

SYBIL. The murder.

ARTHUR (*deflated*) Well, I—I haven't exactly done it yet.

SYBIL (*disappointed*) Oh, Arthur, you've had nearly a week.

ARTHUR. I tried, Sybil. I *did* try. I prepared a subtle poison for my Aunt Clementina. By accident—I swallowed it myself.

SYBIL (*severely*) But, darling, how careless of you. You knew it was poison.

ARTHUR. No, I didn't. At least, I did, but I didn't know it was where it was at the time. Really, Sybil, I thought you'd be more sympathetic. I've been seriously ill.

SYBIL. I'm sorry, dear. I was just a little disappointed. Did it hurt much?

ARTHUR. They said it was painless. That was a vile lie. And then I was operated on with a stomach pump. Oh, Sybil, never let anyone use a stomach pump on you.

SYBIL. Never mind, Arthur, it couldn't have been a very good poison or you wouldn't have recovered. What are you going to try next?

ARTHUR. I wish I knew. For three days I've lain on my bed of pain, thinking—thinking—thinking.

SYBIL. And what have you thought?

ARTHUR. Nothing.

SYBIL. Oh. That doesn't help us very much, does it?

ARTHUR. It's much more difficult to commit a murder than people think.

SYBIL. Oh, but darling, dozens of people do it every day who haven't had half your education.

ARTHUR. Yes, but those are the ones that are found out. I want to keep mine strictly private.

SYBIL (*rising and moving thoughtfully* rc) What about history? There are lots of murders in history.

ARTHUR. Y-yes.

SYBIL. Arthur, I know. (*She returns and sits R of him on the sofa*) Mary, Queen of Scots.

ARTHUR (*after a stern mental effort*) No.

SYBIL. Why not?

ARTHUR. I haven't got an axe.

SYBIL. No, darling, not that. Her husband Darnley.

ARTHUR. What about him?

SYBIL. She blew him up on their honeymoon.

ARTHUR (*interested*) He didn't have very long, did he?

SYBIL. They laid a train of gunpowder to the house, and then went off to a ball and left him in bed. While they were away, the house blew up.

ARTHUR. What a rotten honeymoon.

SYBIL. Couldn't you do something like that?

ARTHUR. Well, I didn't really want to go about blowing up houses. It's so conspicuous.

SYBIL (*offended*) Arthur, I thought you *wanted* help.

ARTHUR. I do, darling. I'm very grateful to you. I suppose I might do something like that on a smaller scale.

(BAINES enters up c)

What is it, Baines?

BAINES. Lady Julia, my lord. She requests Miss Merton to join her without delay.

(ARTHUR and SYBIL rise)

SYBIL. You will try very hard, won't you, darling? Mother would never forgive you if you asked for another postponement.

ARTHUR. Never fear, Sybil. Now I have you behind me, I'll venture anything. I'll decide what it's to be and carry it out without an instant's delay. (*He leads Sybil up c*)

SYBIL. Good-bye, darling. I trust you and I know you'll succeed.

(SYBIL exits up c. BAINES is about to follow)

ARTHUR. Come back, will you, Baines?

BAINES. Yes, my lord.

(BAINES exits up c. ARTHUR goes to the sideboard, pours himself a drink, then remembers and sniffs suspiciously at it. He decides it is all right and drinks it.)

BAINES enters up c)

You wanted me, my lord?

ARTHUR (moving down rc) Yes, Baines. Now, about this murder . . .

BAINES. You feel well enough to discuss it, my lord?

ARTHUR. Oh, yes, I'm reasonably fit now. Oh, and by the way, I've confided in Miss Merton.

BAINES (moving down c) You think that was prudent, my lord?

ARTHUR. Well, dash it all, I owed her an explanation for postponing the wedding and, as a matter of fact, she made a suggestion.

BAINES. I am not surprised, my lord, murder is by no means the prerogative of the male sex. Is it to be the Lady Clementina again, my lord?

ARTHUR (crossing below the sofa) No, I don't think so. I've had the rottenest luck with auntie. I'd rather try somebody new.

BAINES. May I enquire whom, my lord?

ARTHUR. I don't know yet. Have you got that list we drew up of my relations? (He moves L of the sofa, then above it)

BAINES. I have it here, my lord. (He takes a very long list from his pocket)

ARTHUR. Good. Now, put it on the table.

(BAINES lays out the list on the table behind the sofa. ARTHUR takes a pencil from his pocket)

BAINES. Ah, the game of chance, my lord.

ARTHUR. That's right. Then no-one can say I've been vindictive. (He stabs the list with the pencil) Who have I got, Baines?

BAINES (examining the list) The Dean of Paddington, my lord.

ARTHUR. The Dean? I say, that's dashed awkward.

BAINES. Why so, my lord? (He puts the list in his pocket)

ARTHUR. Well, he was going to perform the ceremony.

BAINES. That need not present a difficulty, my lord.

ARTHUR (moving down L of the sofa) Why not?

BAINES. Your lordship has, I believe, a young cousin also in orders.

ARTHUR. By Jove, so I have! (He sits on the sofa) Young Augustus.

BAINES (moving down R of the sofa) Exactly, my lord.

ARTHUR. And if I remember correctly, he's been waiting for preferment for a very long time. I might even be able to get him the Deanship.

BAINES. It would be a kindly act, my lord.

ARTHUR. Upon my word, Augustus *would* be pleased. You know, Baines, it's surprising when one comes to think of it, what a lot of good one can do by murder.

BAINES. I fancy other people have had the same idea, my lord.

ARTHUR. And, after all, if a *Dean* isn't ready to pop off at a moment's notice, who is?

BAINES. Precisely, my lord. And the method of dispatch?

ARTHUR. Well, there I'm not very clear. All I could think of upstairs was strangling, but the *Dean's* stronger than I am.

BAINES. If I might suggest it, my lord, I have an idea.

ARTHUR. Yes?

BAINES. During your lordship's unfortunate illness, I have taken the opportunity of re-reading the classics, which being primarily intended for juvenile consumption, contain many choice examples of murder by violence. I was much taken by the description of the death of one Amy Robsart.

ARTHUR. Oh, how was it done?

BAINES. An ingenious trapdoor was contrived at the head of the stairs, my lord. When her little foot was placed upon it, she was precipitated forty feet below and instantly broke her neck.

ARTHUR. Y-yes, it's quite a good idea . . .

BAINES. I thought so, my lord. The coroner brought in a verdict of accidental death. Apparently trapdoors at the head of stairs were common fixtures in those days.

ARTHUR. Yes, but all the same, there is an objection, you know.

BAINES. My lord?

ARTHUR. The thing's got to be made, after all, and I don't quite see how we can go about doing complicated carpentry in somebody else's house.

BAINES. I see your lordship's point. That had not occurred to me. Your lordship would not consider having one made here?

ARTHUR. No, I wouldn't. I have to go up and down those stairs myself.

BAINES. Very true, my lord. (He pauses) I could, of course, procure another capsule of Wolf's Bane.

(ARTHUR looks balefully at Baines)

I would take the greatest care to see it was not misplaced, my lord.

ARTHUR. No.

BAINES. No, my lord.

ARTHUR (rising and pacing anxiously down L) There *must* be something easier.

BAINES (after a pause) My lord—a nice shooting accident. His Reverence is always prominent on the glorious Twelfth of August.

ARTHUR. This happens to be June, and I've only got a month's postponement.

BAINES (moving rc) It seems that even the seasons are against us, my lord.

ARTHUR. I'm almost inclined to adopt Miss Merton's suggestion, only I don't know how to go about it.

BAINES. What was it, my lord?

ARTHUR. An explosion. (He sits in the armchair down L)

BAINES. Explosion? Dynamite, my lord?

ARTHUR. I suppose so. It seems a bit wholesale, somehow.

BAINES (*crossing to LC*) Nevertheless, my lord, with dynamite it should be scarcely possible to fail.

ARTHUR. Yes, but I don't know where to *get* any dynamite. It's not the sort of thing you can just go in and *ask* for.

WINKELKOPF (*off*) Lord Arthur, he is in, ja?

BAINES (*moving RC*) My lord, we are saved. Listen!

ARTHUR (*rising*) Winkelkopf, by Jove!

(WINKELKOPF *enters up c. He carries his bag and umbrella*)

WINKELKOPF. My dear Lord Arthur, how are you? I am passing this way and I say to myself I will go in and see that nice Lord Arthur, ja. (*He puts his bag and umbrella on the table behind the sofa*)

ARTHUR (*moving up L of the sofa*) I'm delighted to see you, Herr Winkelkopf. Do sit down. Oh, you're wet. Let Baines take your coat.

WINKELKOPF. No, no. It is nothing. A passing shower, that is all. (*He moves c*) Well, and how goes the enterprise, my lord?

ARTHUR (*moving below the sofa*) Oh, Herr Winkelkopf!

WINKELKOPF. The beautiful pill—she did not take it?

ARTHUR (*sitting on the sofa*) No—I took it.

WINKELKOPF. You? But you are still here. (*He sits R of Arthur on the sofa*)

ARTHUR. Yes—well, we won't go into that. Herr Winkelkopf, I need your help.

