

GALSWORTHY JOHN

PLAYS :
SECOND
SERIES

John Galsworthy

Plays : Second Series

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John Galsworthy
Plays : Second Series

THE ELDEST SON

BY JOHN GALSWORTHY

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 Mabel].

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—whatever 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 LATTE are seen coming from the dining-room.

LATTE. That must be so, Ronny.

KEITH. No, John; not a bit of it!

LATTE. 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 hugely 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 pernickitty 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!

MABEL. What's the matter with you? Aren't you rather queer, considering that I don't bite, and was rather a pal!

BILL. [Stolidly] I'm sorry.

Then seeing that his mother has come in from the billiard-room, he sits down at the writing-table.

LADY CHESHIRE. Mabel, dear, do take my cue. Won't you play too, Bill, and try and stop Ronny, he's too terrible?

BILL. Thanks. I've got these letters.

MABEL taking the cue passes back into the billiard-room, whence comes out the sound of talk and laughter.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Going over and standing behind her son's chair] Anything wrong, darling?

BILL. Nothing, thanks. [Suddenly] I say, I wish you hadn't asked that girl here.

LADY CHESHIRE. Mabel! Why? She's wanted for rehearsals. I thought you got on so well with her last Christmas.

BILL. [With a sort of sullen exasperation.] A year ago.

LADY CHESHIRE. The girls like her, so does your father; personally I must say I think she's rather nice and Irish.

BILL. She's all right, I daresay.

He looks round as if to show his mother that he wishes to be left alone. But

LADY CHESHIRE, having seen that he is about to look at her, is not looking at him.

LADY CHESHIRE. I'm afraid your father's been talking to you, Bill.

BILL. He has.

LADY CHESHIRE. Debts? Do try and make allowances. [With a faint smile] Of course he is a little—

BILL. He is.

LADY CHESHIRE. I wish I could—

BILL. Oh, Lord! Don't you get mixed up in it!

LADY CHESHIRE. It seems almost a pity that you told him.

BILL. He wrote and asked me point blank what I owed.

LADY CHESHIRE. Oh! [Forcing herself to speak in a casual voice] I happen to have a little money, Bill—I think it would be simpler if—

BILL. Now look here, mother, you've tried that before. I can't help spending money, I never shall be able, unless I go to the Colonies, or something of the kind.

LADY CHESHIRE. Don't talk like that, dear!

BILL. I would, for two straws!

LADY CHESHIRE. It's only because your father thinks such a lot of the place, and the name, and your career. The Cheshires are all like that. They've been here so long; they're all—root.

BILL. Deuced funny business my career will be, I expect!

LADY CHESHIRE. [Fluttering, but restraining herself lest he should see] But, Bill, why must you spend more than your allowance?

BILL. Why—anything? I didn't make myself.

LADY CHESHIRE. I'm afraid we did that. It was inconsiderate, perhaps.

BILL. Yes, you'd better have left me out.

LADY CHESHIRE. But why are you so—Only a little fuss about money!

BILL. Ye-es.

LADY CHESHIRE. You're not keeping anything from me, are you?

BILL. [Facing her] No. [He then turns very deliberately to the writing things, and takes up a pen] I must write these letters, please.

LADY CHESHIRE. Bill, if there's any real trouble, you will tell me, won't you?

BILL. There's nothing whatever.

He suddenly gets up and walks about. LADY CHESHIRE, too, moves over to the fireplace, and after an uneasy look at him, turns to the fire. Then, as if trying to switch of his mood, she changes the subject abruptly.

LADY CHESHIRE. Isn't it a pity about young Dunning? I'm so sorry for Rose Taylor.

There is a silence. Stealthily under the staircase FREDa has entered, and seeing only BILL, advances to speak to him.

BILL. [Suddenly] Oh! well,—you can't help these things in the country.

As he speaks, FREDa stops dead, perceiving that he is not alone; BILL, too, catching sight of her, starts.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Still speaking to the fire] It seems dreadful to force him. I do so believe in people doing things of their own accord. [Then seeing FREDa standing so uncertainly by the stairs] Do you want me, Freda?

FREDa. Only your cloak, my lady. Shall I—begin it?

At this moment SIR WILLIAM enters from the drawing-room.

LADY CHESHIRE. Yes, yes.

SIR WILLIAM. [Genially] Can you give me another five minutes, Bill? [Pointing to the billiard-room] We'll come directly, my dear.

FREDa, with a look at BILL, has gone back whence she came; and LADY CHESHIRE goes reluctantly away into the billiard-room.

SIR WILLIAM. I shall give young Dunning short shrift. [He moves over to the fireplace and divides his coat-tails] Now, about you, Bill! I don't want to bully you the moment you come down, but you know, this can't go on. I've paid your debts twice. Shan't pay them this time unless I see

a disposition to change your mode of life. [A pause] You get your extravagance from your mother. She's very queer—[A pause]—All the Winterleighs are like that about money....

BILL. Mother's particularly generous, if that's what you mean.

