

The Vortex

Written by [Noël Coward](#)

Characters

- PRESTON
- HELEN SAVILLE
- PAUNCEFORT QUENTIN
- CLARA HIBBERT
- FLORENCE LANCASTER
- TOM VERYAN
- NICKY LANCASTER
- DAVID LANCASTER
- BUNTY MAINWARING
- BRUCE FAIRLIGHT

ACT 1

*The scene is the drawing-room of **Mrs Lancaster's** flat in London. The colours and decoration are on the verge of being original. The furniture is simple but distinctly expensive.*

*Persons shown are **Helen Saville** and **Pauncefort Quentin**. **Helen Saville** and **Pauncefort Quentin** are shown in by **Preston**. **Helen** is a smartly dressed woman of about thirty. **Pawnie**' is an elderly maiden gentleman.*

Preston I'm expecting Mrs Lancaster in at any moment now, ma'am.

Helen Thank you, Preston, we'll wait a little.

Preston Shall I get you some tea?

Helen No thanks, we've already had some – give me a cigarette, Pawnie, they're in that box on the table.

Pawnie hands her cigarette box. **Preston** goes out.

Pawnie It may be tiresome of me, but I think all this colouring is oppressive.

Helen You make such a 'Fetish' of house decoration, Pawnie.

Pawnie (*wandering round the room*) Not at all, but I do like things to be good and right.

Helen Well, I don't consider the new frieze in your bathroom either good or right.

Pawnie How can you, Helen! It's too marvellous for words. Parelli designed it specially for me.

Helen Personally, it would make me self-conscious to sit in a bath surrounded by frisky gods and goddesses all with such better figures than mine.

Pawnie I find it encouraging. This whole room is so typical of Florence.

Helen In what way?

Pawnie Every way. Look at the furniture.

Helen A little artificial perhaps, but quite harmless.

Pawnie Dear Helen, you're such a loyal friend.

Helen I'm very fond of Florence.

Pawnie We all are. Oh, my God, look at that lamp-shade!

Helen I gave it to her last Christmas.

Pawnie Wasn't that a little naughty of you?

Helen I don't see why, it's extremely pretty.

Pawnie Too unrestrained. Such a bad example for the servants. (*He takes up frame from desk.*)

Who's this boy?

Helen Tom Veryan. You must have seen him.

Pawnie Florence's past, present or future?

Helen Present.

Pawnie He has that innocent look that never fails to attract elderly women.

Helen Don't be a cat.

Pawnie I wasn't meaning Florence, she's too divine to be in any marked category.

Helen I wonder.

Pawnie Oh, yes, Helen, deathless sort of magnetism, you know.

Helen I often wonder what will happen to Florence eventually.

Pawnie My dear, I'm far too occupied in wondering what's going to happen to me to worry about other people.

Helen I've always thought your course was quite clear, Pawnie.

Pawnie However offensive that remark was intended to be, Helen, I shall take it in the most complimentary spirit.

Helen I'm sure you will.

Pawnie I expect Florence will just go on and on, then suddenly become quite beautifully old, and go on and on still more.

Helen It's too late now for her to become beautifully old, I'm afraid. She'll have to be young indefinitely.

Pawnie I don't suppose she'll mind that, but it's trying for David.

Helen And fiendish for Nicky.

Pawnie Oh, no, my dear, you're quite wrong there. I'm sure Nicky doesn't care a damn.

Helen It's difficult to tell with Nicky.

Pawnie He's divinely selfish; all amusing people are.

Helen Did you hear him play in Paris?

Pawnie Yes.

Helen Well?

Pawnie Erratic – one or two things perfect, but he's slovenly.

Helen He only takes things seriously in spurts, but still he's very young.

Pawnie Do you really think that's a good excuse.

Helen No, I'm afraid not, especially when so much depends on it.

Pawnie What does depend on it?

Helen Everything – his life's happiness.

Pawnie Don't be so terribly intense, dear.

Helen It's true.

Pawnie I'm quite sure Nicky will be perfectly happy as long as he goes on attracting people; he loves being attractive.

Helen Naturally, he's Florence's son.

Pawnie Such an exciting thing to be.

Helen You don't believe Nicky's got anything in him at all, do you?

Pawnie (*lightly*) I don't think it matters, anyway.

Helen I do.

Pawnie But you've got a loving nature, Helen. I always knew it.

Helen Nicky hasn't had a chance.

Pawnie Nonsense – he's had everything he wanted ever since the day he was born, and he'll go on wasting his opportunities until he dies.

Helen Quite possibly.

Pawnie Well, there you are then.

Helen He may have had everything he wanted, but he's had none of the things he really needs.

Pawnie Are you talking socially or spiritually.

Helen You're quite right, Pawnie, you wouldn't be so beautifully preserved if you'd wasted any of your valuable time or sincerity.

Pawnie I forgive you for that, Helen, freely.

Helen Thank you so much.

Pawnie You must realise one thing, everyone is sacrificed to Florence – it's as it should be – of course, she's a couple of hundred years too late – she ought to have been a flaunting, intriguing King's mistress, with black page boys and jade baths and things too divine—

Enter Preston.

Preston (*announcing*) Miss Hibbert.