WINKELKOPF. It is all yours, Lord Arthur.

ARTHUR. Can you let me have some dynamite?

WINKELKOPF. But, of course.

ARTHUR. You can?

WINKELKOPF. Nothing simpler.

BAINES. You see, my lord.

WINKELKOPF. How do you wish it, my lord? Plain or disguised?

ARTHUR. Oh, disguised, I think. I don't like to be crude.

WINKELKOPF (*rising and moving above the sofa*) As it happens, I haf just come from the house of the Russian Ambassador, so I haf some samples wid me. Juvenile or adult, my lord? (*He opens his bag*)

ARTHUR (*rising*) Oh, adult, certainly.

WINKELKOPF. If it had been a juvenile I should haf recommended this. (*He takes a small coloured ball from his bag and moves to R of Arthur*)

ARTHUR. A ball, eh? (*He takes the ball, tosses it up and catches it*)

WINKELKOPF. Take care, my lord!

ARTHUR (*nearly dropping it*) What?

WINKELKOPF. It look like a ball—it feel like a ball, but one bounce and . . . (*He spreads his hands in a wide gesture*)

ARTHUR (*looking appreciatively at the ball*) I say, that's jolly neat. Do you sell many?

WINKELKOPF. One of our best lines, my lord. We sell them chiefly to vicked uncles. (*He goes to his bag*)

ARTHUR. Wicked uncles?

WINKELKOPF. Ven there is a small boy between the uncle and the estate, you understand. The uncle make the heir a present of von of these, and the next day he step into his nephew's shoes. (*He takes out several more balls*) We haf them in all colours. (*He puts the balls on the table beside his bag*)

BAINES (*stepping forward*) My lord, I would like to purchase one of those on my own account.

ARTHUR. If you're thinking of the little boy next door, Baines—no. (*He puts the ball on the table behind the sofa and moves down L*)

BAINES. Oh, my lord!

ARTHUR. Didn't you have a catapult when you were young? Don't be vindictive.

(BAINES *hangs his head*)

No, something more mature, I think, Herr Winkelkopf.

WINKELKOPF. For a lady or gentleman?

ARTHUR. Gentleman. The Dean of Paddington.

WINKELKOPF. A dean! Then I haf just the very thing. Look at this, my lord. (*He picks up his umbrella*)

ARTHUR. An umbrella!

WINKELKOPF (*moving c*) Ah, but what an umbrella. Once open this and—poof! You would not even haf to pay for a funeral.

ARTHUR (*crossing to L of Winkelkopf*) It's loaded with dynamite?

WINKELKOPF. To the very ferrule, my lord.

ARTHUR. This seems to be just the thing. What do you say, Baines?

BAINES (*moving down R*) If I might be permitted, my lord, it seems a trifle dangerous.

ARTHUR. Of course it is. That's the idea.

BAINES. Your lordship misunderstands me. I mean, the Dean is absent-minded and might easily leave it about for some innocent bystander to pick up.

ARTHUR. That's true. I hadn't thought of that. No, I'm sorry, Herr Winkelkopf, it had better be something else.

(WINKELKOPF *hangs the umbrella on the chair RC*)

WINKELKOPF (*after thinking*) The Dean takes snuff, yes?

ARTHUR. No.

WINKELKOPF (*moving to his bag*) A pity.

ARTHUR. He collects clocks, though.

WINKELKOPF. Clocks! But, yes, I haf the very thing. (*He takes a small gilt clock from his bag*) Look at that, Lord Arthur.

ARTHUR (*moving up L of the sofa*) Is it loaded?

WINKELKOPF. Not yet. You may handle it in safety.

ARTHUR (*taking the clock*) How does it go off?

WINKELKOPF. Ah, that is my secret. But tell me the hour you wish it to explode and I vill set it.

ARTHUR. I'll have this, then, Herr Winkelkopf, and set it for—let me see—tomorrow at twelve midday. *(He puts the clock on the table behind the sofa)*

WINKELKOPF *(making a note in his notebook)* Tomorrow at twelve midday.

ARTHUR. The Dean is always at home, then. You can pop over with it in the morning, Baines.

BAINES *(startled)* I, my lord?

ARTHUR. Yes. *(To Winkelkopf)* It won't go off before the proper time, will it?

WINKELKOPF *(pocketing his notebook)* It has only happened once or twice, my lord.

ARTHUR *(to Baines)* There, you see? There's nothing to worry about.

BAINES *(swallowing)* No, my lord.

WINKELKOPF. All the same, Lord Arthur, you would do better to let me send it. It would be more suitable for your purposes if the clock were to arrive anonymously.

BAINES *(thankfully)* Yes, indeed, my lord.

ARTHUR. Very well, if you think best.

(A knock is heard from the front door)

See who that is, Baines.

(BAINES exits up c)

Now, how much do I owe you, Herr Winkelkopf?

WINKELKOPF. It is such a small matter, my lord, that I do not care to make any charge.

ARTHUR *(moving down L)* Oh, but I insist.

WINKELKOPF. Then we will say three pounds for the clock and ten shillings for the dynamite. *(He puts the clock in his bag)*

ARTHUR *(taking out some gold coins)* But your trouble?

WINKELKOPF *(moving to L of the sofa)* For that, nothing at all. I do not vork for money. I live entirely for my art.

(ARTHUR pays Winkelkopf.)

BAINES *enters up c and stands R of the doorway)*

BAINES *(announcing)* The Dean of Paddington.

ARTHUR *(startled)* Uncle!

(The DEAN enters up c. He carries a wet umbrella)

DEAN *(shaking the moisture from his umbrella)* I'm glad you're at home, Arthur. I want to talk to you. What's this I hear about you postponing your marriage again? Lady Julia has just been to see me. *(He moves down c)*

BAINES. Allow me, your reverence. *(He takes the Dean's umbrella, hangs it beside Winkelkopf's on the chair RC, then moves down R)*

ARTHUR. Oh, this is Herr Winkelkopf, Uncle.

DEAN. How do you do, sir? Well, Arthur, what have you to say for yourself?

ARTHUR *(moving below the sofa)* I'm not at all well, Uncle.

DEAN. Nonsense! You look perfectly well to me. It's your duty to get married, sir. You can't always be living for pleasure.

ARTHUR. I am trying to get married, Uncle. You've no idea how hard I'm trying.

DEAN *(moving up R of the sofa)* I don't believe you, sir. Look at you, now. Looking at toys. *(He picks up a ball from the table behind the sofa)* Is this an occupation for a grown man, sir?

ARTHUR *(backing down L)* Uncle, be careful.

DEAN *(moving below the sofa and shaking the ball at Arthur)* Careful, sir? It is you who had better be careful. These postponements are making the family the laughing-stock of the town. I tell you, Arthur, unless you act quickly, something very serious is going to happen.

ARTHUR. I know, Uncle. I can see it.

DEAN. Bah! *(He moves c)* I don't know why I waste my time on you. *(He throws the ball L)*

(ARTHUR and BAINES cower. WINKELKOPF just manages to catch the ball)

And when do you propose to have the wedding now?

ARTHUR *(mopping his face)* In July, Uncle. *(He sits in the armchair down L)*

DEAN. July? I'm not at all sure I shall be available then. *(He takes out his diary)*

ARTHUR. I'm quite sure you won't be, Uncle.

DEAN *(consulting his diary)* No, I shall be a long way off by that time. Going where it's warmer, in fact.

ARTHUR. Oh, Uncle, surely not?

(BAINES moves behind the chair RC)

DEAN *(moving up c)* Well, you'll have to put up with young Augustus, that's all. And mind you go through with it this time, Arthur. This sort of thing is getting us talked about and I don't like it. *(To Winkelkopf)* Good day to you, sir.

(BAINES picks up Winkelkopf's umbrella and holds it out to the Dean)

BAINES *(smoothly)* Your umbrella, your reverence.

(The DEAN snatches the umbrella and exits up c. BAINES moves up c and closes the door)

ARTHUR. Well, Herr Winkelkopf, any scruples I may have had are completely vanished now. Tomorrow at twelve o'clock.

BAINES *(moving down c)* My lord, you need go no further with these preparations. Your troubles are over.

ARTHUR *(rising)* What? What do you mean?

BAINES. I have done the business for you, my lord. I have given the Dean Herr Winkelkopf's umbrella.

ARTHUR (*crossing to R of the sofa; delighted*) Baines, you didn't?

BAINES. The opportunity seemed to me too good to be missed, my lord.

(WINKELKOPF *crosses to the chair RC and picks up the remaining umbrella*)

WINKELKOPF (*examining the umbrella*) Mein Gott, it is true!

ARTHUR. But this is wonderful! Herr Winkelkopf, will that umbrella go off the moment it's opened?

WINKELKOPF. It cannot fail, my lord.

ARTHUR. Is it still raining, Baines?

(BAINES *crosses to the window, opens it and looks out. WINKELKOPF puts the umbrella on the table RC*)

BAINES. Pouring, my lord.

ARTHUR. Then he'll open it the moment he steps outside. Any minute now. Listen!