SIR WILLIAM. [Drily] We will put it that way. [A pause] At the present moment you owe, as I understand it, eleven hundred pounds.

BILL. About that.

SIR WILLIAM. Mere flea-bite. [A pause] I've a proposition to make.

BILL. Won't it do to-morrow, sir?

SIR WILLIAM. "To-morrow" appears to be your motto in life.

BILL. Thanks!

SIR WILLIAM. I'm anxious to change it to-day. [BILL looks at him in silence] It's time you took your position seriously, instead of hanging about town, racing, and playing polo, and what not.

BILL. Go ahead!

At something dangerous in his voice, SIR WILLIAM modifies his attitude.

SIR WILLIAM. The proposition's very simple. I can't suppose anything so rational and to your advantage will appeal to you, but [drily] I mention it. Marry a nice girl, settle down, and stand for the division; you can have the Dower House and fifteen hundred a year, and I'll pay your debts into the bargain. If you're elected I'll make it two thousand. Plenty of time to work up the constituency before we kick out these infernal Rads. Carpetbagger against you; if you go hard at it in the summer, it'll be odd if you don't manage to get in your three days a week, next season. You can take Rocketeer and that four-year-old—he's well up to your weight, fully eight and a half inches of bone. You'll only want one other. And if Miss—if your wife means to hunt—

BILL. You've chosen my wife, then?

SIR WILLIAM. [With a quick look] I imagine, you've some girl in your mind.

BILL. Ah!

SIR WILLIAM: Used not to be unnatural at your age. I married your mother at twenty-eight. Here you are, eldest son of a family that stands for something. The more I see of the times the more I'm convinced that everybody who is anybody has got to buckle to, and save the landmarks left. Unless we're true to our caste, and prepared to work for it, the landed classes are going to go under to this infernal democratic spirit in the air. The outlook's very serious. We're threatened in a hundred ways. If you mean business, you'll want a wife. When I came into the property I should have been lost without your mother.

BILL. I thought this was coming.

SIR WILLIAM. [With a certain geniality] My dear fellow, I don't want to put a pistol to your head. You've had a slack rein so far. I've never objected to your sowing a few wild oats—so long as you—er—[Unseen by SIR WILLIAM, BILL makes a sudden movement] Short of that—at all events, I've not inquired into your affairs. I can only judge by the—er—pecuniary evidence you've been good enough to afford me from time to time. I imagine you've lived like a good many young men in your position—I'm not blaming you, but there's a time for all things.

BILL. Why don't you say outright that you want me to marry Mabel Lanfarne?

SIR WILLIAM. Well, I do. Girl's a nice one. Good family—got a little money—rides well. Isn't she good-looking enough for you, or what?

BILL. Quite, thanks.

SIR WILLIAM. I understood from your mother that you and she were on good terms.

BILL. Please don't drag mother into it.

SIR WILLIAM. [With dangerous politeness] Perhaps you'll be good enough to state your objections.

BILL. Must we go on with this?

SIR WILLIAM. I've never asked you to do anything for me before; I expect you to pay attention now. I've no wish to dragoon you into this particular marriage. If you don't care for Miss Lanfarne, marry a girl you're fond of.

BILL. I refuse.

SIR WILLIAM. In that case you know what to look out for. [With a sudden rush of choler] You young.... [He checks himself and stands glaring at BILL, who glares back at him] This means, I suppose, that you've got some entanglement or other.

BILL. Suppose what you like, sir.

SITS WILLIAM. I warn you, if you play the blackguard—

BILL. You can't force me like young Dunning.

Hearing the raised voices LADY CHESHIRE has come back from the billiard-room.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Closing the door] What is it?

SIR WILLIAM. You deliberately refuse! Go away, Dorothy.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Resolutely] I haven't seen Bill for two months.

SIR WILLIAM. What! [Hesitating] Well—we must talk it over again.

LADY CHESHIRE. Come to the billiard-room, both of you! Bill, do finish those letters!

With a deft movement she draws SIR WILLIAM toward the billiard-room, and glances back at BILL before going out, but he has turned to the writing-table. When the door is closed, BILL looks into the drawing-room, then opens the door under the stairs; and backing away towards the writing-table, sits down there, and takes up a pen. FRED A who has evidently been waiting, comes in and stands by the table.

BILL. I say, this is dangerous, you know.

FREDA. Yes—but I must.

BILL. Well, then—[With natural recklessness] Aren't you going to kiss me?

Without moving she looks at him with a sort of miserable inquiry.

BILL. Do you know you haven't seen me for eight weeks?

FREDA. Quite—long enough—for you to have forgotten.

BILL. Forgotten! I don't forget people so soon.

FREDA. No?

BILL. What's the matter with you, Freda?

FREDA. [After a long look] It'll never be as it was.

BILL. [Jumping up] How d'you mean?

FREDA. I've got something for you. [She takes a diamond ring out of her dress and holds it out to him] I've not worn it since Cromer.