Enter Clara Hibbert – she is affected, but quite well dressed.

Preston *goes out.*

Clara My dears. Isn't Florence back yet?

Helen No, we're waiting for her.

Pawnie You look harassed, Clara.

Clara I am harassed.

Helen Why?

Clara I'm singing to-night for Laura Tennant – she's giving a dreadful reception at her dreadful house for some dreadful Ambassador—

Pawnie How dreadful!

Clara No one will listen to me, of course – they'll all be far too busy avoiding the Cup and searching for the Champagne.

Helen What are you singing?

Clara One Gabriel Faure, two Reynaldo Hahn's and an Aria.

Pawnie Which Aria?

Clara I can't think, but my accompanist will know – I've got a frightful headache.

Helen Why don't you take off your hat?

Clara My dear, I daren't – I've just had my hair done – I suppose you haven't got a 'Cachet Faivre', either of you?

Helen No, but Florence has, I expect – Preston will know where they are – ring the bell, Pawnie.

Pawnie (*ringing bell*) My poor Clara – I do hope your singing tonight will justify the fuss you're making this afternoon.

Clara Don't be so *brutal*, Pawnie.

Helen Is Gregory going with you?

Clara Of *course* – I *never* sing unless he's there – he gives me such marvellous moral support.

Pawnie 'Moral' is hardly the word I should have chosen, dear.

Enter Preston.

Helen Do you know if Mrs Lancaster has any 'Cachet Faivre' anywhere?

Preston Yes, ma'am – I think so.

Clara Do get me one, Preston, I'm suffering *tortures*.

Preston Very well, miss.

She goes out.

Pawnie Preston has such wonderful poise, hasn't she?

Helen She needs it in this house.

Clara I do wish Florence would hurry up. I want to borrow her green fan. I've got a new Patou frock that positively *demands* it.

Helen She can't be long now.

Clara I suppose I daren't ask Preston for the fan and creep away with it?

Helen I shouldn't, if I were you – Florence is very touchy over that sort of thing.

Clara She promised it to me ages ago.

Pawnie Surely there isn't such a desperate hurry? You won't be singing until about half-past eleven.

Clara (*petulantly*) My dear, I've got to *rehearse* – I don't know a *word*—

Re-enter Preston with a 'Cachet Faivre' and a glass of water.

Clara You're a *Saint*, Preston – thank you a *thousand* times—

Pawnie Soak it a little first, dear, or you'll choke, and I should *detest* that.

Clara *soaks 'Cachet' and then swallows it.* **Preston** *goes out.*

Clara Now I must lie down *flat* – get out of the way, Helen.

Pawnie Perhaps you'd like us *both* to go *right* out of the room and sit in the *hall*?

Clara No, Pawnie, I should never expect the least consideration from you.

She lies down flat on the divan, Helen arranges cushions for her.

Clara Thank you, Helen darling – I shall always come to you whenever I'm ill.

Helen That *will* be nice.

Enter Florence Lancaster followed by Tom Veryan. Florence is brilliantly dressed almost to the point of being 'outré'. Her face still retains the remnants of great beauty. Tom is athletic and good looking. One feels he is good at games and extremely bad at everything else.

Florence Helen – Pawnie, have you been here long?

Pawnie No, only a few hours.

Florence My dear. I'm so frightfully sorry – we've been held up for ages in the traffic. Davis is a congenital idiot. Always manages to get to a turning just as the policeman puts out his hand. No initiative whatever. What's happened to Clara? Has she been run over?

Clara No, dear, I've got a frightful head.

Florence Pawnie, you know Tom, don't you? – Tom Veryan, Mr Quentin, I'm sure you'll adore one another.

Tom (*shaking hands*) How are you?

Pawnie Very well, thank you – how sweet of you to ask me?

Florence Is there anything I can do, Clara?

Clara Yes, dear, lend me your green fan for to-night.

Florence All right – but you *won't* get too carried away with it, will you, dear? I should hate the feathers to come out. Does anyone want any tea?

Helen No thanks, dear.

Florence Cocktails, then?

Pawnie It's too early.

Florence (*ringing bell*) It's never too early for a cocktail.

Clara I should like to go quite quietly into a Convent, and never see anybody again ever—

Pawnie Gregory would be bored stiff in a Convent.

Florence We've just been to a most frightful Charity *matinée*. Nothing but inaudible speeches from dreary old actors, and leading ladies nudging one another all over the stage. (**Preston enters**).

Cocktails, Preston, and ask Barker to wrap up my green fan for Miss Hibbert to take away with her.

Preston Very good, ma'am.

She goes out.

Clara You're an angel, Florence – I think I'll sit up now.

Florence Do, dear, then Tom will be able to sit down.

Clara (*sitting up*) I really do feel most peculiar.

Pawnie You look far from normal, dear.

Clara If Pawnie's rude to me any more I shall burst into tears.

Florence Tom, give me a cigarette.

Pawnie Here are some.

Florence No, Tom has a special rather hearty kind that I adore.

Clara Lend me your lip stick, Helen, mine has sunk down into itself.

Helen Here you are.

Clara What a lovely colour! I look far prettier than I feel.

Florence (*to Tom*) Thank you, angel.