(BAINES *moves down L. WINKELKOPF crosses down R. ARTHUR stands R of the sofa. They stand listening. The door up C is suddenly flung open. The DEAN enters up C*)

DEAN (*moving C and glaring at Baines*) I suppose you realize you gave me the wrong umbrella?

ARTHUR. Uncle—are you all right?

DEAN. All right? Of course I'm all right. Noticed I'd got the wrong one the moment I opened it.

ARTHUR. You—opened it?

DEAN (*moving down C*) Always know my own umbrella. Got a tear in the silk. This one is perfect, see. (*He opens the umbrella*)

(*The others dive for cover. ARTHUR flings himself on the sofa and hides his face. BAINES dives behind the armchair down L. WINKELKOPF shoots rapidly behind the armchair RC*)

(*He closes the umbrella, puts it on the table RC, picks up his own umbrella, moves up C and turns to Winkelkopf*) Glad that fool caused you no inconvenience, sir. Good day.

(*The DEAN exits up C. ARTHUR slowly rises. BAINES and WINKELKOPF emerge from cover*)

ARTHUR (*to Winkelkopf; dangerously*) I thought you said that umbrella would go off the moment it was opened?

WINKELKOPF. I cannot understand it. Never before haf I known it to fail.

ARTHUR. Idiot! Bungler! Here I have the perfect opportunity of killing my uncle. My servant very properly takes advantage of it—and you ruin it.

WINKELKOPF. My lord . .

ARTHUR (*crossing to RC*) I don't believe you're any good at all. You're a windbag—a blundering incompetent. (*He seizes the umbrella*) Explosive umbrella, indeed!

WINKELKOPF (*backing down R*) Take care! It is still charged.

ARTHUR. Charged! (*He moves down C*) Didn't you hear my uncle say he opened it in perfect safety? (*He opens the umbrella*)

(WINKELKOPF *gestures in terror*)

Look at it! (*He opens and closes the umbrella several times rapidly*) Harmless—perfectly harmless. The thing's useless. (*He crosses to the open window, tosses the umbrella out, then moves to C above the sofa*) That's what I think of your explosive umbrella, Herr Winkelkopf.

A tremendous explosion is heard off L. They stand stock still for a moment, paralysed, then ARTHUR faints as—

the CURTAIN falls

ACT III

SCENE I

SCENE—*The same. Early evening, several days later.*

When the CURTAIN rises, ARTHUR is seated on the sofa, furiously smoking a cigarette. He is not in evening dress. BAINES enters up c, carrying a salver with a copy of "The Times".

BAINES. Nothing, I fear, about the Dean, my lord.

ARTHUR. *(rising; stubbing out his cigarette)* This suspense is terrible.

BAINES *(moving down c)* Would your lordship care for me to make a few discreet enquiries at the more prominent hospitals?

(A knock is heard from the front door)

ARTHUR *(moving to the window)* Certainly not. If anything had happened to the Dean I should have been informed at once. Winkelkopf promised faithfully the clock would explode on Tuesday and now it's Friday and we haven't heard a thing.

BAINES *(moving rc)* It is possible, my lord, that the clock may be suffering from delayed action as in the case of Herr Winkelkopf's umbrella.

(ARTHUR casts a baleful glance at Baines)

I beg your pardon, my lord. I merely wished to imply that we may yet hear from Herr Winkelkopf. *(He puts the newspaper on the table rc)*

ARTHUR. Winkelkopf! I don't believe he's ever done a murder in his life! I've lost all faith in him!

(NELLIE enters up c and stands r of the doorway)

NELLIE *(announcing)* Herr Winkelkopf, my lord.

(WINKELKOPF enters up c. He carries his bag.)

NELLIE exits up c)

WINKELKOPF *(moving to Arthur)* My lord, congratulations.

ARTHUR. What?

WINKELKOPF. Victory, my lord. You are a happy man.

ARTHUR. Has the clock gone off?

WINKELKOPF *(putting his bag on the table behind the sofa)* It exploded yesterday at twelve o'clock.

ARTHUR. How do you know?

WINKELKOPF. Did I not send it myself? Did I not charge it with my own hands?

ARTHUR *(moving below the sofa)* Yes I know all that, but your

umbrella didn't go off—at least, not when it was supposed to. *(He sits on the sofa)*

WINKELKOPF. Oh, my lord, do not recall it. *(He moves to L of the sofa)* That caused me such deep distress that for three nights I had sat up with the clock, determined there should be no risk of failure. That is why there has been this little delay. I did not send it until yesterday.

ARTHUR. And it happened the same day?

WINKELKOPF. I was outside the Deanery myself, my lord. I hear the whirring sound that precede the explosion. Then I run for my life, for I know my task is done.

BAINES *(moving to r of the sofa)* This is indeed joyful news, my lord.

ARTHUR. Herr Winkelkopf, I don't want to seem to doubt you, but why isn't it in the papers? I've had every one of them for days.

WINKELKOPF. That is easily explained, but I hesitate to wound your feelings.

ARTHUR. Never mind that.

WINKELKOPF. The explosion is naturally a big one. It will take them some little time to collect all the pieces for identification.

ARTHUR. Oh, I see.

BAINES. Permit me to offer my congratulations, my lord.

ARTHUR. Thank you, Baines. I suppose I ought to pay a visit of condolence to the Deanery.

BAINES. It would be a thoughtful gesture, my lord. *(He moves up c)* I will go and procure some suitable flowers.

(BAINES exits up c. A knock is heard from the front door)

ARTHUR. Herr Winkelkopf, you'll forgive me if at any time I've been a little sceptical of your abilities.

WINKELKOPF *(moving down L)* Say no more, my lord, you have been overwrought. It was natural. But you should not have worried. Winkelkopf, he never fails.

(NELLIE enters up c and stands r of the doorway)

NELLIE *(announcing)* Lady Windermere.

(LADY WINDERMERE enters up c. ARTHUR rises.)

NELLIE exits up c)

LADY WINDERMERE *(moving down c)* Arthur, what do you think of this dreadful news?

ARTHUR. Good evening, Auntie. You mean about the Dean?

LADY WINDERMERE *(sitting in the armchair rc)* Yes, of course I mean about the Dean. What other news is there?

ARTHUR. It's sad, of course, Auntie . . .

LADY WINDERMERE. Sad! It's catastrophic. His poor wife is absolutely shattered.

ARTHUR *(sitting on the right arm of the sofa)* I expect uncle is a bit, too.

LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, how can you speak like that? Have you no heart?

ARTHUR. I'm sorry, Auntie. (*He rises*) Oh, this is a friend of mine—Herr Winkelkopf.

LADY WINDERMERE. How do you do? (*To Arthur*) It was all the fault of that wretched little clock—I know it.

(WINKELKOPF preens himself admiringly)

And Robert would have it put in the library where he writes his sermons. And then—only a few hours later—his life was over. (*She dabs her eyes*) All the good he has laboured to do in Paddington forgotten.

ARTHUR (*moving jauntily above the sofa*) Oh, I wouldn't say that, Auntie. I know I, for one, will always be jolly grateful to him. Do you think half mourning will be enough or ought it to be full?

LADY WINDERMERE. Must you be so facetious, Arthur?

ARTHUR. Well, after all, he was my uncle.

LADY WINDERMERE. Even though Robert may in future be lost to us, there is no need to speak of him as if he were dead.

ARTHUR (*looking at Winkelkopf*) Is he only very ill, then?

LADY WINDERMERE. He says he is well, but I should certainly call it an illness. Imagining everyone in England wants to hear him preach because somebody sends him a wretched little clock.

(WINKELKOPF moves up c and edges towards the door up c. ARTHUR moves and bars his way)

ARTHUR. Won't you tell us exactly what happened, Auntie?

(WINKELKOPF retreats up L)

LADY WINDERMERE. But I thought you knew.

ARTHUR. Yes, but our accounts seem to differ.

LADY WINDERMERE. Wouldn't you prefer us to be private?

ARTHUR. No, I'd like Herr Winkelkopf to remain if you don't mind.

LADY WINDERMERE. Just as you please. It all began yesterday morning, when a clock arrived for him from an anonymous donor.

ARTHUR. Yes, I know about that.

LADY WINDERMERE. There was a little figure of a woman on the top, so Robert instantly jumped to the conclusion that it was intended to represent the figure of Liberty and that the donor must be someone who had heard his sermon "Is License Liberty?" He had it placed immediately in his study, and while he was writing his sermon there was a whirring sound from the clock.

WINKELKOPF (*moving down L*) Just as I told you, my lord.

LADY WINDERMERE (*after a cold glance at Winkelkopf*) It struck twelve very slowly, then a little puff of smoke came out of the pedestal, and the figure of Liberty fell flat on her face and broke her nose in the fender.

ARTHUR (*moving down c*) Is that all? I mean, wasn't there an explosion?

LADY WINDERMERE. Only from your uncle. He instantly drew the absurd analogy that liberty in this country is about to be dethroned, and announced his intention of leaving the Deanery and preaching the horrors of democracy in every corner of England. I would like to murder whoever sent that clock.

ARTHUR (*moving towards Winkelkopf*) So would I!

LADY WINDERMERE. If you should see him before he goes, do have a word with him, Arthur, won't you?