BILL. Now, look here

FREDA. I've had my holiday; I shan't get another in a hurry.

BILL. Freda!

FREDA. You'll be glad to be free. That fortnight's all you really loved me in.

BILL. [Putting his hands on her arms] I swear—

FREDA. [Between her teeth] Miss Lanfarne need never know about me.

BILL. So that's it! I've told you a dozen times—nothing's changed. [FREDA looks at him and smiles.]

BILL. Oh! very well! If you will make yourself miserable.

FREDA. Everybody will be pleased.

BILL. At what?

FREDA. When you marry her.

BILL. This is too bad.

FREDA. It's what always happens—even when it's not a—gentleman.

BILL. That's enough.

FREDA. But I'm not like that girl down in the village. You needn't be afraid I'll say anything when—it comes. That's what I had to tell you.

BILL. What!

FREDA. I can keep a secret.

BILL. Do you mean this? [She bows her head.]

BILL. Good God!

FREDA. Father brought me up not to whine. Like the puppies when they hold them up by their tails. [With a sudden break in her voice] Oh! Bill!

BILL. [With his head down, seizing her hands] Freda! [He breaks away from her towards the fire] Good God!

She stands looking at him, then quietly slips away by the door under the staircase. BILL turns to speak to her, and sees that she has gone. He walks up to the fireplace, and grips the mantelpiece.

BILL. By Jove! This is—!

The curtain falls.

ACT II

The scene is LADY CHESHIRE's morning room, at ten o'clock on the following day. It is a pretty room, with white panelled walls; and chrysanthemums and carmine lilies in bowls. A large bow window overlooks the park under a sou'-westerly sky. A piano stands open; a fire is burning; and the morning's correspondence is scattered on a writing-table. Doors opposite each other lead to the maid's workroom, and to a corridor. LADY CHESHIRE is standing in the middle of the room, looking at an opera cloak, which FREDa is holding out.

LADY CHESHIRE. Well, Freda, suppose you just give it up!

FREDa. I don't like to be beaten.

LADY CHESHIRE. You're not to worry over your work. And by the way, I promised your father to make you eat more. [FREDa smiles.]

LADY CHESHIRE. It's all very well to smile. You want bracing up. Now don't be naughty. I shall give you a tonic. And I think you had better put that cloak away.

FREDa. I'd rather have one more try, my lady.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Sitting down at her writing-table] Very well.

FREDa goes out into her workroom, as JACKSON comes in from the corridor.

JACKSON. Excuse me, my lady. There's a young woman from the village, says you wanted to see her.

LADY CHESHIRE. Rose Taylor? Ask her to come in. Oh! and Jackson the car for the meet please at half-past ten.

JACKSON having bowed and withdrawn, LADY CHESHIRE rises with worked signs of nervousness, which she has only just suppressed, when ROSE TAYLOR, a stolid country girl, comes in and stands waiting by the door.

LADY CHESHIRE. Well, Rose. Do come in! [ROSE advances perhaps a couple of steps.]

LADY CHESHIRE. I just wondered whether you'd like to ask my advice. Your engagement with Dunning's broken off, isn't it?

ROSE. Yes—but I've told him he's got to marry me.

LADY CHESHIRE. I see! And you think that'll be the wisest thing?

ROSE. [Stolidly] I don't know, my lady. He's got to.

LADY CHESHIRE. I do hope you're a little fond of him still.

ROSE. I'm not. He don't deserve it.

LADY CHESHIRE. And—do you think he's quite lost his affection for you?

ROSE. I suppose so, else he wouldn't treat me as he's done. He's after that—that—He didn't ought to treat me as if I was dead.

LADY CHESHIRE. No, no—of course. But you will think it all well over, won't you?

ROSE. I've a—got nothing to think over, except what I know of.

LADY CHESHIRE. But for you both to marry in that spirit! You know it's for life, Rose. [Looking into her face] I'm always ready to help you.

ROSE. [Dropping a very slight curtsy] Thank you, my lady, but I think he ought to marry me. I've told him he ought.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Sighing] Well, that's all I wanted to say. It's a question of your self-respect; I can't give you any real advice. But just remember that if you want a friend—

ROSE. [With a gulp] I'm not so 'ard, really. I only want him to do what's right by me.

LADY CHESHIRE. [With a little lift of her eyebrow—gently] Yes, yes—I see.

ROSE. [Glancing back at the door] I don't like meeting the servants.

LADY CHESHIRE. Come along, I'll take you out another way. [As they reach the door, DOT comes in.]

DOT. [With a glance at ROSE] Can we have this room for the mouldy rehearsal, Mother?

LADY CHESHIRE. Yes, dear, you can air it here.

Holding the door open for ROSE she follows her out. And DOT, with a book of "Caste" in her hand, arranges the room according to a diagram.

DOT. Chair—chair—table—chair—Dash! Table—piano—fire—window! [Producing a pocket comb] Comb for Eccles. Cradle?—Cradle—[She viciously dumps a waste-paper basket down, and drops a footstool into it] Brat! [Then reading from the book gloomily] "Enter Eccles breathless. Esther and Polly rise—Esther puts on lid of bandbox." Bandbox!