Clara I shan't be able to get down to the house until Saturday evening, Florence – I'm seeing Gregory off to Newcastle.

Pawnie Why Newcastle?

Clara His home's just near there – isn't it too awful for him?

Florence Well, wire me the time of your train, won't you?

Clara Of course, dear.

Helen You're smelling divinely, Florence. What is it?

Florence (*flicking her handkerchief*) It is good, isn't it?

Pawnie 'Narcisse Noir' of Caron, I use it.

Florence Yes, you would, Pawnie.

Re-enter Preston with parcel.

Preston Here is the fan, miss.

Clara (*taking it*) Thank you so much – you are sweet, Florence. A fan gives me such a feeling of *security* when I'm singing modern stuff. (**Preston goes out.**) I must rush now—

Florence Don't you want a cocktail before you go?

Clara No, darling – I should only hiccup all the evening. Goodbye, you've been *such* a comfort – good-bye, Helen – Pawnie, you will be nicer to me over the week-end, won't you? I shall be so depressed, what with Gregory going away and everything – Good-bye, Tom – I shall dine in bed and give way at every pore—

She goes out.

Pawnie Poor Clara – she eternally labours under the delusion that she really matters.

Helen We all do that a little.

Florence (*laughing*) You're awfully cruel to her, Pawnie.

Pawnie She upsets my vibrations.

Florence (*before glass*) I've taken a sudden hatred to this hat. (*She takes it off.*) That's better – are you going to *The New Elaine* to-night, either of you?

Helen I 'm not – but Pawnie is, of course.

Pawnie It's going to be *amazing* – what a cast, my dear! Marvellous Selwyn Steele, Nora Dean, and that perfect woman, Lily Burfield—

Helen I can't stand her, she always over-acts.

Pawnie (*incensed*) How *can* you, Helen! Did you see her in *Simple Faith*?

Helen Yes, unfortunately.

Pawnie Oh, you really are too tiresome for words!

Helen Her technique creaks like machinery.

Pawnie It's sacrilege – she's too, too marvellous.

Enter Preston with a tray of cocktails. Everyone helps themselves.

Florence What do you think about it, Tom?

Tom I've never seen her.

Florence Yes, you have. About three months ago, at the *Comedy*.

Tom Oh. ... I don't remember.

Pawnie Don't remember! An artist like that! Good God, it's agony!

Helen You'll look awfully tired at dinner-time, Pawnie, if you don't calm down a little.

Florence This is special – my own invention.

Helen Absolutely delicious.

Tom A bit too sweet.

Florence Tom, *darling*, don't be so taciturn – he's always taciturn after a *matinée*.

Pawnie When's Nicky coming back?

Florence To-morrow, isn't it too divine? He's been away for a whole year, but I saw him for a moment on my way through Paris last month.

Pawnie Has he been working hard?

Florence I suppose so, but you know what Nicky is – bless his heart!

Pawnie I heard him play at Yvonne Mirabeau's.

Florence She's a loathsome woman, isn't she?

Helen Not as bad as that.

Pawnie She's a half-wit. I can't bear half-wits.

Florence She goes on so dreadfully about things – devastating.

Pawnie Funny Nicky liking her so much.

Florence Only because she keeps on saying how wonderful he is – that always appeals to Nicky.

Pawnie How old is he now?

Florence Twenty-four. Isn't it absurd to think I have such a grown-up son – old General Fenwick said last Thursday that— (*The telephone rings, she goes to it*). Hallo – hallo – yes, my dear, how are you? – Yes, so am I, simply worn out. No, when? How perfectly marvellous.... No, dear, it's a prescription: but I can let you have a little in a jar.... Quite easy, all you do is just rub it on at night.... Don't be so silly ... not in the least, if you send the car round that will be all right.... Very well.... Good-bye, darling. (*She hangs up receiver*). I give Clara Hibbert ten for stupidity, don't you, Helen?

Helen A hundred and ten.

Pawnie Ten's the limit.

Tom I say, Florence – I think I'd better be getting along if I've got to be dressed and back here by half-past seven—

Florence You've got half an hour.

Tom That's not very much.

Florence The car's outside ... take it and send it straight back.

Pawnie Can it drop me, Florence dear? I always feel so much richer in your car than anyone else's.

Florence Of course, Pawnie.

The telephone rings again.

Florence (*at telephone*) Hallo ... yes ... speaking. ... How do you do—?

Pawnie Good-bye, Helen, it's been divine—

Helen Ring me up at tea-time to-morrow.

Florence... How perfectly sweet of you ... now, now really ... well, naturally, if you persist in saying such charming things ... (*laughing gaily*) ... what nonsense....

Pawnie Good-bye, Florence—

Florence (*she puts her hand over mouthpiece*) It's that awful General Fenwick.... Good-bye, Pawnie dear, you're coming down to the house on Friday?

Pawnie Yes, too lovely—

Florence Helen's coming by the five o'clock – you'd better travel together.

Pawnie Perfect. (*To Tom.*) Are you ready?

Tom Quite.