ARTHUR. Yes, of course.

LADY WINDERMERE. Thank you, dear. Now, Sybil has given me an errand. (*She takes a cutting of silk from her bag*) She wants to know if this silk will match the bedroom curtains. May I go and see?

ARTHUR. Yes, do whatever you like, Auntie.

LADY WINDERMERE (*rising*) I won't come in again, dear boy, so I'll say good-bye now. And do go and see your poor aunt. She is utterly distracted. (*To Winkelkopf*) Good evening.

(LADY WINDERMERE exits up c.)

BAINES enters up R, carrying a large bunch of lilies)

ARTHUR (*sadly*) No, Baines, they won't be needed now. (*He sits on the sofa*)

BAINES (*moving down RC; nastily*) So Winkelkopf never fails, eh?

WINKELKOPF (*moving to L of the sofa*) I cannot understand it, my lord. Never in my life has such a thing happened before.

ARTHUR. Bah!

(BAINES moves up RC and puts the lilies on the sideboard)

WINKELKOPF. It is true, my lord. Did I not cause the disaster in Dalmatia? Was I not commissioned to blow up the entire Rumanian Parliament at one sitting?

ARTHUR. If you were I should imagine they're still comfortably sitting at this very moment.

WINKELKOPF. I haf deserved that, my lord. But I vill make amends. I vill do the next murder for nothing.

ARTHUR. You haven't done *one* yet. I employ you as an expert to do a simple little thing a child could do, and all you succeed in doing is to turn my uncle into a lunatic.

WINKELKOPF. I haf one thing that cannot fail.

ARTHUR. Oh, how I hate you when you say that.

WINKELKOPF (*moving to his bag*) But it is true, my lord. (*He opens the bag*) A barometer which when tapped . . .

ARTHUR. Oh, no, you don't. No more explosives. Either they don't go off at all or they go off when I'm holding them. If I were the person you were intending to murder, Herr Winkelkopf, you'd be very successful.

BAINES (*moving down c*) If I might make a suggestion, my lord.

ARTHUR (*wearily*) What is it?

BAINES. Up to now, we have perhaps been a little incompetent.

ARTHUR. Oh, that's just occurred to you, has it?

BAINES. But we may have attempted to be somewhat too complicated in our methods. The most successful murders have always been the simplest ones.

ARTHUR. All right. Suggest something simple.

WINKELKOPF (*moving to L of the sofa*) Der cut throat.

ARTHUR. You be quiet!

BAINES. I was about to suggest smothering, my lord.

ARTHUR (*unhelpfully*) Who?

BAINES (*with dignity*) At the moment, the victim is immaterial, my lord. It is the method we are endeavouring to decide. Smothering seems to me to be swift, clean and undetectable.

WINKELKOPF. Ja, he is right! It is gud!

ARTHUR. If you like it that makes me instantly mistrust it.

WINKELKOPF. You are hard, my lord.

ARTHUR. Hard! I'm a bundle of nerves since you came into this.

BAINES. I feel it would be worth our consideration, my lord.

The weapon—a pillow or cushion—is at hand in every home. All that is needed is the strong hand—the steady pressure . . .

ARTHUR. Suppose the victim struggles?

BAINES. Would he be able to, my lord? To any great extent, I mean.

ARTHUR. Oh, but surely . . .

WINKELKOPF. No, he is right. See, I show you. (*He seizes a cushion from the chair down L and claps it over Arthur's face*)

(*The unfortunate ARTHUR struggles wildly and unavailingly*)

There, you see? You are helpless. You cannot dislodge my grip.

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa and discussing it technically*) You don't think the cushion should be a little lower?

WINKELKOPF. No, no, it is in exactly the right place. See, his struggles grow feebler already.

BAINES. There would be no outward marks left to show, I presume? His lordship is particularly anxious to avoid detection.

(*ARTHUR's hands fall limply to his sides*)

WINKELKOPF. The symptoms would be those of heart failure, that is all. No marks on the throat—nothing at all. You see, he has stopped struggling already. Now I show you. (*He removes the cushion*) There, as I say, no marks at all.

(*They bend over the inert Arthur*)

BAINES. Yes, you're quite right. This is certainly the method I shall recommend to his lordship.

(*They move away. BAINES goes RC. WINKELKOPF replaces the cushion*)

on the chair down L. Then they both stop suddenly, each struck by the same thought. They rush to Arthur)

(*He kneels beside the sofa*) My lord, are you all right? My lord, speak to me. (*To Winkelkopf*) Get some water, for heaven's sake.

(*WINKELKOPF goes to the table behind the sofa, picks up a vase and removes the flowers*)

My lord, we were only experimenting. It was not meant to be taken so seriously.

(*WINKELKOPF moves to L of the sofa, leans over and throws a generous amount of water in Arthur's face*)

Oh, my dear young lord, speak to me. Speak to me.

ARTHUR (*opening his eyes*) You infernal idiot! (*He struggles up. To Winkelkopf*) And as for you, you maniac, get out of my house before I kill you, or you kill me.

WINKELKOPF (*backing behind the sofa*) My lord . . .

ARTHUR (*following Winkelkopf c*) Get out, get out, get out!

(*WINKELKOPF puts the vase on the table behind the sofa, grabs his bag and exits up c. ARTHUR chokes, holds his throat and leans on the table behind the sofa*)

BAINES (*moving up c*) My lord, is there anything I can do for you?

ARTHUR. Yes, keep that imbecile away from me, and tell Nellie to bring in the brandy.

BAINES. And soda, my lord?

ARTHUR. No!

BAINES (*moving up R*) Very good, my lord.

(*BAINES exits up R. ARTHUR wipes his face, goes to the window, opens it and takes some deep breaths.*)

NELLIE enters R carrying a tray with a decanter of brandy and a glass which she places on the table RC)

ARTHUR (*crossing to the table RC*) Thank you, Nellie. Just leave it, will you?

NELLIE. Yes, my lord.

(*ARTHUR takes the stopper from the decanter*)

Are you all right, my lord? You don't look well.

ARTHUR. That is scarcely to be wondered at. (*He tries to pour the brandy*)

NELLIE. Oh, let me do that, my lord. Your poor hands are shaking like anything. (*She takes the decanter and pours some brandy into the glass*) There. You drink that and you'll feel a lot better. (*She puts the decanter on the tray*)

ARTHUR (*taking the glass*) Thank you, Nellie. You're very kind. (*He moves to the sofa, sits and sips his drink*)

NELLIE. You learn to be kind, my lord, when you're alone in the world.

ARTHUR. Alone? Haven't you any relatives?

NELLIE (*moving to R of the sofa*) Not a single one, my lord. They all popped off from one cause or another.

ARTHUR. Extraordinary. My relatives have a hold on life I can only describe as tenacious.

NELLIE (*proudly*) My dad drank himself to death.

ARTHUR. Drank? (*He thinks a moment*) Is it a long process?

NELLIE. Depends how much you take at a time, my lord.

ARTHUR. Yes, I suppose so. Would it take longer than three weeks? (*He drains his glass*)

NELLIE. Oh, yes, my lord. My dad took all mum's married life, and that was fifteen years.

ARTHUR. Oh, no. I don't think I could wait as long as that. A pity. (*He hands the glass to Nellie*)

(*NELLIE puts the glass on the tray. BAINES enters quickly up c*)

BAINES (*as he enters*) My lord . . . (*He sees Nellie*) Do you require this young person further, my lord?

ARTHUR. No, that's all. Thank you, Nellie.

NELLIE. Thank you, my lord.

(*NELLIE curtsies and exits up R*)

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) My lord, I do believe your troubles are over.

ARTHUR (*morosely*) Why, is somebody dead?

BAINES. Not yet, my lord, but it should not be long.

ARTHUR. What!

BAINES. Herr Winkelkopf and myself have between us devised a simple, yet we believe, infallible trap.

ARTHUR. I thought I told you to keep that man away from here.

BAINES. He was overcome with contrition, my lord, and begged to be allowed one more attempt.

ARTHUR (*wearily*) Well, what is it this time?

BAINES. A black thread, my lord, stretched across the head of the stairs. Whoever touches it with their foot cannot fail to be precipitated head first to the bottom. What do you think of that, my lord?

ARTHUR. I suppose it's not a bad idea, except that there's nobody upstairs to fall over it.

BAINES. But there is, my lord. Lady Windermere.

ARTHUR (*rising*) Auntie! I'd forgotten her.

BAINES. Even as we completed our arrangements we heard her ladyship preparing to descend.

ARTHUR (*crossing to c*) Baines, do you really think we shall succeed this time? I don't think I could bear another failure.

BAINES. I am convinced of it, my lord, and I am not, as your

lordship knows, of a sanguine nature. Herr Winkelkopf is waiting at the top flight ready to remove the traces of foul play when all is over.

ARTHUR. Listen! (*He moves up c*)

(*LADY WINDERMERE is heard singing as she descends the stairs. The singing comes nearer*)

BAINES (*moving up RC*) Her ladyship is descending the first flight, my lord.

ARTHUR (*moving up LC*) She's coming nearer.