Searching for something to represent a bandbox, she opens the workroom door.

DOT. Freda?

FREDA comes in.

DOT. I say, Freda. Anything the matter? You seem awfully down. [FREDA does not answer.]

DOT. You haven't looked anything of a lollipop lately.

FREDA. I'm quite all right, thank you, Miss Dot.

DOT. Has Mother been givin' you a tonic?

FREDA. [Smiling a little] Not yet.

DOT. That doesn't account for it then. [With a sudden warm impulse] What is it, Freda?

FREDA. Nothing.

DOT. [Switching of on a different line of thought] Are you very busy this morning?

FREDA. Only this cloak for my lady.

DOT. Oh! that can wait. I may have to get you in to prompt, if I can't keep 'em straight. [Gloomily] They stray so. Would you mind?

FREDA. [Stolidly] I shall be very glad, Miss Dot.

DOT. [Eyeing her dubiously] All right. Let's see—what did I want?

JOAN has come in.

JOAN. Look here, Dot; about the baby in this scene. I'm sure I ought to make more of it.

DOT. Romantic little beast! [She plucks the footstool out by one ear, and holds it forth] Let's see you try!

JOAN. [Recoiling] But, Dot, what are we really going to have for the baby? I can't rehearse with that thing. Can't you suggest something, Freda?

FREDA. Borrow a real one, Miss Joan. There are some that don't count much.

JOAN. Freda, how horrible!

DOT. [Dropping the footstool back into the basket] You'll just put up with what you're given.

Then as CHRISTINE and MABEL LANFARNE Come in, FREDA turns abruptly and goes out.

DOT. Buck up! Where are Bill and Harold? [To JOAN] Go and find them, mouse-cat.

But BILL and HAROLD, followed by LATTE, are already in the doorway. They come in, and LATTE, stumbling over the waste-paper basket, takes it up to improve its position.

DOT. Drop that cradle, John! [As he picks the footstool out of it] Leave the baby in! Now then! Bill, you enter there! [She points to the workroom door where BILL and MABEL range themselves close to the piano; while HAROLD goes to the window] John! get off the stage! Now then, "Eccles

enters breathless, Esther and Polly rise." Wait a minute. I know now. [She opens the workroom door] Freda, I wanted a bandbox.

HAROLD. [Cheerfully] I hate beginning to rehearse, you know, you feel such a fool.

DOT. [With her bandbox-gloomily] You'll feel more of a fool when you have begun. [To BILL, who is staring into the workroom] Shut the door. Now. [BILL shuts the door.]

LATTER. [Advancing] Look here! I want to clear up a point of psychology before we start.

DOT. Good Lord!

LATTER. When I bring in the milk—ought I to bring it in seriously— as if I were accustomed—I mean, I maintain that if I'm—

JOAN. Oh! John, but I don't think it's meant that you should—

DOT. Shut up! Go back, John! Blow the milk! Begin, begin, begin! Bill!

LATTER. [Turning round and again advancing] But I think you underrate the importance of my entrance altogether.

MABEL. Oh! no, Mr. Latter!

LATTER. I don't in the least want to destroy the balance of the scene, but I do want to be clear about the spirit. What is the spirit?

DOT. [With gloom] Rollicking!

LATTER. Well, I don't think so. We shall run a great risk, with this play, if we rollick.

DOT. Shall we? Now look here—!

MABEL. [Softly to BILL] Mr. Cheshire!

BILL. [Desperately] Let's get on!

DOT. [Waving LATTER back] Begin, begin! At last! [But JACKSON has come in.]

JACKSON. [To CHRISTINE] Studdenham says, Mm, if the young ladies want to see the spaniel pups, he's brought 'em round.

JOAN. [Starting up] Oh! come 'on, John! [She flies towards the door, followed by LATTER.]

DOT. [Gesticulating with her book] Stop! You— [CHRISTINE and HAROLD also rush past.]

DOT. [Despairingly] First pick! [Tearing her hair] Pigs! Devils!

[She rushes after them. BILL and MABEL are left alone.]

MABEL. [Mockingly] And don't you want one of the spaniel pups?

BILL. [Painfully reserved and sullen, and conscious of the workroom door] Can't keep a dog in town. You can have one, if you like. The breeding's all right.

MABEL. Sixth Pick?

BILL. The girls'll give you one of theirs. They only fancy they want 'em.

Mann. [Moving nearer to him, with her hands clasped behind her] You know, you remind me awfully of your father. Except that you're not nearly so polite. I don't understand you English-lords of the soil. The way you have of disposing of your females. [With a sudden change of voice] What was the matter with you last night? [Softly] Won't you tell me?

BILL. Nothing to tell.

MABEL. Ah! no, Mr. Bill.

BILL. [Almost succumbing to her voice—then sullenly] Worried, I suppose.