Pawnie (*as they go out*) You can drop me first, can't you? I'm not as young as I was—

Florence (*at telephone*) Please forgive me – people rushing in and out, this house grows more like a railway station every day ... now, General, that was a deliberate compliment. (*She laughs.*)

Ridiculous man ... very well.... good-bye. (*She hangs up receiver.*) My God, ten for dreariness!

Helen He's not a bad old thing.

Florence No, but he tries to be, and that's what's so frightful. (*Arranging her hair before glass.*) I

look like Death.... Isn't Tom a darling?

Helen Yes, dear, without being aggressively brilliant.

Florence I'm afraid, Helen, you're getting rather bitter.

Helen Nonsense.

Florence It's silly to be sarcastic about Tom.

Helen It's better than being maudlin about him.

Florence I don't know what you mean, dear. I'm not in the least maudlin, and never have been about anybody. I sometimes wish I could be – I'm too hard.

Helen (*taking a cigarette*) Tom will let you down.

Florence Let me down? Why ... how ... I don't understand—

Helen You're more in love with him than he is with you.

Florence Don't be so *absurd*, Helen.

Helen It's true.

Florence (*complacently*) He adores me – worships me – he's never seen anyone like me before in his life. I'm something strange ... exotic—

Helen You're more in love with him than he is with you.

Florence You're getting on my nerves to-day, Helen.

Helen You do see that I'm right, don't you?

Florence If you knew some of the things he's said to me.

Helen I can guess them.

Florence That boy was utterly unawakened until he met me.

Helen He's very young.

Florence I've taught him – everything.

Helen Or nothing.

Florence Helen, I believe you're jealous.

Helen Don't be a fool.

Florence I wish I hadn't this fatal knack of seeing through people.

Helen How's David?

Florence I don't know – he ought to be home soon.

Helen Doesn't he ever suspects anything?

Florence Of course not – he adores me.

Helen It seems so strange not to see—

Florence I'm devoted to David – I'd do anything for him, anything in the world – but he's grown old, and I've kept young – it does muddle things up so. I can't help having a temperament, can I?

Helen Temperament.... No.

Florence David's always loved me and never understood me – you see, I'm such an extraordinary *mixture*. I have so many *sides* to my character. I adore being at home and running the house and looking after David and Nicky—

Helen You don't exactly overdo it.

Florence Well, Nicky's been away for such ages. Also, one must be in London for the season. You can't expect me to bury myself in the country indefinitely – I shall be there practically all through the spring and summer.

Helen Lovely tennis parties and cricket weeks and things—

Florence Certainly.

Helen (*kissing her*) You're a divine creature, Florence.

Florence (*basking*) Am I? (*The telephone rings.*) Hallo – yes – speaking. (*To Helen in a whisper.*) It's Inez Zulieta, I never went to her recital.... Inez, *darling*, I never recognised your voice ... didn't you get my note? ... it was absolutely true; I was in agony.... Inez, don't be angry, if you only knew how I longed for the sound of your wonderful, wonderful voice *darling* ... Inez, don't be so cruel ... tomorrow, then. (*She hangs up receiver*). I do wish Inez wasn't so persistent.

Helen You never stop encouraging her.

Florence Oh, Helen, I'm so tired of everyone.

Helen Except Tom?

Florence Yes, except Tom; he's such a *darling*.

Helen How do you think he and Nicky will get on?

Florence Marvellously – Tom loves music.

Helen He says he does.

Florence My dear, I took him to that Russian thing the other day and he sat entranced from beginning to end.

Helen Poor Nicky!

Florence Why do you say that?

Helen Because I sometimes feel it.

Florence (*suddenly furious*) Oh, I wonder why we're such friends – we're so opposite – you don't understand me a bit. I used to think you did, but you've been different lately – unsympathetic.

Helen No, I haven't.

Florence Yes, you have – over Tom – I believe you're in love with him yourself.

Helen (*smiling*) No – it isn't that.

Florence Anyhow, you can't bear him being in love with me.

Helen I don't think he is – really. I quite realise that he *was* very violently infatuated, but that is wearing off a bit now. I'm beginning to see him as he is....

Florence No, no, it's not true – you don't understand—

Helen We *are* friends, Florence, though we're so 'opposite'. Do you really know the truth – inside you? Or is all this shrill vanity real?

Florence What's the matter with you?

Helen You're ten years older than I am, but when I'm your age I shall be twenty years older than you.

Florence *Darling*, how deliciously involved – what *can* you mean by that?

Helen I mean, I think it's silly not to grow old when the time comes.

She rises and goes towards door.

Florence (*outraged*) Helen! (*There is suddenly heard a violent knocking at the front door.*) What on earth is that?

There is a noise outside, then the door bursts open and Nicky enters. He is extremely well dressed in travelling clothes. He is tall and pale, with thin, nervous hands.

Florence Nicky.

Nicky Mother.

He embraces her.

Florence But I'd no idea – I thought you were coming tomorrow.

Nicky No, to-day – I wrote to you.

Florence I'm terribly, terribly excited.

Nicky Helen, dear, how are you?

He kisses her.

Helen Splendid, Nicky.

Florence I can't get over your arriving like this.... I never realized —

Nicky Silly ... you're looking awfully well.

Florence Am I?

Nicky Wonderful, as usual.