BAINES. Any moment now, my lord.

(*The singing suddenly breaks off, and there is a piercing scream from LADY WINDERMERE off, and a series of bumps as somebody falls down-stairs*)

It is done, my lord. (*He moves c*)

ARTHUR (*moving to L of Baines and gripping his hand*) Thank you, old friend. I'm sorry I ever doubted you.

BAINES. It was understandable, my lord.

(*LADY WINDERMERE enters up c and comes between Arthur and Baines*)

LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, I don't know what has happened to your foreign friend, but he's lying at the foot of the stairs and I think he's unconscious.

BAINES. I need hardly say I offer my profound apologies, my lord.

(*BAINES exits up c*)

LADY WINDERMERE (*moving to the fireplace*) What is going on in this house, Arthur? I stopped at the top of the stairs to fasten my shoe, and that funny little man suddenly shot past me like an arrow. Really, he might have killed me.

ARTHUR (*bitterly*) It's extremely unlikely, Auntie.

(*BAINES and NELLIE enter up c, carrying WINKELKOPF between them*)

BAINES. He has only fainted, my lord.

(*They place him on the sofa*)

NELLIE. I'll get some water, Mr Baines. (*She moves up LC*)

ARTHUR. Oh, no, you don't. This is my turn. (*He takes the flowers from a vase on the table up LC and throws the water into Winkelkopf's face*)

BAINES. I never thought you would be vindictive, my lord.

ARTHUR (*L of the sofa*) Didn't you? (*He puts the vase on the table behind the sofa*)

NELLIE. He's coming round.

LADY WINDERMERE (*moving RC*) I don't imagine he is seriously

hurt. The lower classes are astonishingly impervious to fatal accident.

ARTHUR (*bitterly*) The upper classes aren't doing so badly, either.

LADY WINDERMERE (*moving up RC*) I must be going. I'm late already. (*She goes to the door up C and turns*) I must say, Arthur, your house is becoming increasingly like a bear garden. I shall be thankful when you are married. That will curb your high spirits.

(LADY WINDERMERE *exits up C*)

ARTHUR (*moving down L*) High spirits! High spirits!

WINKELKOPF (*sitting up*) Haf we succeeded?

ARTHUR (*bitterly*) That's a fine question, coming from you.

BAINES. Take Herr Winkelkopf to the pantry, Nellie. Give him some stimulant.

(BAINES *helps WINKELKOPF to rise*)

NELLIE (*moving below the sofa*) Yes, Mr Baines. Lean on me, sir. (*She leads Winkelkopf up C*)

WINKELKOPF (*as he goes*) Do not despair, my lord. There is always tomorrow, and Winkelkopf never say die.

ARTHUR. I can well believe it.

(WINKELKOPF'S legs almost collapse under him as he is helped off up C by NELLIE)

BAINES. All is not lost, my lord. There are other days and other methods.

ARTHUR (*crossing to the fireplace*) Not for me. (*He leans on the mantel-piece*)

BAINES. My lord!

ARTHUR. This is the end, Baines. I'm giving the whole thing up.

BAINES (*moving above the table RC*) My lord, you can't be serious?

ARTHUR. I am. I shall break off my engagement and go abroad.

BAINES. But where will you go, my lord?

ARTHUR (*nobly*) Oh, there is always some war in which a man may die—some cause for which he can give his life. I shall volunteer for the most dangerous missions in order to terminate as rapidly as possible an existence which has become unbearable.

BAINES. Oh, my lord, I cannot bear to hear you talk like this. You have forty-nine other relatives. With perseverance you must succeed.

(A knock is heard from the front door)

ARTHUR. No. I am determined. I shall leave for—somewhere or other tomorrow morning.

BAINES (*controlling his emotion*) I will pack at once, my lord.

ARTHUR (*sadly*) No evening suits, Baines. They won't be needed in the thick of battle.

BAINES. I will put in your shooting jackets, my lord.

ARTHUR. Thank you, old friend. And think of me sometimes in my grave in a foreign land—unloved—unmourned.

BAINES (*now in tears*) Not unmourned, my lord. I shall grieve for you for the rest of my life.

(Both are overcome by emotion.)

NELLIE *enters up C, carrying a card on a salver*)

NELLIE. Excuse me, Mr Baines. There's a gentleman outside who insists on seeing his lordship. He sent in his card.

(BAINES *takes the salver. ARTHUR takes and reads the card*)

ARTHUR. Mr Podgers!

BAINES. The palmist, my lord?

ARTHUR (*reading from the card*) "Must see you. Urgent." What can he want?

BAINES (*moving down RC*) My lord—could it be—he was mistaken about what he saw in your hand?

ARTHUR. But he was so positive. Yet it is a possibility. Admit him at once, Baines.

(BAINES *exits up C.*)

NELLIE *follows him off*)

(*He re-reads the card*) "Must see you. Urgent." (*He crosses down L.*) Oh, Sybil—Sybil!

(BAINES *enters up C and stands R of the doorway*)

BAINES (*announcing*) Mr Podgers.

(PODGERS *enters up C.*)

BAINES *exits up C*)

ARTHUR (*crossing to Podgers*) Mr Podgers, I'm delighted to see you. (*He leads Podgers down RC*) Come and sit down.

PODGERS (*bland and smiling*) Thank you, Lord Arthur, it is indeed a pleasure to find I am so welcome. (*He sits in the armchair RC*)

ARTHUR (*moving to the sideboard*) A cigar? Brandy?

PODGERS. Nothing, thank you, my lord. I would rather come straight to the matter which brought me here.

ARTHUR (*moving down C*) Do by all means. Is it—about my hand?

PODGERS. You are quicker than I expected, Lord Arthur. Yes, it is about your hand—or more correctly, what I saw in it.

ARTHUR. I knew it. Oh, Mr Podgers, you can't think what a relief it is to me to know the whole wretched business was a mistake.

PODGERS. A mistake?

ARTHUR (*sitting on the sofa*) Be advised by me, Mr Podgers. Never try to commit murder. You've no idea how difficult it is. I've tried Lady Beauchamp, the Dean of Paddington, and only today Lady Windermere, and had the foulest luck with them all. As a matter

of fact, just before you were announced, I was on the point of giving the whole thing up.

PODGERS. You have certainly been busy, Lord Arthur.

ARTHUR. Busy! I don't seem to have had a minute to myself for weeks.

PODGERS. What you tell me is most interesting. So you were responsible for the explosive clock which was to have sent the Dean of Paddington to another world?

ARTHUR. That's right—well, indirectly. I employed a man named Winkelkopf to arrange it, but he's very incompetent really. If you want anything done of that nature, I couldn't honestly recommend him—how did you know about it, by the way?

PODGERS. It is in the evening papers. Scotland Yard has now decided that the clock was intended to be lethal and have taken up the case.

ARTHUR. Have they, by Jove! (*He chuckles*) I bet they'd like to know who sent it.

PODGERS (*smiling*) Yes, my lord, I expect they would.

ARTHUR. But we won't tell them, will we?

PODGERS. You will not, my lord, naturally, but . . .

ARTHUR. I say, you don't mean *you're* going to?

PODGERS. I may—and I may not. It depends.

ARTHUR (*rising*) But look here, you can't do a thing like that.

PODGERS. No, my lord?

ARTHUR. No, certainly not. It was all your fault in the first place. I'd never have dreamt of doing such a thing if you hadn't told me I was going to commit a murder. And now, at the very moment you call to tell me it was all a mistake, you threaten to give me away.

PODGERS. I have not said it was a mistake, Lord Arthur. You did.

ARTHUR. You mean I've still got to do the infernal thing?

(PODGERS *nods*)

Well, you're wrong. I dashed well won't. (*He moves L*)

PODGERS. That makes no difference to what has already happened, my lord. The fact remains that you have attempted three capital crimes, and of one of them, the police have evidence in their hands.

ARTHUR. Yes, but they won't know it was me unless you tell them. And I should think, in the circumstances, the least you could do is to keep quiet about it.

PODGERS. As I said before, my lord, that depends.

ARTHUR. On what?

PODGERS. On what it is worth to me.

ARTHUR (*with a step towards Podgers*) So *that's* it.

PODGERS (*rising; with a change of manner*) I want a thousand pounds in cash tonight.

ARTHUR. A thousand pounds! You must be out of your mind.

PODGERS (*moving below the sofa*) No, my lord, but *you* would do

well to make that *your* plea when you come to stand your trial before your peers.

ARTHUR. Trial!

PODGERS. Unless you comply with my little request, I shall go straight to Scotland Yard, and place my information in their hands. Come, my lord, you are a rich man. What is a thousand pounds to you?

ARTHUR. But I haven't got it.

PODGERS (*turning up R*) Pah!

ARTHUR (*moving above the sofa*) I haven't, honestly. It's the end of the month. I've about two pounds ten at the moment.

PODGERS (*turning to him*) You have friends—relatives—you have jewels, plate, silver. Get it by twelve o'clock tonight and bring it to the Embankment. I shall be waiting by Cleopatra's Needle. (*He advances on Arthur*)

ARTHUR (*backing L*) But I say . . .

PODGERS. By the Needle! You understand?