MABEL. [Returning to her mocking] Quite got over it?

BILL. Don't chaff me, please.

MABEL. You really are rather formidable.

BILL. Thanks.

MABEL. But, you know, I love to cross a field where there's a bull.

BILL. Really! Very interesting.

MABEL. The way of their only seeing one thing at a time. [She moves back as he advances] And overturning people on the journey.

BILL. Hadn't you better be a little careful?

MABEL. And never to see the hedge until they're stuck in it. And then straight from that hedge into the opposite one.

BILL. [Savagely] What makes you bait me this morning of all mornings?

MABEL. The beautiful morning! [Suddenly] It must be dull for poor Freda working in there with all this fun going on?

BILL. [Glancing at the door] Fun you call it?

MABEL. To go back to you,—now—Mr. Cheshire.

BILL. No.

MABEL. You always make me feel so Irish. Is it because you're so English, d'you think? Ah! I can see him moving his ears. Now he's pawing the ground—He's started!

BILL. Miss Lanfarne!

MABEL. [Still backing away from him, and drawing him on with her eyes and smile] You can't help coming after me! [Then with a sudden change to a sort of sierra gravity] Can you? You'll feel that when I've gone.

They stand quite still, looking into each other's eyes and FREDa, who has opened the door of the workroom stares at them.

MABEL. [Seeing her] Here's the stile. Adieu, Monsieur le taureau!

She puts her hand behind her, opens the door, and slips through, leaving BILL to turn, following the direction of her eyes, and see FREDa with the cloak still in her hand.

BILL. [Slowly walking towards her] I haven't slept all night.

FREDa. No?

BILL. Have you been thinking it over? [FREDa gives a bitter little laugh.]

BILL. Don't! We must make a plan. I'll get you away. I won't let you suffer. I swear I won't.

FREDa. That will be clever.

BILL. I wish to Heaven my affairs weren't in such a mess.

FREDa. I shall be—all—right, thank you.

BILL. You must think me a blackguard. [She shakes her head] Abuse me—say something! Don't look like that!

FREDa. Were you ever really fond of me?

BILL. Of course I was, I am now. Give me your hands.

She looks at him, then drags her hands from his, and covers her face.

BILL. [Clenching his fists] Look here! I'll prove it. [Then as she suddenly flings her arms round his neck and clings to him] There, there!

There is a click of a door handle. They start away from each other, and see LADY CHESHIRE regarding them.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Without irony] I beg your pardon.

She makes as if to withdraw from an unwarranted intrusion, but suddenly turning, stands, with lips pressed together, waiting.

LADY CHESHIRE. Yes?

FREDa has muffled her face. But BILL turns and confronts his mother.

BILL. Don't say anything against her!

LADY CHESHIRE. [Tries to speak to him and fails—then to FREDa] Please-go!

BILL. [Taking FREDa's arm] No.

LADY CHESHIRE, after a moment's hesitation, herself moves towards the door.

BILL. Stop, mother!

LADY CHESHIRE. I think perhaps not.

BILL. [Looking at FREDa, who is cowering as though from a blow] It's a d-d shame!

LADY CHESHIRE. It is.

BILL. [With sudden resolution] It's not as you think. I'm engaged to be married to her.

[FREDa gives him a wild stare, and turns away.]

LADY CHESHIRE. [Looking from one to the other] I don't think I—quite—understand.

BILL. [With the brutality of his mortification] What I said was plain enough.

LADY CHESHIRE. Bill!

BILL. I tell you I am going to marry her.

LADY CHESHIRE. [To FREDa] Is that true?

[FREDa gulps and remains silent.]

BILL. If you want to say anything, say it to me, mother.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Gripping the edge of a little table] Give me a chair, please. [BILL gives her a chair.]

LADY CHESHIRE. [To FREDa] Please sit down too.

FREDa sits on the piano stool, still turning her face away.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Fixing her eyes on FREDa] Now!

BILL. I fell in love with her. And she with me.

LADY CHESHIRE. When?

BILL. In the summer.

LADY CHESHIRE. Ah!

BILL. It wasn't her fault.

LADY CHESHIRE. No?

BILL. [With a sort of menace] Mother!

LADY CHESHIRE. Forgive me, I am not quite used to the idea. You say that you—are engaged?

BILL. Yes.

LADY CHESHIRE. The reasons against such an engagement have occurred to you, I suppose? [With a sudden change of tone] Bill! what does it mean?

BILL. If you think she's trapped me into this—

LADY CHESHIRE. I do not. Neither do I think she has been trapped. I think nothing. I understand nothing.

BILL. [Grimly] Good!

LADY CHESHIRE. How long has this-engagement lasted?

BILL. [After a silence] Two months.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Suddenly] This is-this is quite impossible.

BILL. You'll find it isn't.

LADY CHESHIRE. It's simple misery.

BILL. [Pointing to the workroom] Go and wait in there, Freda.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Quickly] And are you still in love with her?