Florence I was talking to George Morrison only last Thursday —

Nicky The man who wrote that fearful book?

Florence It isn't a fearful book, it's brilliant — anyhow, he absolutely refused to believe that I had a grown-up son.

Helen My dears, I must fly.

Nicky Don't go yet.

Helen I must — I'm hours late as it is.

Nicky Be a little later, then.

Florence Remember, five o'clock train on Friday.

Nicky Oh, is she coming down to the house — divine?

Helen Yes, if Florence is still speaking to me — good-bye.

She goes out.

Nicky Have you been having a scene?

Florence No, dear.

Nicky She's a darling — Helen —

Florence Extremely stupid and tactless sometimes.

Nicky It doesn't feel as though I'd been away at all.

Florence I've missed you appallingly — we had such a short time together in Paris — did you enjoy all my letters?

Nicky I adored them — so did John Bagot. I used to read most of them aloud to him. He's mad on you, saw your pictures in the *Tatler*, or something, and fell in love with it.

Florence Is he nice?

Nicky He's grand.

Florence We must all dine at the Embassy. When is he coming to England?

Nicky Not until after Christmas.

Florence You must see my new photographs, they're wonderful.

She takes large packet from desk.

Nicky It's heavenly – being back.

Florence Look.

Nicky I don't like that one.

Florence How can you, Nicky! – Tom likes that one best of all.

Nicky Who's Tom?

Florence Tom Veryan – he's a dear, you'll like him frightfully – you know – the very nicest type of Englishman.

Nicky I hate the very nicest type of Englishman.

Florence Don't be tiresome, Nicky, he's only twenty-four, and they all think so well of him —

Nicky All who?

Florence All his officers and people, he's in the Brigade.

Nicky (*holding photograph away from him and scrutinising it through half-closed eyes*) Now that one really is *enchanting* – they've got your hair *beautifully* – Oh, yes, my dear, it's perfect.

Florence (*complacently*) It *is* good – she's sweet – Madame Henderson, she simply won't hear of my paying for these – she says it's quite sufficient to be allowed to exhibit them in the window.

Nicky Is anyone dining this evening?

Florence No – Oh, dear, I'd forgotten – I'm dining out with Tom.

Nicky Oh – I see.

Florence Your first night home, too – how perfectly fiendish. What a fool I am to have muddled it up.

Nicky It doesn't matter, darling.

Florence Oh, but it *does*. I wonder if we could get another seat —

Nicky Seat, what for?

Florence We're going to the first night of *The New Elaine*, it's going to be marvellous.

Nicky Who's in it?

Florence Nora Dean and Selwyn Steele —

Nicky Oh, God!

Florence It's silly of you *always* to jeer at Selwyn Steele. He's a brilliant actor, if only he could get away from his wife....

Nicky I couldn't bear him to-night, anyway, I'm tired. Is father home yet?

Florence No, I don't think so. Oh, I do feel such a beast —

Nicky Don't be silly — honestly, I don't mind a bit.

Florence I know — you have a nice quiet dinner here and join us at the Embassy afterwards.

Nicky Is it a late night?

Florence Yes, they play the most heavenly tune there now — Tom always makes them do it over and over again — I'll put it on —

She goes to the gramophone.

Nicky How's Iris?

Florence My dear, don't speak of her.

Nicky Why — what's she done?

Florence She's been absolutely foul.

Nicky In what way?

Florence Every way — I never trusted her, luckily — Thank God I've got instincts about people — listen, isn't this marvellous — She said the most filthy things to Gloria Craig about me — I always knew she was insanely jealous, but there are limits. I loathe being at people's beck and call.... Come and dance.

Nicky (*as they dance*) I'm sorry you've rowed — I rather liked her —

Florence Only because she kept on saying how wonderful you were.... She doesn't know a thing about music really.

Nicky Oh, yes, she does.

Florence It's merely bluff — all that appreciation — *Darling*, how oddly you're dancing.

Nicky It's probably because we haven't danced together for so long....

Florence Anyhow, now she's gone off to Monte Carlo with Violet Fenchurch — silly fool —

Enter David Lancaster. He is an elderly grey-haired pleasant man.

David (*delighted*) Nicky — my boy —

Nicky (*kissing him*) Hallo, father —

David I thought — Florence said — to-morrow —

Nicky Mother muddled it up.

David You look rather tired.

Nicky I'm splendid — how's everything?

David The same as usual. I've made lots of improvements down at the house.

Florence David thinks and talks of nothing but the farm —

David It's beginning to pay a bit – Peterson's an awfully good man.

Nicky We'll make a grand tour of it on Sunday.

David Have you enjoyed yourself in Paris?

Nicky Oh, yes, rather – it's a splendid place to work.

David It never struck me that way quiet, but still –

Florence Sophie de Mollignac said Nicky's playing had improved wonderfully.

David I'm so glad, Nicky.

Nicky I've been doing some Spanish stuff lately.

David I wish I knew more about it.

Nicky Never mind, father.

David Come to my room and talk, I can't bear that thing –

Florence Father's such a beast, he never will dance with me.

David Is the *Evening News* anywhere about?

Nicky Yes, here.

He gives it to him.

David I'm so glad you're home again, Nicky – don't forget – come and talk....

