

GALSWORTHY

JOHN

THE ELDEST

SON

John Galsworthy

The Eldest Son

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John Galsworthy

The Eldest Son

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

SIR WILLIAM CHESHIRE, a baronet
LADY CHESHIRE, his wife
BILL, their eldest son
HAROLD, their second son
RONALD KEITH(in the Lancers), their son-in-law
CHRISTINE (his wife), their eldest daughter
DOT, their second daughter
JOAN, their third daughter
MABEL LANFARNE, their guest
THE REVEREND JOHN LATTER, engaged to Joan
OLD STUDDENHAM, the head-keeper
FREDA STUDDENHAM, the lady's-maid
YOUNG DUNNING, the under-keeper
ROSE TAYLOR, a village girl
JACKSON, the butler
CHARLES, a footman
TIME: The present. The action passes on December 7 and 8 at the Cheshires' country house, in one of the shires.
ACT I
SCENE I. The hall; before dinner.
SCENE II. The hall; after dinner.
ACT II. Lady Cheshire's morning room; after breakfast.
ACT III. The smoking-room; tea-time.
A night elapses between Acts I. and II.

ACT I

SCENE I

The scene is a well-lighted, and large, oak-panelled hall, with an air of being lived in, and a broad, oak staircase. The dining-room, drawing-room, billiard-room, all open into it; and under the staircase a door leads to the servants' quarters. In a huge fireplace a log fire is burning. There are tiger-skins on the floor, horns on the walls; and a writing-table against the wall opposite the fireplace. FREDA STUDDENHAM, a pretty, pale girl with dark eyes, in the black dress of a lady's-maid, is standing at the foot of the staircase with a bunch of white roses in one hand, and a bunch of yellow roses in the other. A door closes above, and SIR WILLIAM CHESHIRE, in evening dress, comes downstairs. He is perhaps fifty-eight, of strong build, rather bull-necked, with grey eyes, and a well-coloured face, whose choleric autocracy is veiled by a thin urbanity. He speaks before he reaches the bottom.

SIR WILLIAM. Well, Freda! Nice roses. Who are they for?

FREDA. My lady told me to give the yellow to Mrs. Keith, Sir William, and the white to Miss Lanfarne, for their first evening.

SIR WILLIAM. Capital. [Passing on towards the drawing-room] Your father coming up to-night?

FREDA. Yes.

SIR WILLIAM. Be good enough to tell him I specially want to see him here after dinner, will you?

FREDA. Yes, Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM. By the way, just ask him to bring the game-book in, if he's got it.

He goes out into the drawing-room; and FREDA stands restlessly tapping her foot against the bottom stair. With a flutter of skirts CHRISTINE KEITH comes rapidly down. She is a nice-looking, fresh-coloured young woman in a low-necked dress.

CHRISTINE. Hullo, Freda! How are YOU?

FREDA. Quite well, thank you, Miss Christine – Mrs. Keith, I mean. My lady told me to give you these.

CHRISTINE. [Taking the roses] Oh! Thanks! How sweet of mother!

FREDA. [In a quick, toneless voice] The others are for Miss Lanfarne. My lady thought white would suit her better.

CHRISTINE. They suit you in that black dress.

[FREDA lowers the roses quickly.]

What do you think of Joan's engagement?

FREDA. It's very nice for her.

CHRISTINE. I say, Freda, have they been going hard at rehearsals?

FREDA. Every day. Miss Dot gets very cross, stage-managing.

CHRISTINE. I do hate learning a part. Thanks awfully for unpacking. Any news?

FREDA. [In the same quick, dull voice] The under-keeper, Dunning, won't marry Rose Taylor, after all.

CHRISTINE. What a shame! But I say that's serious. I thought there was – she was – I mean —
FREDA. He's taken up with another girl, they say.

CHRISTINE. Too bad! [Pinning the roses] D'you know if Mr. Bill's come?

FREDA. [With a swift upward look] Yes, by the six-forty.

RONALD KEITH comes slowly down, a weathered firm-lipped man, in evening dress, with eyelids half drawn over his keen eyes, and the air of a horseman.

KEITH. Hallo! Roses in December. I say, Freda, your father missed a wiggling this morning when they drew blank at Warnham's spinney. Where's that litter of little foxes?

FREDA. [Smiling faintly] I expect father knows, Captain Keith.