FREDa, moving towards the workroom, smothers a sob.

BILL. Of course I am.

FREDa has gone, and as she goes, LADY CHESHIRE rises suddenly, forced by the intense feeling she has been keeping in hand.

LADY CHESHIRE. Bill! Oh, Bill! What does it all mean? [BILL, looking from side to aide, only shrugs his shoulders] You are not in love with her now. It's no good telling me you are.

BILL. I am.

LADY CHESHIRE. That's not exactly how you would speak if you were.

BILL. She's in love with me.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Bitterly] I suppose so.

BILL. I mean to see that nobody runs her down.

LADY CHESHIRE. [With difficulty] Bill! Am I a hard, or mean woman?

BILL. Mother!

LADY CHESHIRE. It's all your life—and—your father's—and—all of us. I want to understand—I must understand. Have you realised what an awful thins this would be for us all? It's quite impossible that it should go on.

BILL. I'm always in hot water with the Governor, as it is. She and I'll take good care not to be in the way.

LADY CHESHIRE. Tell me everything!

BILL. I have.

LADY CHESHIRE. I'm your mother, Bill.

BILL. What's the good of these questions?

LADY CHESHIRE. You won't give her away—I see!

BILL. I've told you all there is to tell. We're engaged, we shall be married quietly, and—and—go to Canada.

LADY CHESHIRE. If there weren't more than that to tell you'd be in love with her now.

BILL. I've told you that I am.

LADY CHESHIRE. You are not. [Almost fiercely] I know—I know there's more behind.

BILL. There—is—nothing.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Baffled, but unconvinced] Do you mean that your love for her has been just what it might have been for a lady?

BILL. [Bitterly] Why not?

LADY CHESHIRE. [With painful irony] It is not so as a rule.

BILL. Up to now I've never heard you or the girls say a word against Freda. This isn't the moment to begin, please.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Solemnly] All such marriages end in wretchedness. You haven't a taste or tradition in common. You don't know what marriage is. Day after day, year after year. It's no use being sentimental—for people brought up as we are to have different manners is worse than to have different souls. Besides, it's poverty. Your father will never forgive you, and I've practically nothing. What can you do? You have no profession. How are you going to stand it; with a woman who—? It's the little things.

BILL. I know all that, thanks.

LADY CHESHIRE. Nobody does till they've been through it. Marriage is hard enough when people are of the same class. [With a sudden movement towards him] Oh! my dear-before it's too late!

BILL. [After a struggle] It's no good.

LADY CHESHIRE. It's not fair to her. It can only end in her misery.

BILL. Leave that to me, please.

LADY CHESHIRE. [With an almost angry vehemence] Only the very finest can do such things. And you don't even know what trouble's like.

BILL. Drop it, please, mother.

LADY CHESHIRE. Bill, on your word of honour, are you acting of your own free will?

BILL. [Breaking away from her] I can't stand any more. [He goes out into the workroom.]

LADY CHESHIRE. What in God's name shall I do?

In her distress she walks up and down the room, then goes to the workroom door, and opens it.

LADY CHESHIRE. Come in here, please, Freda.

After a seconds pause, FREDa, white and trembling, appears in the doorway, followed by BILL.

LADY CHESHIRE. No, Bill. I want to speak to her alone.

BILL, does not move.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Icily] I must ask you to leave us.

BILL hesitates; then shrugging his shoulders, he touches FREDa's arms, and goes back into the workroom, closing the door. There is silence.

LADY CHESHIRE. How did it come about?

FREDa. I don't know, my lady.

LADY CHESHIRE. For heaven's sake, child, don't call me that again, whatever happens. [She walks to the window, and speaks from there] I know well enough how love comes. I don't blame you. Don't cry. But, you see, it's my eldest son. [FREDa puts her hand to her breast] Yes, I know. Women always get the worst of these things. That's natural. But it's not only you is it? Does any one guess?

FREDa. No.

LADY CHESHIRE. Not even your father? [FREDa shakes her head] There's nothing more dreadful than for a woman to hang like a stone round a man's neck. How far has it gone? Tell me!

FREDa. I can't.

LADY CHESHIRE. Come!

FREDa. I—won't.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Smiling painfully]. Won't give him away? Both of you the same. What's the use of that with me? Look at me! Wasn't he with you when you went for your holiday this summer?

FREDa. He's—always—behaved—like—a—gentleman.

LADY CHESHIRE. Like a man you mean!

FREDa. It hasn't been his fault! I love him so.

LADY CHESHIRE turns abruptly, and begins to walk up and down the room. Then stopping, she looks intently at FREDa.

LADY CHESHIRE. I don't know what to say to you. It's simple madness! It can't, and shan't go on.

FREDa. [Sullenly] I know I'm not his equal, but I am—somebody.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Answering this first assertion of rights with a sudden steeliness] Does he love you now?

FREDa. That's not fair—it's not fair.

LADY CHESHIRE. If men are like gunpowder, Freda, women are not. If you've lost him it's been your own fault.