He goes out.

Florence David's so much happier in the country.

Nicky Why on earth doesn't he retire and live at the house for good?

Florence Work has become such a habit with him – he's always hated giving up habits.

Nicky Mother – I've got something rather important to tell you.

Florence Darling, how thrilling! What is it?

Nicky I am engaged to be married.

Florence What!

Nicky Practically – as much as one can be these days.

Florence Nicky!

Nicky Don't look so stricken.

Florence But, Nicky – I never sort of visualised you being engaged, or married, or anything.

Nicky Why not?

Florence You're not old enough.

Nicky I'm twenty-four.

Florence You don't look it.... Thank God!

Nicky What do you really feel about it, mother?

Florence *Darling* – I hardly know what to say – you've sprung it on me so suddenly – who is she?

Nicky A girl called Bunty Mainwaring.

Florence What a silly name!

Nicky It isn't at all – it's very attractive.

Florence Is she an actress, or a student, or what?

Nicky Neither – she is what is technically termed a 'lady'.

Florence Do you think she'll like me?

Nicky She went mad over your photograph.

Florence Which one?

Nicky The 'looking out of the window' one.

Florence That really is one of the best I've ever had done.

Nicky She said you had the face of an heroic little boy.

Florence What a *divine* thing to say!

She glances at herself in the glass.

Nicky She does say divine things – she's supremely intelligent.

Florence Is she in Paris?

Nicky No, she came over with me to-day.

Florence Where does she live?

Nicky Just round the corner in Carbury Square.

Florence Near the Churchingtons?

Nicky It's her mother's house, but her mother's away just now, so I asked her to change quickly and come on here.

Florence Nicky!

Nicky Why not? I wanted you to see her as soon as possible.

Florence (*realising parental responsibility*) It's an awful shock, you know.

Nicky Nonsense, mother – you're quite excited about it, really.

Florence (*with determination*) I shall be charming to her.

Nicky Then she'll adore you at once – probably too much, and I shall be jealous.

Florence You'd better both dine here together and come on to the Embassy – how old is she?

Nicky Twenty-three.

Florence What does she do?

Nicky Nothing much – she writes things occasionally.

Florence Where did you meet her?

Nicky First of all at a party at Olive Lloyd-Kennedy's.

Florence I can't bear Olive Lloyd-Kennedy – she's a cat.

Nicky Then I met her again at Marion Fawcett's – a frightful sort of reception affair – she was staying with her.

Florence She seems to move exclusively among my worst enemies – is she pretty?

Nicky I don't know – I haven't really noticed.

Florence (*with a touch of real feeling*) Nicky, darling, I do feel so extraordinary about it.

Nicky Why extraordinary?

Florence It's a milestone, isn't it – you being engaged? A definite milestone? (*She catches sight of herself.*) Look at my nose. (*She powders it.*) I do hope she'll like me – I must go and dress now, Tom is fetching me at half-past seven – bring her to my room when she comes.

Nicky Don't go for a minute.

Florence I must, really – Tom will be furious.

Nicky Oh, damn Tom!

Florence Oh, Nicky, *don't* go and take one of your tiresome prejudices against him.

Nicky (*smiling*) All right, I'll try not to.

Florence He's frightfully good-looking.

Nicky Oh!

Florence And he adores music.

Nicky Now, then, mother —

Florence He does, honestly.

Nicky Good.

Florence And he dances beautifully.

Nicky I shall never stop dancing with him.

Florence And he's so good at games.

Nicky He sounds adorable.

Florence Of course, he needs knowing.

Nicky So do I.

Florence You will make an effort though, darling, won't you? For my sake?

Nicky Yes, mother.

Florence And we'll all have a divine time together, Tom and me and you and what's her name —

Nicky Bunty.

Florence Oh, yes, of course, Bunty.

Front door bell rings.

Nicky This is her, I expect.

Florence Do you feel wonderful about her?

Nicky Yes.

Florence It is thrilling, isn't it — being in love?

Nicky (*frowning a little*) Yes.

Florence Your father was right — you look awfully tired, Nicky.

Nicky What nonsense! I feel grand.

Enter Preston.

Preston (*announcing*) Miss Mainwaring.

Bunty *comes in, very self-assured and well dressed. She is more attractive than pretty in a boyish sort of way.*

Preston *goes out.*

Nicky Bunty. You have been quick.

Bunty I've simply flown.

Nicky Bunty ... here is mother....

Bunty Oh!

Florence (*taking both her hands*) This is frightfully exciting, isn't it?

She kisses her.

Nicky I've told her.

Bunty Are you furious?

Florence Of course not — why should I be? 'Specially now.

Bunty It's absolutely incredible, you being Nicky's mother.

Florence Am I anything like you thought I'd be?

Bunty Yes, exactly — but I couldn't believe it until I saw you.

Florence Take off that perfectly divine cloak and have a cigarette — I've got to rush and dress now, because I'm *terribly* late, but you're dining here with Nicky and joining Tom Veryan and me at the Embassy afterwards.

Bunty Tom Veryan ...?

Florence Yes, do you know him?

Bunty I did when I was a child – if it's the same one.

She takes off her cloak.