KEITH. You bet he does. Emigration? Or thin air? What?

CHRISTINE. Studdenham'd never shoot a fox, Ronny. He's been here since the flood.

KEITH. There's more ways of killing a cat – eh, Freda?

CHRISTINE. [Moving with her husband towards the drawing-room] Young Dunning won't marry that girl, Ronny.

KEITH. Phew! Wouldn't be in his shoes, then! Sir William'll never keep a servant who's made a scandal in the village, old girl. Bill come?

As they disappear from the hall, JOHN LATTER in a clergyman's evening dress, comes sedately downstairs, a tall, rather pale young man, with something in him, as it were, both of heaven, and a drawing-room. He passes FREDA with a formal little nod. HAROLD, a fresh-cheeked, cheery-looking youth, comes down, three steps at a time.

HAROLD. Hallo, Freda! Patience on the monument. Let's have a sniff! For Miss Lanfarne? Bill come down yet?

FREDA. No, Mr. Harold.

HAROLD crosses the hall, whistling, and follows LATTER into the drawing-room. There is the sound of a scuffle above, and a voice crying: "Shut up, Dot!" And JOAN comes down screwing her head back. She is pretty and small, with large clinging eyes.

JOAN. Am I all right behind, Freda? That beast, Dot!

FREDA. Quite, Miss Joan.

DOT's face, like a full moon, appears over the upper banisters. She too comes running down, a frank figure, with the face of a rebel.

DOT. You little being!

JOAN. [Flying towards the drawing-room, is overtaken at the door] Oh! Dot! You're pinching!

As they disappear into the drawing-room, MABEL LANFARNE, a tall girl with a rather charming Irish face, comes slowly down. And at sight of her FREDA's whole figure becomes set and meaningful.

FREDA. For you, Miss Lanfarne, from my lady.

MABEL. [In whose speech is a touch of wilful Irishry] How sweet! [Fastening the roses] And how are you, Freda?

FREDA. Very well, thank you.

MABEL. And your father? Hope he's going to let me come out with the guns again.

FREDA. [Stolidly] He'll be delighted, I'm sure.

MABEL. Ye-es! I haven't forgotten his face-last time.

FREDA. You stood with Mr. Bill. He's better to stand with than Mr. Harold, or Captain Keith?

MABEL. He didn't touch a feather, that day.

FREDA. People don't when they're anxious to do their best.

A gong sounds. And MABEL LANFARNE, giving FREDA a rather inquisitive stare, moves on to the drawing-room. Left alone without the roses, FREDA still lingers. At the slamming of a door above, and hasty footsteps, she shrinks back against the stairs. BILL runs down, and comes on her suddenly. He is a tall, good-looking edition of his father, with the same stubborn look of veiled choler.

BILL. Freda! [And as she shrinks still further back] what's the matter? [Then at some sound he looks round uneasily and draws away from her] Aren't you glad to see me?

FREDA. I've something to say to you, Mr. Bill. After dinner.

BILL. Mister – ?

She passes him, and rushes away upstairs. And BILL, who stands frowning and looking after her, recovers himself sharply as the drawing-room door is opened, and SIR WILLIAM and MISS LANFARNE come forth, followed by KEITH, DOT, HAROLD, CHRISTINE, LATTER, and JOAN, all leaning across each other, and talking. By herself, behind them, comes LADY CHESHIRE, a refined-looking woman of fifty, with silvery dark hair, and an expression at once gentle, and ironic. They move across the hall towards the dining-room.

SIR WILLIAM. Ah! Bill.

MABEL. How do you do?

KEITH. How are you, old chap?

DOT. [gloomily] Do you know your part?

HAROLD. Hallo, old man!

CHRISTINE gives her brother a flying kiss. JOAN and LATTER pause and look at him shyly without speech.

BILL. [Putting his hand on JOAN's shoulder] Good luck, you two! Well mother?

LADY CHESHIRE. Well, my dear boy! Nice to see you at last. What a long time!

She draws his arm through hers, and they move towards the dining-room. The curtain falls. The curtain rises again at once.

SCENE II

CHRISTINE, LADY CHESHIRE, DOT, MABEL LANFARNE, and JOAN, are returning to the hall after dinner.

CHRISTINE. [in a low voice] Mother, is it true about young Dunning and Rose Taylor?

LADY CHESHIRE. I'm afraid so, dear.

