

(The front door bell rings)

There! That's the Parkers. Now, what 'appens?

HENRY. You tell us.

ETHEL (moving behind the sofa; frantically) Get her out the back way, Henry, Henry—do something.

(NICHOLAS moves up c and looks off)

NICHOLAS. Too late, Annie's letting them in. (He moves up r) Mrs PUFFIN. The study! I get shoved in there. Quick, get hold of me! (She pulls up her coat collar)

HENRY. Into the study. (He grabs Mrs Puffin by her coat collar and almost drags her to the door down r) Not a word from you. Keep in there.

Mrs PUFFIN. I told you I'd come in 'ere sometime. 'Ere's where I see that ruddy clock again.

(Mrs PUFFIN exits down r)

HENRY (crossing to c) Not a word, do you understand, from anybody.

JACKY. Sorry, Daddy, I shall use my own discretion.

(ANNIE enters up c and stands aside. PAMELA moves down r)

ANNIE (announcing) Mr Stephen and Mr Victor Parker.

(STEPHEN and VICTOR PARKER enter up c. STEPHEN is a self-made man, and looks it. Business is his whole life, and in that he brooks no interference. He carries a despatch case. VICTOR is shorter than Stephen, of rather solid build, and he gazes on the world through horn-trimmed glasses, in a rather shy and diffident manner. He is altogether a more likeable person than his father. ANNIE exits up c)

STEPHEN. Ah, good evening, Fordyce—Mrs Fordyce. (He shakes hands with Henry and Ethel) Pamela, Jacqueline, Nicholas. (He nods to each of them in turn)

(The Fordyce family, with the exception of Jacky and Nicholas, are all slightly on edge, with frequent glances at the study door. ETHEL has made a strenuous effort to recover, and HENRY is full of false heartiness)

HENRY (very heartily) Sit down everybody. Hullo, Parker, glad to see you.

ETHEL. I'm so glad you both came.

JACKY Hullo.

PAMELA } (together) Good evening, Mr Parker.

NICHOLAS } Evening, sir.

VICTOR. Good evening, everyone. (He moves to Jacky) Hullo, Jacky. (He kisses her very primly)

JACKY. Hullo, Victor.

STEPHEN

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HENRY. Come and sit down, Stephen. Glad to see you. (He ushers Stephen to the easy chair lc)

ETHEL (sitting on the sofa, at the right end of it) Sit here, Victor.

(She pats the seat beside her)

(VICTOR sits c of the sofa. JACKY sits r of Victor on the sofa.

STEPHEN sits in the easy chair lc and puts his case on the floor beside the chair. HENRY moves to the fireplace)

STEPHEN. Well, Jacqueline, how are the preparations getting along for the great day?

JACKY. As a matter of fact, I . . .

HENRY (heartily and hastily) They are going on well, Parker, old man. Extremely well, in fact.

ETHEL. Oh, yes, and the wedding dress looks lovely.

STEPHEN. Glad to hear it. Must see that everything goes off all right. Wouldn't do to have any slips, would it, eh?

HENRY. No, no, no! Definitely not. God forbid! Quite unthinkable. Look—er—look, how about a drink? Nicholas, get the drinks.

(NICHOLAS crosses to the table up l and pours the drinks)

ETHEL. Yes, yes, Nicholas, get the drinks. (She fans herself with her handkerchief) Hasn't it been terribly cold today?

STEPHEN. Cold? I thought it was very warm for the time of the year. According to tonight's paper it's the warmest December day for over ten years.

ETHEL. Oh, dear, is it really?

STEPHEN. Not catching a cold, are you? Can't have the bride's mother with a bad cold before the wedding, can we, Victor?

VICTOR. Oh, no. You haven't the early symptoms, have you, Mrs Fordyce? I am most susceptible to colds.

ETHEL. No, Victor, of course not. No. I just thought—I mean—it's December and . . . Oh, Nicholas, haven't you got those drinks yet?

NICHOLAS. Just coming.

STEPHEN. I suppose you are getting very excited, Jacqueline? JACKY. Well, to be perfectly honest . . .

(NICHOLAS picks up the tray of drinks and moves c)

HENRY (crossing to c) Ah, the drinks at last. (He takes a glass from the tray and hands it to Stephen) Whisky for you, Stephen, old man. He knows your taste. (He fetches the soda syphon from the table up c and takes it to Stephen) Say when. (He splashes soda into Stephen's glass)

(NICHOLAS passes round with the drinks, finishing with Pamela, down r, then he puts the tray on the table r)

(He crosses to Victor) How about you, Victor?