Florence (*effusively*) Nicky – I don't feel extraordinary about it any more – I'm *delighted*.

Nicky Angel.

Florence Perhaps Bunty would like to come down to the house on Friday for the week-end?

Nicky Oh, yes, marvellous.

Bunty It's awfully sweet of you, Mrs Lancaster.

Florence You must call me Florence – I can't bear Mrs Lancaster. I must fly, Tom will be here at any moment – that's him on the desk.

Bunty (*going over to photograph*) Yes – it is the same one.

Florence How too divine ...

Telephone rings.

'Hallo – yes, speaking – Elsa, darling, how are you ... What? ... to-night ... how perfectly heavenly, of course, I'd adore it ... listen, Nicky's just back from Paris, can he come too with Bunty Mainwaring – yes, he's here. – See you to-night, dear....Here, Nicky, talk to Elsa....

*She snatches up her hand-bag and fur coat and kisses **Bunty** effusively.*

I'm so glad about you and Nicky – it's too wonderful.

She rushes out.

Nicky (*at telephone*) Hallo, Elsa ... I'd no idea you were in London. I'm terribly thrilled – my dear, you haven't ... all those lovely tunes you played to me in Paris? ... *how amazing, I am glad* ... have you done anything with that Tango? ... You must play it to-night, I want Bunty to hear it.... It is perfect, isn't it? ... Good-bye, dear. (*He hangs up the receiver.*) Bunty.

Bunty What?

Nicky I'm terribly happy.

Bunty So am I.

Nicky Do you remember how we planned all this – coming home together – and breaking it to mother – and everything?

Bunty Rather.

Nicky Do you really like her?

Bunty I adore her – she's a perfect angel.

Nicky I told her your 'heroic little boy' line – she loved it.

Bunty It's true, you know – rather defiant too – laughing at Fate.

Nicky Doesn't Paris seem ages away now?

Bunty A different life altogether.

Nicky That nasty little bit of channel is such an enormous gulf, really. Did you put that dress on on purpose?

Bunty (*smiling*) Perhaps.

Nicky You are a devil.

Bunty It's such fun being reminded of things.

Nicky And such agony, too.

Bunty Nicky, darling – why agony?

Nicky It's always agony being in love, and I started loving you in that dress.

Bunty Did you?

Nicky Don't pretend you didn't know.

Bunty I suppose one always knows – really.

Nicky From the very first moment.

Bunty Yes.

Nicky A sort of spark.

Bunty Your playing helped a lot.

Nicky I meant it to.

Bunty Calculating pig.

Nicky Have a cigarette?

Bunty All right.

He hands her box, and she takes one.

Nicky (*lighting her cigarette*) I wish we weren't so free.

Bunty Why? What do you mean?

Nicky I feel I should like to elope, or something violently romantic like that.

Bunty (*laughing*) There wouldn't be much point in it now, would there?

Nicky Perhaps not. How much do you love me?

Bunty I don't know.

Nicky It's fun analysing one's emotions.

Bunty Marvellous fun.

Nicky And a comfort, too, when things go wrong – but it kills sentiment stone dead.

Bunty A good job too.

Nicky You're frightfully hard, Bunty.

Bunty Am I?

Nicky Much harder than me – really.

Bunty You've got so much hysteria.

Nicky I can't help it.

Bunty Of course not, it's your temperament. You burst out suddenly.

Nicky Not so badly as I used to.

Bunty You're growing older.

Nicky God, yes; isn't it foul?

Bunty Hell, my dear.

Nicky It's funny how mother's generation always longed to be old when they were young, and we strain every nerve to keep young.

Bunty That's because we see what's coming so much more clearly.

Nicky Wouldn't it be terrible to know *exactly* – I feel frightened sometimes.

Bunty Why?

Nicky We're all so hectic and nervy....

Bunty It doesn't matter – it probably only means we shan't live so long....

Nicky (*suddenly*) Shut up – shut up....

Enter Preston.

Preston (*announcing*) Mr Veryan.

Enter Tom. Nicky greets him and shakes hands. Exit Preston.

Nicky How are you? – I'm Nicky – I came over to-day instead of to-morrow....

Tom Oh!

Nicky Do you know Bunty Mainwaring?

Tom Bunty – I say – I am glad.

They shake hands warmly.

Nicky We'd better have some cocktails.

He goes to the door and shouts.

Preston ... bring us some cocktails....

Tom This *is* jolly – I didn't know what had become of you.

Bunty I've been living in Paris a good deal.

Tom How many years ago is it since we ...

Bunty During the War – the last time I saw you, you were at Sandhurst.

Nicky Such a pretty place.

Tom You've hardly altered a bit – more grown up, of course.

Nicky All this is most affecting.

Tom Bunty and I used to know one another awfully well.

Nicky What fun!

Bunty (*warningly*) Nicky...

Nicky But it is – it's thrilling – there's nothing so charming as a reunion.

Bunty Nicky and I have been travelling all day.... Boats and trains get on his nerves....

Nicky When the cocktails come, tell Preston to bring mine to me in father's room.

Bunty Nicky, don't be so silly.

Nicky Surely it's not silly to want to talk to my aged father after a year's debauch in Paris? I fail to see why you should have the monopoly of reunions.