CHRISTINE. But can't they be —

DOT. Ah! ah-h! [CHRISTINE and her mother are silent.] My child, I'm not the young person.

CHRISTINE. No, of course not – only – [nodding towards JOAN and Mable].

DOT. Look here! This is just an instance of what I hate.

LADY CHESHIRE. My dear? Another one?

DOT. Yes, mother, and don't you pretend you don't understand, because you know you do.

CHRISTINE. Instance? Of what?

JOAN and MABEL have ceased talking, and listen, still at the fire.

DOT. Humbug, of course. Why should you want them to marry, if he's tired of her?

CHRISTINE. [Ironically] Well! If your imagination doesn't carry you as far as that!

DOT. When people marry, do you believe they ought to be in love with each other?

CHRISTINE. [With a shrug] That's not the point.
DOT. Oh? Were you in love with Ronny?
CHRISTINE. Don't be idiotic!
DOT. Would you have married him if you hadn't been?
CHRISTINE. Of course not!
JOAN. Dot! You are! —
DOT. Hallo! my little snipe!
LADY CHESHIRE. Dot, dear!
DOT. Don't shut me up, mother! [To JOAN.] Are you in love with John? [JOAN turns hurriedly to the fire.] Would you be going to marry him if you were not?
CHRISTINE. You are a brute, Dot.
DOT. Is Mabel in love with – whoever she is in love with?
MABEL. And I wonder who that is.
DOT. Well, would you marry him if you weren't?
MABEL. No, I would not.
DOT. Now, mother; did you love father?
CHRISTINE. Dot, you really are awful.
DOT. [Rueful and detached] Well, it is a bit too thick, perhaps.
JOAN. Dot!
DOT. Well, mother, did you – I mean quite calmly?
LADY CHESHIRE. Yes, dear, quite calmly.
DOT. Would you have married him if you hadn't? [LADY CHESHIRE shakes her head] Then we're all agreed!
MABEL. Except yourself.
DOT. [Grimly] Even if I loved him, he might think himself lucky if I married him.
MABEL. Indeed, and I'm not so sure.
DOT. [Making a face at her] What I was going to —
LADY CHESHIRE. But don't you think, dear, you'd better not?
DOT. Well, I won't say what I was going to say, but what I do say is – Why the devil —
LADY CHESHIRE. Quite so, Dot!
DOT. [A little disconcerted.] If they're tired of each other, they ought not to marry, and if father's going to make them —
CHRISTINE. You don't understand in the least. It's for the sake of the —
DOT. Out with it, Old Sweetness! The approaching infant! God bless it!

There is a sudden silence, for KEITH and LATTER are seen coming from the dining-room.

LATTER. That must be so, Ronny.
KEITH. No, John; not a bit of it!
LATTER. You don't think!
KEITH. Good Gad, who wants to think after dinner!
DOT. Come on! Let's play pool. [She turns at the billiard-room door.] Look here! Rehearsal to-morrow is directly after breakfast; from "Eccles enters breathless" to the end.
MABEL. Whatever made you choose "Caste," DOT? You know it's awfully difficult.
DOT. Because it's the only play that's not too advanced. [The girls all go into the billiard-room.]
LADY CHESHIRE. Where's Bill, Ronny?
KEITH. [With a grimace] I rather think Sir William and he are in Committee of Supply – Mem-Sahib.
LADY CHESHIRE. Oh!

She looks uneasily at the dining-room; then follows the girls out.

LATTER. [In the tone of one resuming an argument] There can't be two opinions about it, Ronny. Young Dunning's refusal is simply indefensible.

KEITH. I don't agree a bit, John.

LATTER. Of course, if you won't listen.

KEITH. [Clipping a cigar] Draw it mild, my dear chap. We've had the whole thing over twice at least.

LATTER. My point is this —

KEITH. [Regarding LATTER quizzically with his halfclosed eyes] I know – I know – but the point is, how far your point is simply professional.

LATTER. If a man wrongs a woman, he ought to right her again. There's no answer to that.

KEITH. It all depends.

LATTER. That's rank opportunism.

KEITH. Rats! Look here – Oh! hang it, John, one can't argue this out with a parson.

LATTER. [Frigidly] Why not?

HAROLD. [Who has entered from the dining-room] Pull devil, pull baker!

KEITH. Shut up, Harold!