FREDa. But he does love me, he must. It's only four months.

LADY CHESHIRE. [Looking down, and speaking rapidly] Listen to me. I love my son, but I know him—I know all his kind of man. I've lived with one for thirty years. I know the way their senses work. When they want a thing they must have it, and then—they're sorry.

FREDa. [Sullenly] He's not sorry.

LADY CHESHIRE. Is his love big enough to carry you both over everything?... You know it isn't.

FREDa. If I were a lady, you wouldn't talk like that.

LADY CHESHIRE. If you were a lady there'd be no trouble before either of you. You'll make him hate you.

FREDA. I won't believe it. I could make him happy—out there.

LADY CHESHIRE. I don't want to be so odious as to say all the things you must know. I only ask you to try and put yourself in our position.

FREDA. Ah, yes!

LADY CHESHIRE. You ought to know me better than to think I'm purely selfish.

FREDA. Would you like to put yourself in my position?

LADY CHESHIRE. What!

FREDA. Yes. Just like Rose.

LADY CHESHIRE. [In a low, horror-stricken voice] Oh!

There is a dead silence, then going swiftly up to her, she looks straight into FREDA's eyes.

FREDA. [Meeting her gaze] Oh! Yes—it's the truth. [Then to Bill who has come in from the workroom, she gasps out] I never meant to tell.

BILL. Well, are you satisfied?

LADY CHESHIRE. [Below her breath] This is terrible!

BILL. The Governor had better know.

LADY CHESHIRE. Oh! no; not yet!

BILL. Waiting won't cure it!

The door from the corridor is thrown open; CHRISTINE and DOT run in with their copies of the play in their hands; seeing that something is wrong, they stand still. After a look at his mother, BILL turns abruptly, and goes back into the workroom. LADY CHESHIRE moves towards the window.

JOAN. [Following her sisters] The car's round. What's the matter?

DOT. Shut up!

SIR WILLIAM'S voice is heard from the corridor calling "Dorothy!" As LADY CHESHIRE, passing her handkerchief over her face, turns round, he enters. He is in full hunting dress: well-weathered pink, buckskins, and mahogany tops.

SIR WILLIAM. Just off, my dear. [To his daughters, genially] Rehearsin'? What! [He goes up to FREDA holding out his gloved right hand] Button that for me, Freda, would you? It's a bit stiff!

FREDA buttons the glove: LADY CHESHIRE and the girls watching in hypnotic silence.

SIR WILLIAM. Thank you! "Balmy as May"; scent ought to be first-rate. [To LADY CHESHIRE] Good-bye, my dear! Sampson's Gorse —best day of the whole year. [He pats JOAN on the shoulder] Wish you were cumin' out, Joan.

He goes out, leaving the door open, and as his footsteps and the chink of his spurs die away, FREDA turns and rushes into the workroom.

CHRISTINE. Mother! What—?

But LADY CHESHIRE waves the question aside, passes her daughter, and goes out into the corridor. The sound of a motor car is heard.

JOAN. [Running to the window] They've started—! Chris! What is it? Dot?

DOT. Bill, and her!

JOAN. But what?

DOT. [Gloomily] Heaven knows! Go away, you're not fit for this.

JOAN. [Aghast] I am fit.

DOT. I think not.

JOAN. Chris?

CHRISTINE. [In a hard voice] Mother ought to have told us.

JOAN. It can't be very awful. Freda's so good.

DOT. Call yourself in love, you milk-and-water-kitten!

CHRISTINE. It's horrible, not knowing anything! I wish Runny hadn't gone.

JOAN. Shall I fetch John?

DOT. John!

CHRISTINE. Perhaps Harold knows.

JOAN. He went out with Studdenham.

DOT. It's always like this, women kept in blinkers. Rose-leaves and humbug! That awful old man!

JOAN. Dot!

CHRISTINE. Don't talk of father like that!

DOT. Well, he is! And Bill will be just like him at fifty! Heaven help Freda, whatever she's done! I'd sooner be a private in a German regiment than a woman.

JOAN. Dot, you're awful.

DOT. You-mouse-hearted-linnet!

CHRISTINE. Don't talk that nonsense about women!

DOT. You're married and out of it; and Ronny's not one of these terrific John Bulls. [To JOAN who has opened the door] Looking for John? No good, my dear; lath and plaster.

JOAN. [From the door, in a frightened whisper] Here's Mabel!

DOT. Heavens, and the waters under the earth!

CHRISTINE. If we only knew!

MABEL comes in, the three girls are silent, with their eyes fixed on their books.

MABEL. The silent company.

DOT. [Looking straight at her] We're chucking it for to-day.

MABEL. What's the matter?

CHRISTINE. Oh! nothing.

DOT. Something's happened.

MABEL. Really! I am sorry. [Hesitating] Is it bad enough for me to go?

CHRISTINE. Oh! no, Mabel!

DOT. [Sardonically] I should think very likely.