ARTHUR (*miserably*) By the Needle.

PODGERS. I am glad to find you so sensible. (*He moves to the door up C and turns*) Oh, one word of caution, my lord. Do not attempt to outwit me. Remember, however unsuccessful you may have been in your own little efforts, the hangman never makes mistakes.

(PODGERS *exits up C*. ARTHUR *feels his throat unhappily, takes money from his wallet and sovereign purse, takes off his tiepin and rings and puts them all into one pocket. He then wanders round the room, collecting silver and plate, until he has a large armful.*)

BAINES *enters hopefully up C*)

BAINES. My lord, was it . . . ? (*He sees Arthur's load*) My lord!

ARTHUR (*moving up LC*) Hand me that, will you? (*He indicates a piece of plate on the sideboard*)

(BAINES, *dazed, hands the piece of plate to Arthur*)

We were wrong, Baines. It wasn't a mistake.

ARTHUR *takes an epergne from the table up LC and exits up C*. BAINES *watches him in amazement as—*

the CURTAIN falls

SCENE 2

SCENE—*The same. The following morning.*

When the CURTAIN rises, LADY JULIA and SYBIL are seated on the sofa. SYBIL is R of Lady Julia. BAINES is standing R of the sofa, concluding a long story.

BAINES. And that is all I know, your ladyship.

LADY JULIA. You say Lord Arthur left the house last night and has not returned since?

BAINES. That is exactly what he did, my lady.

LADY JULIA. And you have told us everything?

BAINES. Everything, my lady. I have told you the truth, pure and simple.

LADY JULIA. The truth is seldom pure and never simple. I don't know how all this appears to you, Sybil, but it is my belief this is another of Arthur's stratagems to put off the wedding.

SYBIL. Oh, no, Mamma, I'm sure it isn't. *(She rises and moves to Baines)* Didn't he say anything, Baines, that might give us some idea of where he went?

BAINES. Nothing at all, miss, though I must admit his lordship was greatly depressed last night.

(SYBIL moves up c)

LADY JULIA. Depressed? Why?

BAINES. He had been engaged on a little scheme, my lady, which had not met with the success he hoped.

LADY JULIA. What scheme?

BAINES. I am not at liberty to disclose it, my lady, but I believe I shall not be betraying his lordship's confidence if I say he has now given it up.

SYBIL *(moving above the sofa)* Oh, no, he mustn't do that.

BAINES. His lordship appeared to be adamant, miss. He spoke of going abroad immediately.

LADY JULIA. Abroad? But it isn't the season.

BAINES. Not for the purposes of pleasure, my lady. He spoke of seeking some war in which he might give his life for the benefit of humanity.

LADY JULIA. Some *what*?

BAINES. Some war, my lady, in which he might give his . . .

LADY JULIA. Yes, yes, I heard the rest. I never heard anything so preposterous. He must be out of his mind.

SYBIL. He's not. I know why he's doing it. *(She moves to L of Baines)* Isn't it noble of him, Baines? *(She crosses below Baines to R)* Perhaps at this very moment he's on some ship, watching from the deck the disappearing shores of England. *(She gazes out front)*

LADY JULIA. Having some familiarity with the train service in this country, I should say he would be extremely fortunate if he has managed to arrive at Dover. And as for this nonsense about his joining some war, I can only say I have every sympathy with the army misguided enough to take him. It must certainly mean their immediate downfall. Arthur has no brains and is therefore only fitted for the position to which his birth entitles him—the House of Lords.

BAINES. Then you would not advise that I endeavour to ascertain his whereabouts, my lady?

LADY JULIA. I see no necessity. He is probably still waiting at Victoria Station—on the wrong platform.

BAINES. But—he may be dead, my lady.

LADY JULIA. Neither do I see any reason for optimism. *(She rises)* Come, Sybil, we have to attend the wedding rehearsal in half an hour.

SYBIL. But we can't have the rehearsal without Arthur.

LADY JULIA *(moving to L of the sofa)* I shall give him ten minutes' latitude. After that, the engagement is terminated.

(BAINES moves up c and opens the door)

SYBIL. Mamma!

LADY JULIA *(moving to the door up c)* Terminated, I say! *(To Baines)* And should Lord Arthur return from the French Foreign Legion, or whichever peculiar regiment it is that seems to recruit itself entirely from the ranks of the disappointed, you may inform him that he need not trouble to call at Curzon Street. My daughter will not be at home.

(LADY JULIA sweeps out up c)

SYBIL *(moving RC)* Baines, are you sure you haven't forgotten anything? I can't believe he would have gone off like this without even a message for me. Surely he must have said something? *(She sits in the armchair RC)*

BAINES *(moving down c)* It was difficult for his lordship to speak, miss, overburdened as he was with the silver.

SYBIL. The silver?

BAINES. He took most of the silver with him, miss.

SYBIL. But why should he do that? He couldn't want it in the Foreign Legion.

BAINES. I can only conclude, miss, that his lordship intended to purchase a commission. But it seems rather a cumbrous way of doing it.

SYBIL. Poor Arthur, he never did anything very well.

BAINES. No, miss. He was a true son of the nobility.

SYBIL. What will you do now, Baines?

BAINES *(crossing above Sybil to R)* I shall retire, miss. I could never serve another master.

SYBIL. And I shall never marry now.

BAINES. I understand, miss.

SYBIL. But we will remember him, won't we?

BAINES. Indeed we will, miss. His image is graven on my heart.

(Both weep a little.)

ARTHUR *enters up c. He is immensely cheerful and carries a large bunch of flowers)*

ARTHUR. Good morning, Baines. Why, Sybil darling!

SYBIL (*rising and running to Arthur*) Arthur! Oh, my love, you've come back. Did you miss the train?

ARTHUR. Train?

SYBIL. The train to North Africa, darling, or wherever it is.

ARTHUR. Oh, that. I didn't try to catch it.

SYBIL. But Baines was telling me—last night . . .

ARTHUR. Oh, yes. Well, as a matter of fact I was rather busy last night. (*He hands the flowers to Sybil*) These are for you, Sybil, and they're not one bit more beautiful than you are.

SYBIL. Oh, darling, thank you. (*She moves below the sofa*)

ARTHUR. Now, is everything ready? I'm not too late, am I?

SYBIL. Too late for what?

ARTHUR (*moving to R of the sofa*) Why, the wedding rehearsal. Must have everything going smoothly. Can't have any hitches there.

BAINES. My lord—do you mean you are going on with your marriage?

ARTHUR. Yes, of course I am.

SYBIL (*sitting on the sofa, at the left end*) But, Arthur, how can you?

ARTHUR. Why not?

SYBIL. Darling, surely you remember you said you must commit your murder first?

ARTHUR. Yes.

SYBIL. Then how can we be married until you've done it? It's cruel of you to talk about attending the wedding rehearsal.

ARTHUR (*sitting R of Sybil on the sofa*) But, darling, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I *have* done it.

SYBIL. What?

BAINES (*moving RC*) The murder, my lord?

ARTHUR. Yes, I did it last night.

SYBIL. Arthur, you didn't?

ARTHUR. Yes, Sybil, I did. Really!

SYBIL. Oh, darling, I'm so proud of you. I always knew you could do it if you put your mind to it. Was it very difficult?

ARTHUR. No, not very. Surprisingly easy, as a matter of fact. Didn't take longer than a couple of minutes.

BAINES (*moving to R of the sofa*) My lord—may I ask whom—and how?

ARTHUR. Well, you remember Podgers calling here last night?

BAINES. I do, my lord. We hoped he had come to say he was mistaken in his prediction.

ARTHUR. Well, he hadn't. He jolly well came to blackmail me.

SYBIL. Oh, Arthur, how terrible! What did you do?

ARTHUR. There wasn't very much I could do. He said he'd expose me to the police unless I brought him a thousand pounds by midnight. I argued with him, but he was quite relentless, so in the end I said I'd meet him on the Embankment.

BAINES. Now I understand about the silver, my lord.

ARTHUR. Yes. Well, I'm afraid I didn't get very much on that,

so I went round to the club to see if I could borrow from one or two people I knew. I wasn't much luckier there. Everybody seemed to be out of town. By the time it was half past eleven all I'd got was a hundred and fifty.

BAINES. It must have been with a sinking heart that you approached your rendezvous, my lord.

ARTHUR. Yes, it was. Still, I hoped to have one last attempt to make him see reason. I got to the Embankment early, but Podgers was there before me. He was leaning over the parapet, looking down into the water. He didn't see me coming, and it was then the idea struck me.

BAINES (*hoarsely*) Go on, my lord.

ARTHUR. It was Podgers who had caused me all this misery, so I had to murder somebody, why shouldn't it be Podgers. Almost as I thought I acted. I seized his legs and with a mighty effort hurled him into the Thames. There was a cry—a splash—then all was silent. Nothing could be seen but his silk hat pirouetting on the water. Podgers was no more.

(BAINES *moves up R and stands with his back to them*)

SYBIL. Oh, Arthur, what a wonderful thing to do. How happy you must have felt.

ARTHUR. I haven't felt so light-hearted for weeks. So now I can marry you with a clear conscience, darling. There's nothing to stand in our way.