VICTOR. Oh, very weak for me.

HENRY (*splashing soda into Victor's glass*) Ah, then you will be a long time saying "When". (*He moves behind the sofa*)

STEPHEN. But in a very short time saying "I will".  
HENRY. What's that? Oh, yes! (*He laughs heartily. Frantically, in a whisper*) Laugh, Mother. (*He prods Jacky*)

(*The Fordyce family laugh immoderately at this small joke*)

STEPHEN. Here's to the happy pair.

(HENRY crosses up L, puts down the siphon and collects his own drink)

May the arrangements continue to run smoothly.

VICTOR. Thank you, Father. I am sure they will.

(HENRY moves C)

JACKY. I would like to say . . .

(HENRY splutters and coughs over his drink)

ETHEL (*hastily*) Hasn't it been cold today? I mean—warm. Have another drink, Mr Parker.

STEPHEN. Not at the moment, thank you. Are you sure you haven't got a cold coming?

ETHEL. No, really—of course not.

VICTOR. You should eat oranges, you know. People who eat oranges freely are immune from colds and chills.

NICHOLAS. Have an orange, Mother, do. (*He picks up a bowl of oranges from the table up R and moves to L of the sofa*) We have plenty here.

STEPHEN. I'm not sure about oranges. Hot bath last thing at night with a hot whisky and lemon and two aspirins. Finest thing in the world.

ETHEL. Oh, yes—yes . . .

STEPHEN. I should have it tonight. If you felt cold today, we mustn't take any chances, you know. Too near the wedding. Can't have you give Jacqueline a cold, can we?

ETHEL. No, no, certainly not. I will—I mean, I'll have the whisky . . .

STEPHEN. D'you feel all right, Jacqueline?

JACKY. Oh, yes, I feel fine, but . . .

NICHOLAS (*offering the bowl to Jacky*) Suck an orange just in case, dear.

JACKY. No, thank you.

STEPHEN (*to Henry*) How about you, Fordyce? Do you feel all right?

NICHOLAS (*offering the bowl to Henry*) Perhaps you'd like an orange, Father?

HENRY. No, no, I feel fine. Never felt better.

STEPHEN. Good! Treacherous things, colds.

HENRY. Oh, very. Couldn't agree with you more. The amount of man power wasted each year through colds . . .

STEPHEN. Amounts to millions, millions. All because people will not take simple precautions.

NICHOLAS (*offering the bowl to Stephen*) Are you sure you won't have an orange, Mr Parker?

HENRY. Put those blood-oranges down, Nicholas. We're all drinking.

(NICHOLAS replaces the bowl on the table up R)

VICTOR. How is your bridesmaid's frock looking, Pamela?

PAMELA. Oh, lovely, thank you, Victor.

STEPHEN. We mustn't forget the chief bridesmaid, must we?

ETHEL. No, certainly not. I suppose I'll be losing my other little girl, soon.

(PAMELA sits on the right arm of the sofa)

NICHOLAS. Never mind, dear; you've still got your little boy.

VICTOR. Why, have you . . .? I mean—thought Pamela . . . She isn't engaged.

PAMELA. No, of course not. That's only mother's way.

JACKY. Perhaps if I could say . . .

HENRY (*desperately*) Millions, it must be millions. Everywhere. (*There is a pause as the others all look at Henry*)

STEPHEN. What on earth are you talking about, Henry?

HENRY. Colds.

STEPHEN. Yes, but I thought we had settled that.

HENRY (*desperately*) And, do you know, I read once that Eskimos never catch cold. Extraordinary thing, that, isn't it? I mean, living where they do.

VICTOR. Blubber.

HENRY. Oh, yes—yes—blubber—most certainly.

NICHOLAS. But no oranges.

VICTOR. Oh, no, they don't have oranges there.

NICHOLAS. Really? I should hate to be an Eskimo. Fancy never knowing the joy of sucking an orange.

VICTOR. But what you never have you never miss.

HENRY. True, true, very true.

JACKY } I think I ought to tell you that . . .

STEPHEN } Oh, by the way, Fordyce . . . I beg

JACKY } your pardon, Jacqueline—you were saying?

JACKY. I was going to say . . .

(NICHOLAS pulls Jacky's hair and sits on the left arm of the sofa)

No, please. Please go on.

END