While she is looking from face to face, BILL comes in from the workroom. He starts to walk across the room, but stops, and looks stolidly at the four girls.

BILL. Exactly! Fact of the matter is, Miss Lanfarne, I'm engaged to my mother's maid.

No one moves or speaks. Suddenly MABEL LANFARNE goes towards him, holding out her hand. BILL does not take her hand, but bows. Then after a swift glance at the girls' faces MABEL goes out into the corridor, and the three girls are left staring at their brother.

BILL. [Coolly] Thought you might like to know. [He, too, goes out into the corridor.]

CHRISTINE. Great heavens!

JOAN. How awful!

CHRISTINE. I never thought of anything as bad as that.

JOAN. Oh! Chris! Something must be done!

DOT. [Suddenly to herself] Ha! When Father went up to have his glove buttoned!
There is a sound, JACKSON has come in from the corridor.

JACKSON. [To Dot] If you please, Miss, Studdenham's brought up the other two pups. He's just outside. Will you kindly take a look at them, he says?

There is silence.

DOT. [Suddenly] We can't.

CHRISTINE. Not just now, Jackson.

JACKSON. Is Studdenham and the pups to wait, Mm?

DOT shakes her head violently. But STUDDENHAM is seen already standing in the doorway, with a spaniel puppy in either side-pocket. He comes in, and JACKSON stands waiting behind him.

STUDDENHAM. This fellow's the best, Miss DOT. [He protrudes the right-hand pocket] I was keeping him for my girl—a proper greedy one—takes after his father.

The girls stare at him in silence.

DOT. [Hastily] Thanks, Studdenham, I see.

STUDDENHAM. I won't take 'em out in here. They're rather bold yet.

CHRISTINE. [Desperately] No, no, of course.

STUDDENHAM. Then you think you'd like him, Miss DOT? The other's got a white chest; she's a lady.

[He protrudes the left-hand pocket.]

DOT. Oh, yes! Studdenham; thanks, thanks awfully.

STUDDENHAM. Wonderful faithful creatures; follow you like a woman. You can't shake 'em off anyhow. [He protrudes the right-hand pocket] My girl, she'd set her heart on him, but she'll just have to do without.

DOT. [As though galvanised] Oh! no, I can't take it away from her.

STUDDENHAM. Bless you, she won't mind! That's settled, then. [He turns to the door. To the PUPPY] Ah! would you! Tryin' to wriggle out of it! Regular young limb! [He goes out, followed by JACKSON.]

CHRISTINE. How ghastly!

DOT. [Suddenly catching sight of the book in her hand] "Caste!" [She gives vent to a short sharp laugh.]

The curtain falls.

ACT III

It is five o'clock of the same day. The scene is the smoking-room, with walls of Leander red, covered by old steeplechase and hunting prints. Armchairs encircle a high feruled hearth, in which a fire is burning. The curtains are not yet drawn across mullioned windows, but electric light is burning. There are two doors, leading, the one to the billiard-room, the other to a corridor. BILL is pacing up and down; HAROLD, at the fireplace, stands looking at him with commiseration.

BILL. What's the time?

HAROLD. Nearly five. They won't be in yet, if that's any consolation. Always a tough meet —[softly] as the tiger said when he ate the man.

BILL. By Jove! You're the only person I can stand within a mile of me, Harold.

HAROLD. Old boy! Do you seriously think you're going to make it any better by marrying her? [Bill shrugs his shoulders, still pacing the room.]

BILL. Look here! I'm not the sort that finds it easy to say things.

HAROLD. No, old man.

BILL. But I've got a kind of self-respect though you wouldn't think it!

HAROLD. My dear old chap!

BILL. This is about as low-down a thing as one could have done, I suppose—one's own mother's maid; we've known her since she was so high. I see it now that—I've got over the attack.

HAROLD. But, heavens! if you're no longer keen on her, Bill! Do apply your reason, old boy. There is silence; while BILL again paces up and down.

BILL. If you think I care two straws about the morality of the thing.

HAROLD. Oh! my dear old man! Of course not!

BILL. It's simply that I shall feel such a d-d skunk, if I leave her in the lurch, with everybody knowing. Try it yourself; you'd soon see!

HAROLD. Poor old chap!

BILL. It's not as if she'd tried to force me into it. And she's a soft little thing. Why I ever made such a sickening ass of myself, I can't think. I never meant—

HAROLD. No, I know! But, don't do anything rash, Bill; keep your head, old man!

BILL. I don't see what loss I should be, if I did clear out of the country. [The sound of cannoning billiard balls is heard] Who's that knocking the balls about?

HAROLD. John, I expect. [The sound ceases.]

BILL. He's coming in here. Can't stand that!

As LATTE appears from the billiard-room, he goes hurriedly out.

LATTE. Was that Bill?

HAROLD. Yes.

LATTE. Well?

HAROLD. [Pacing up and down in his turn] Rat in a cage is a fool to him. This is the sort of thing you read of in books, John! What price your argument with Runny now? Well, it's not too late for you luckily.

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