SYBIL. No more postponements?

ARTHUR. Not a single one. (*He rises*) Well, Baines, aren't you going to congratulate me?

BAINES (*turning; a prey to great emotion*) My lord . . .

ARTHUR (*moving up C*) What's the matter?

BAINES. I hardly know how to say this, my lord . . .

ARTHUR. Come on, man, out with it. We're in a hurry.

BAINES (*moving to the sideboard*) Has your lordship seen the morning paper?

ARTHUR. No, not yet. Why, does it contain the announcement of Podgers' death?

BAINES. It does, my lord.

ARTHUR (*moving above the sofa*) Well, that's all right, then. Not that I needed confirmation. He sank like a jolly old stone.

BAINES. No, my lord, it is *not* all right.

ARTHUR. What's the matter with you? Podgers is dead, isn't he?

BAINES (*picking up a copy of "The Times" from the sideboard*) Yes, my lord. (*He moves down RC*) But you did not kill him.

ARTHUR. What do you mean? Of course I killed him.

BAINES. No, my lord. He was found shot through the head in his apartment this morning.

ARTHUR (*crossing to Baines*) Shot! But that's impossible. I tell you I pushed him into the Thames last night.

BAINES (*handing the paper to Arthur*) It is here, my lord. That paragraph. (*He points*)

ARTHUR (*moving down c; reading*) "Suicide of well-known chiro-mantist." I say—that's not fair. I killed him.

SYBIL (*rising and moving to Arthur*) Let me look, Arthur. (*She takes the paper and moves below the sofa*)

ARTHUR. I did, Sybil. (*He moves to R of her*) Really I did.

SYBIL. Arthur, listen. (*She reads*) "The deceased had apparently made a previous attempt on his life, for his clothes were saturated with water—"

ARTHUR (*moving c*) There you are!

SYBIL. "—but it is concluded that the attempt was unsuccessful since Mr Podgers was an exceptionally strong swimmer—"

ARTEUR (*moving to Sybil*) Oh, no!

SYBIL. "—having on two occasions swum the English Channel from Dover to Cap Griz Nez."

(WINKELKOPF enters up c, unobserved by the others)

ARTHUR. That would be the man I have to try and kill by drowning.

SYBIL (*sitting in the armchair down L*) Oh, Arthur, what a shame! This means you haven't murdered anybody.

ARTHUR (*sitting on the sofa*) And I was so happy when I came in.

BAINES (*moving up R*) Shall I telephone the usual paragraph to *The Times*, my lord, announcing a further postponement?

ARTHUR. I suppose so.

SYBIL. No, Arthur, you mustn't. Mamma said if you postponed it again, she'd terminate the engagement.

ARTHUR. Well, what else can I do?

WINKELKOPF (*moving down c*) My lord . . .

ARTHUR (*rising*) Oh, help! Are you here again? (*He crosses and stands near Sybil*)

WINKELKOPF. I haf heard everything, my lord, and I realize that here is a situation which calls for immediate and efficient action.

ARTHUR. That's right. That's why we don't need you.

WINKELKOPF. Your lordship will change your tone when you hear I haf other resources. I haf not yet shown you my *pièce de resistance*.

ARTHUR. If it's anything like the other things you've shown me, I don't want to see it. (*He moves up L*)

SYBIL. Don't be obstinate, Arthur. You ought to be grateful to Herr Winkelkopf for trying to help when there's so little time. What is it, Herr Winkelkopf?

WINKELKOPF (*moving up c*) Your lordship remembers the success of my explosive umbrella?

ARTHUR (*moving LC*) Success, do you call it? It nearly blew me to bits.

WINKELKOPF. Ja, that is what I mean. Now I suggest we try an explosive on a larger scale.

ARTHUR. Larger?

WINKELKOPF (*moving down c*) In oder words, der bomb.

ARTHUR (*moving behind the sofa*) Oh, but I say, look here . . .

SYBIL (*rising and moving to the sofa*) Now don't start raising objections, Arthur. I'm sure it's a very good idea. (*She sits on the sofa*)

ARTHUR (*moving to L of the sofa*) Yes, but dash it all, a bomb will make such a frightful mess and the place has just been redecorated.

SYBIL. Oh, well, of course, if you're going to think about money when our future happiness is at stake . . . Perhaps you'd rather mamma did terminate the engagement.

ARTHUR. Of course I wouldn't—only you don't know Herr Winkelkopf like I do. Anyway, there's nobody here to blow up except us. (*He sits on the left arm of the sofa*)

WINKELKOPF. Not so, my lord. Even as I came in I saw a carriage approaching, bearing two of your relations.

ARTHUR (*rising*) Oh, lord! (*He moves down L*)

SYBIL. There, you see, Arthur. It couldn't be better.

(A knock is heard from the front door)

ARTHUR. But I haven't got to murder *two*.

BAINES (*moving down R*) Do not bother about the extra one, my lord. It is as well to have a balance for emergencies.

ARTHUR. Oh, all right. (*To Winkelkopf*) What do you want me to do?

WINKELKOPF. Keep them in here for five minutes, that is all. The rest will be simplicity itself.

ARTHUR. Yes, I bet it will.

SYBIL. Don't be so aggravating, Arthur.

WINKELKOPF. The instrument of destruction is in my bag. I will fetch it. (*He moves up R*)

(NELLIE enters up c)

NELLIE. Lady Windermere and Lady Beauchamp have called, my lord.

WINKELKOPF. What did I say?

ARTHUR. Show them in here, Nellie.

NELLIE. Yes, my lord.

(NELLIE exits up c)

WINKELKOPF. A word of warning, my lord. Do not dally in here yourself. Delay will be dangerous.

(WINKELKOPF exits up R.)

LADY WINDERMERE and LADY CLEMENTINA enter up c)

LADY WINDERMERE (*moving RC*) Good morning, Arthur. We're

just on our way to the church. Sybil dear, your mother is waiting for you in the carriage.

SYBIL (*rising*) I'm just going. (*She moves L of the sofa, then above it*) Don't be long, will you, Arthur? I shan't feel safe till I see you. (*She moves up c*)

ARTHUR (*moving up LC; to Baines*) See Miss Merton to the carriage, Baines.

BAINES (*moving up c*) Yes, my lord.

(*SYBIL and BAINES exit up c*)

ARTHUR (*moving down L*) Do sit down, won't you, Aunties? This sofa is very comfortable.

LADY WINDERMERE. Oh, but we aren't staying, Arthur. We only called in to see if we could take you along with us.

ARTHUR. Oh, but you must stay for five minutes. Surely you can stay for five minutes.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*moving down c*) Well, perhaps we can, Margaret, as Arthur is so very pressing. (*She sits on the sofa, at the left end*)

ARTHUR. Oh, good. (*He moves up L*) I'm not ready myself, you see. (*He moves up c*) I shall have to go and tidy up.

LADY WINDERMERE (*moving to Arthur and taking his arm*) Oh, but you must stay, Arthur. I've something most particular to tell you.

ARTHUR (*throwing an anguished glance at the door*) I—I really can't stop, Auntie. I shall be late.

LADY WINDERMERE (*leading Arthur down c*) Then we'll all be late together. I want to tell you about Mr Podgers. I suppose you've heard the news?

ARTHUR. Oh, yes. Terrible thing. Terrible thing.

LADY WINDERMERE (*sitting R of Lady Clementina on the sofa*) Of course, I always knew he would do it.

ARTHUR (*moving to R of the sofa*) What, commit suicide?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes, it was bound to happen in the end.

ARTHUR. But why?

LADY WINDERMERE. My dear, it's common knowledge. You know, don't you, Clem?

LADY CLEMENTINA. My dear, I never hear anything. I hardly stir from my house except to come to Arthur's.

ARTHUR. What do you mean, Auntie? Why did he do it?

LADY WINDERMERE. Why? Because he was on the point of being exposed, of course.

ARTHUR. Exposed? As what?

LADY WINDERMERE. A fraud, my dear. A complete and utter fraud.

ARTHUR (*moving up c*) A fraud?

LADY WINDERMERE. Of the most arrant kind. The man was a complete impostor.

ARTHUR (*moving to L of the sofa*) Auntie—this is most terribly important to me. Are you quite sure of what you say?

(*WINKELKOPF, during the next speech, creeps in up R, on his hands and knees, carrying a large, smoking bomb. Unseen by the others, he places the bomb under the table RC*)

LADY WINDERMERE. Certainly I am. Every one of his predictions, without exception, has been proved entirely false. And his knowledge of the past was drawn from records of everybody in society, all carefully filed and docketed. The Clairvoyant Society heard of his activities and threatened to expose him. That is why he killed himself. Once it was known he was a fraud, his life wouldn't have been worth living.

(*WINKELKOPF creeps to the door up R, rises, and tries to attract Arthur's attention by little chirping noises*)

Is that man trying to speak to you, Arthur?

ARTHUR. What? (*He sees Winkelkopf*) Oh, go away.

WINKELKOPF. But, my lord! (*He gestures desperately towards the table RC*)

ARTHUR. Go away. I'm busy.