LATTER. "To play the game" is the religion even of the Army.

KEITH. Exactly, but what is the game?

LATTER. What else can it be in this case?

KEITH. You're too puritanical, young John. You can't help it – line of country laid down for you. All drag-huntin'! What!

LATTER. [With concentration] Look here!

HAROLD. [Imitating the action of a man pulling at a horse's head] 'Come hup, I say, you hugly beast!

KEITH. [To LATTER] You're not going to draw me, old chap. You don't see where you'd land us all. [He smokes calmly]

LATTER. How do you imagine vice takes its rise? From precisely this sort of thing of young Dunning's.

KEITH. From human nature, I should have thought, John. I admit that I don't like a fellow's leavin' a girl in the lurch; but I don't see the use in drawin' hard and fast rules. You only have to break 'em. Sir William and you would just tie Dunning and the girl up together, willy-nilly, to save appearances, and ten to one but there'll be the deuce to pay in a year's time. You can take a horse to the water, you can't make him drink.

LATTER. I entirely and absolutely disagree with you.

HAROLD. Good old John!

LATTER. At all events we know where your principles take you.

KEITH. [Rather dangerously] Where, please? [HAROLD turns up his eyes, and points downwards] Dry up, Harold!

LATTER. Did you ever hear the story of Faust?

KEITH. Now look here, John; with all due respect to your cloth, and all the politeness in the world, you may go to-blazes.

LATTER. Well, I must say, Ronny – of all the rude boors – [He turns towards the billiard-room.]

KEITH. Sorry I smashed the glass, old chap.

LATTER passes out. There comes a mingled sound through the opened door, of female voices, laughter, and the click of billiard balls, dipped of by the sudden closing of the door.

KEITH. [Impersonally] Deuced odd, the way a parson puts one's back up! Because you know I agree with him really; young Dunning ought to play the game; and I hope Sir William'll make him.

The butler JACKSON has entered from the door under the stairs followed by the keeper STUDDENHAM, a man between fifty and sixty, in a full-skirted coat with big pockets, cord breeches, and gaiters; he has a steady self respecting weathered face, with blue eyes and a short grey beard, which has obviously once been red.

KEITH. Hullo! Studdenham!

STUDDENHAM. [Touching his forehead] Evenin', Captain Keith.

JACKSON. Sir William still in the dining-room with Mr. Bill, sir?

HAROLD. [With a grimace] He is, Jackson.

JACKSON goes out to the dining-room.

KEITH. You've shot no pheasants yet, Studdenham?

STUDDENHAM. No, Sir. Only birds. We'll be doin' the spinneys and the home covert while you're down.

KEITH. I say, talkin' of spinneys —

He breaks off sharply, and goes out with HAROLD into the billiard-room.

SIR WILLIAM enters from the dining-room, applying a gold toothpick to his front teeth.

SIR WILLIAM. Ah! Studdenham. Bad business this, about young Dunning!

STUDDENHAM. Yes, Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM. He definitely refuses to marry her?

STUDDENHAM. He does that.

SIR WILLIAM. That won't do, you know. What reason does he give?

STUDDENHAM. Won't say other than that he don't want no more to do with her.

SIR WILLIAM. God bless me! That's not a reason. I can't have a keeper of mine playing fast and loose in the village like this. [Turning to LADY CHESHIRE, who has come in from the billiard-room] That affair of young Dunning's, my dear.

LADY CHESHIRE. Oh! Yes! I'm so sorry, Studdenham. The poor girl!

STUDDENHAM. [Respectfully] Fancy he's got a feeling she's not his equal, now, my lady.

LADY CHESHIRE. [To herself] Yes, I suppose he has made her his superior.

SIR WILLIAM. What? Eh! Quite! Quite! I was just telling Studdenham the fellow must set the matter straight. We can't have open scandals in the village. If he wants to keep his place he must marry her at once.

LADY CHESHIRE. [To her husband in a low voice] Is it right to force them? Do you know what the girl wishes, Studdenham?

STUDDENHAM. Shows a spirit, my lady – says she'll have him – willin' or not.

LADY CHESHIRE. A spirit? I see. If they marry like that they're sure to be miserable.

SIR WILLIAM. What! Doesn't follow at all. Besides, my dear, you ought to know by this time, there's an unwritten law in these matters. They're perfectly well aware that when there are consequences, they have to take them.