(*WINKELKOPF shrugs, gives it up and exits up R. The bomb smokes happily*)

Then—there was not one atom of truth in anything Podgers predicted?

LADY WINDERMERE. Not a scrap. He had no powers of any sort. (*To Lady Clementina*) You remember he predicted a rupture between the Surbitons? Well, I'm told they're even more attached than ever, and what's more, have managed to produce twins. Could anything, I ask you, be a surer proof of affection? No, the truth is, he frightened a great many gullible people and then, when he had predicted an indiscretion, tried to blackmail them.

ARTHUR. D-did he? (*He sits in the armchair down L*)

LADY CLEMENTINA. How glad I am he predicted only a happy future for you, Arthur.

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes, I must say I'm rather surprised he didn't attempt to make capital out of you, Arthur.

ARTHUR (*uncomfortably*) Me?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. I suppose all these postponements of yours had nothing to do with Mr Podgers?

ARTHUR (*laughing falsely*) Oh, Auntie, what an idea!

LADY WINDERMERE. I'm very glad to hear it.

LADY CLEMENTINA (*sniffing apprehensively*) Arthur, I don't like to appear inquisitive, but is there anything wrong with your table? It seems to be smoking.

ARTHUR (*rising*) What? (*He crosses to the table RC and looks under it*) Great Scott! (*He moves hurriedly to the fireplace and pulls the bell-rope*)

LADY WINDERMERE (*leaning forward*) What a peculiar looking object.

LADY CLEMENTINA. I can't quite see, dear. Is it the thing that's smoking?

LADY WINDERMERE. Yes. Bring it out, Arthur, and let your Aunt Clementina see it.

ARTHUR (*moving to the table RC*) Oh, it's nothing interesting, Auntie. Just a new kind of—ornament. (*He gingerly picks up the bomb*) I'll have it removed.

LADY CLEMENTINA. Oh, don't do that, Arthur. It's not causing me the slightest inconvenience. Is it you, Margaret?

LADY WINDERMERE. No, not in the least.

ARTHUR (*moving up C*) But it might do later.

(BAINES enters up C)

Baines, take this away, for heaven's sake.

BAINES (*backing*) But, my lord, I thought you needed it.

ARTHUR. Well, I don't any more. Put it somewhere where it's safe. (*He hands the bomb to Baines*)

BAINES. Where would you suggest, my lord?

ARTHUR. How do I know? (*He moves to the fireplace*) Put it in the garden or something.

BAINES. Very good, my lord.

(BAINES exits with the bomb up C)

LADY WINDERMERE (*rising*) Really, Arthur, there was no need to make such a fuss. Anyone would think it was dangerous. I think we should go, Clementina. We mustn't be too late. (*She moves to the door up C*)

LADY CLEMENTINA (*rising and crossing to Arthur*) Don't be long, will you, dear boy? We shall be waiting at the church for you. Oh, Arthur dear, I do hope you'll be very happy.

ARTHUR. I shall be, Auntie. Nothing could stop me, now.

LADY WINDERMERE. *Au revoir*, my dear.

(LADY WINDERMERE and LADY CLEMENTINA exit up C. ARTHUR crosses jubilantly to LC)

ARTHUR. Free! Free at last!

(BAINES enters up C, carrying a clothes brush)

Well?

BAINES. In the kitchen garden, my lord, among the asparagus. (*He moves C*)

ARTHUR (*moving to Baines*) Baines, I've had the most wonderful news. Podgers was a fake—do you hear—a fake. Everything he predicted was utterly false.

BAINES. Then this means . . .

ARTHUR. Yes, I haven't got to do a murder after all. Not a

single one. I can go through life without a stain on my conscience. I don't know when I've been so happy.

BAINES. May I offer my heartiest congratulations, my lord?

ARTHUR. Thank you, Baines.

BAINES (*displaying the clothes brush*) And now, if your lordship will permit me, you have a pressing engagement.

ARTHUR. Oh, yes, mustn't be late for the wedding rehearsal.

BAINES (*brushing Arthur's coat*) Now that your lordship's troubles are so happily concluded, might I venture to ask a small favour?

ARTHUR. Anything, Baines, anything.

BAINES. I should be grateful, my lord, if the small room next to mine could be considered as attached to my quarters.

ARTHUR. Yes, of course, if you want it. But why do you need more room?

BAINES (*brushing Arthur's back*) I am thinking, my lord, of getting married.

ARTHUR (*turning*) Not—Nellie?

BAINES. Yes, my lord.

ARTHUR. Baines, I'm delighted, but I thought you were an enemy to matrimony.

BAINES. It is true, my lord, that I have always regarded the state with the aversion natural to the masculine mind, but on one occasion recently, she—quite inadvertently—addressed me by my christian name, and—I don't know how it was, but something melted within me.

ARTHUR. What is your christian name?

BAINES. (*modestly*) Harold, my lord. My mother happened to be staying at Hastings.

ARTHUR. (*after a blank moment*) I don't see any connection.

BAINES. It is immaterial, my lord.

ARTHUR. Anyway, Baines, I couldn't be happier for you. I shall come to your wedding.

BAINES. We shall be honoured, my lord. And now, my lord, I think you should make haste.

ARTHUR. Yes, by Jove! Is the carriage at the door?

BAINES. It is, my lord.

(ARTHUR moves to the door up C, then turns)

ARTHUR. Oh, Baines, I can hardly believe it. I'm actually on my way to the wedding rehearsal, and in three weeks' time I shall be married. It's like a beautiful dream.

(WINKELKOPF enters up R and crosses to Arthur)

Oh, Herr Winkelkopf, I shan't require your services any more. Thank you for all you've done and take this (*he takes out a bank-note and presses it into Winkelkopf's hand*) for your society. Oh, and come to the wedding. It's in three weeks' time.

(ARTHUR exits up c)

BAINES (moving up R) I must apologize for removing your bomb, sir. It was a trifle inconvenient where it was.

WINKELKOPF (moving up L) Oh, dat is all right, my friend. I had already put it where it will be of more use.

BAINES. You've taken it from the kitchen garden?

WINKELKOPF. This very minute. I have placed it in the carriage that was outside. (He gestures to the window)

BAINES (moving c) The carriage—that was at the door?

WINKELKOPF. Ja. I knew somebody connected with Lord Arthur would be bound to step into it sooner or later. In two—three minutes all will be over.

(A tremendous explosion is heard off L)

Ha! Dere it goes.

(BAINES covers his eyes and staggers RG.)

NELLIE rushes in up c)

NELLIE (moving c) Mr Baines!

BAINES. His lordship—tell me the worst.

NELLIE. Oh, Mr Baines, he's been arrested.

BAINES. Arrested? His lordship?

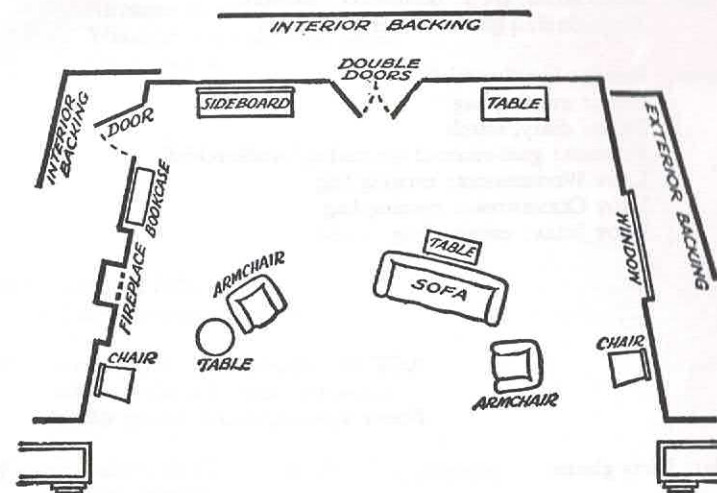
NELLIE. He'd just stepped into the carriage when he saw something on the floor. I don't know why, but he picked it up and threw it out and it blew up the horse-trough across the street. The next thing I saw he was being marched off between two policemen for disturbing the peace.

(BAINES staggers to the wall telephone up RG and lifts the receiver)

BAINES (into the telephone) Give me *The Times* newspaper, please . . . Good morning . . . I'm speaking from Savile House, Grosvenor Square . . . Kindly insert the usual paragraph tomorrow morning, announcing the postponement of the marriage of Lord Arthur Savile . . .

CURTAIN

FURNITURE AND PROPERTY LIST



ACT I

On stage: Upright chair (down R)
 Armchair (RC) *On it:* cushion
 Small table (RC)
 Hearth rug
 Fender
 Fire-irons
In hearth: bowl of flowers
On mantelpiece: clock, vases of flowers
Over mantelpiece: mirror
 Small bookcase (above fireplace) *In it:* books
 Sideboard. *On it:* glasses, silverware, card stand with cards
In it: decanters of port and sherry
 Bell cord (above fireplace)
 Sofa (LC) *On it:* cushions
 Table (behind sofa) *On it:* ashtray
 Armchair (down L) *On it:* cushion
 Table (up LC) *On it:* epergne with roses, silverware
 Old-fashioned telephone (on wall R of double doors)