STUDDENHAM. Some o' these young people, my lady, they don't put two and two together no more than an old cock pheasant.

SIR WILLIAM. I'll give him till to-morrow. If he remains obstinate, he'll have to go; he'll get no character, Studdenham. Let him know what I've said. I like the fellow, he's a good keeper. I don't want to lose him. But this sort of thing I won't have. He must toe the mark or take himself off. Is he up here to-night?

STUDDENHAM. Hangin' partridges, Sir William. Will you have him in?

SIR WILLIAM. [Hesitating] Yes – yes. I'll see him.

STUDDENHAM. Good-night to you, my lady.

LADY CHESHIRE. Freda's not looking well, Studdenham.

STUDDENHAM. She's a bit pernicky with her food, that's where it is.

LADY CHESHIRE. I must try and make her eat.

SIR WILLIAM. Oh! Studdenham. We'll shoot the home covert first. What did we get last year?

STUDDENHAM. [Producing the game-book; but without reference to it] Two hundred and fifty-three pheasants, eleven hares, fifty-two rabbits, three woodcock, sundry.

SIR WILLIAM. Sundry? Didn't include a fox did it? [Gravely] I was seriously upset this morning at Warnham's spinney —

STUDDENHAM. [Very gravely] You don't say, Sir William; that four-year-old he du look a handful!

SIR WILLIAM. [With a sharp look] You know well enough what I mean.

STUDDENHAM. [Unmoved] Shall I send young Dunning, Sir William?

SIR WILLIAM gives a short, sharp nod, and STUDDENHAM retires by the door under the stairs.

SIR WILLIAM. Old fox!

LADY CHESHIRE. Don't be too hard on Dunning. He's very young.

SIR WILLIAM. [Patting her arm] My dear, you don't understand young fellows, how should you?

LADY CHESHIRE. [With her faint irony] A husband and two sons not counting. [Then as the door under the stairs is opened] Bill, now do —

SIR WILLIAM. I'll be gentle with him. [Sharply] Come in!

LADY CHESHIRE retires to the billiard-room. She gives a look back and a half smile at young DUNNING, a fair young man dressed in broom cords and leggings, and holding his cap in his hand; then goes out.

SIR WILLIAM. Evenin', Dunning.

DUNNING. [Twisting his cap] Evenin', Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM. Studdenham's told you what I want to see you about?

DUNNING. Yes, Sir.

SIR WILLIAM. The thing's in your hands. Take it or leave it. I don't put pressure on you. I simply won't have this sort of thing on my estate.

DUNNING. I'd like to say, Sir William, that she [He stops].

SIR WILLIAM. Yes, I daresay-Six of one and half a dozen of the other. Can't go into that.

DUNNING. No, Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM. I'm quite mild with you. This is your first place. If you leave here you'll get no character.

DUNNING. I never meant any harm, sir.

SIR WILLIAM. My good fellow, you know the custom of the country.

DUNNING. Yes, Sir William, but —

SIR WILLIAM. You should have looked before you leaped. I'm not forcing you. If you refuse you must go, that's all.

DUNNING. Yes. Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM. Well, now go along and take a day to think it over.

BILL, who has sauntered moody from the diningroom, stands by the stairs listening. Catching sight of him, DUNNING raises his hand to his forelock.

DUNNING. Very good, Sir William. [He turns, fumbles, and turns again] My old mother's dependent on me —

SIR WILLIAM. Now, Dunning, I've no more to say. [Dunning goes sadly away under the stairs.]

SIR WILLIAM. [Following] And look here! Just understand this [He too goes out...] BILL, lighting a cigarette, has approached the writing-table. He looks very glum. The billiard-room door is flung open. MABEL LANFARNE appears, and makes him a little curtsey.

MABEL. Against my will I am bidden to bring you in to pool.

BILL. Sorry! I've got letters.

MABEL. You seem to have become very conscientious.

BILL. Oh! I don't know.

MABEL. Do you remember the last day of the covert shooting?

BITS. I do.

MABEL. [Suddenly] What a pretty girl Freda Studdenham's grown!

BILL. Has she?

MABEL. "She walks in beauty."

BILL. Really? Hadn't noticed.

MABEL. Have you been taking lessons in conversation?

BILL. Don't think so.

MABEL. Oh! [There is a silence] Mr. Cheshire!

BILL. Miss Lanfarne!

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