Bunty Well, don't be long.

Tom Cheerio!

Nicky (*crossly*) Oh, God!

He goes out.

Tom What's up?

Bunty These temperamental musicians.

Tom Silly ass.

Bunty He isn't really – he's only jealous.

Tom Why ... is he ...?

Bunty We're by way of being engaged.

Tom What?

Bunty Why not?

Tom Are you ... are you in love with him?

Bunty (*lightly*) Yes – isn't it damnable?

Tom Good Lord!

He laughs.

Bunty What are you laughing at?

Tom It seems so funny you being in love with that sort of chap.

Bunty What do you mean by 'that sort of chap'?

Tom Oh – I don't know, that type seems so unlike you.

Bunty Type?

Tom Yes, you know – up in the air – effeminate.

Bunty You're more bucolic than you used to be, Tom.

Tom Here, I say ...

Enter Preston with cocktails.

Bunty Will you please take Mr Nicky's in to him in his father's room?

Preston Yes, miss.

Tom Is Mrs Lancaster nearly ready?

Preston I think so, sir.

Tom Ask her to hurry – we shall be late.

Preston Yes, sir.

She goes out.

Bunty I can laugh now.

She does so.

Tom Why?

Bunty I've just realised something.

Tom What?

Bunty We shall meet again – over the week-end.

Tom Are you coming down to the house?

Bunty Yes.

Tom That's splendid – come for a tramp Sunday morning and we'll talk.

Bunty What about?

Tom Oh, lots of things – old times.

Bunty (*lifting her cocktail*) Old times, Tom.

Tom (*doing the same*) Cheerio!

CURTAIN

ACT 2

The scene is the hall of Mrs Lancaster's house, about forty miles from London.

When the curtain rises it is just after dinner on the Sunday of the week-end party – the gramophone is going, and there is a continual buzz of conversation. Clara Hibbert, an emaciated soprano, is dancing with Tom Veryan, Helen with Pawnie, and Nicky with Bunty. Florence is seated on the club fender talking intellectually with Bruce Fairlight, an earnest dramatist, the squalor of whose plays is much appreciated by those who live in comparative luxury.

There must be a feeling of hectic amusement and noise, and the air black with cigarette smoke and superlatives. During the first part of the scene everyone must appear to be talking at once, but the actual lines spoken while dancing must be timed to reach the audience as the speakers pass near the footlights. This scene will probably be exceedingly difficult to produce, but is absolutely indispensable.

Helen It's much too fast, Nicky.

Tom Do slow down a bit.

Nicky It's the place that's marked on the record.

Pawnie I've never danced well since the War, I don't know why.

Florence But your last act was so strong, when she came in half mad with fright and described everything minutely.

Bruce I try to write as *honestly* as possible.

Clara I gave her three for manners, but seven for charm, because I had to be a *little* nice!

Tom I thought she was rather a decent sort.

Bunty No, but really, Nicky, his technique completely annihilated his inspiration.

Nicky Not with Debussy and Ravel, with the older Masters, yes; but he's probably tired of them.

Bunty That's so stupid, I think.

Helen My dear, it was the most 'Chic' thing you've ever seen, but unfortunately the wrong colour.

Pawnie Marion Ferris had that Poiret model copied in the most frightful blue!

Clara I believe my shoe's coming off.

Tom Shall we stop?

Clara No, it's all right.

Florence I wonder if you could gouge this cigarette-end out of the holder for me?

Bruce I'll try (*He does so.*) I always smoke a pipe when I'm working.

Florence How soothing!

Bunty I suppose one can never really judge properly from a recital.

Nicky Not with him, because he's not dramatic enough.

Bunty Dramatic pianists make me uncomfortable.

Helen Pawnie, your tongue grows more venomous every day.

Pawnie (*giggling*) Well, I had to say something – anyhow, it was true.

Helen Especially about her ankles.

Pawnie My dear, yes!

They both laugh.

The record comes to an end, and Nicky begins to change it. Everyone talks and laughs.

Clara You must come next Sunday week.

Tom Thanks awfully, I'd love to.

Clara I'm only singing ballads, but you know what Sunday concerts are.

Tom Oh, yes, rather.

Clara (*to Nicky*) What's on the other side?

Nicky 'You've got the cutest ears and eyes and nose'.

Pawnie Do put on 'Spoony Moon in Upper Carolina'.

Helen No, don't put it on, Nicky, play it yourself; you always make a gramophone go too quickly.

Bunty Yes, go on, Nicky.

Florence (*refusing Bruce's offer of a cigarette*) No, thanks, not another – I'm dancing with Tom.

Bunty (*gaily*) Missing one, Tom.

Tom Righto!

Nicky *commences to play a foxtrot.*

Bunty (*dragging to his feet*) Come on, Mr Fairlight, don't overdo the serious dramatist stunt!

Bruce I warn you I'm no good.

He dances with her, and confirms the truth of his warning. Clara Hibbert squashes down on the piano-seat next to Nicky and endeavours with one finger in the treble to follow the tune he is playing. Helen and Pawnie stand right down close to the footlights, smoking and talking, their backs are half-turned to the audience, but their remarks must be perfectly audible.

Helen Tom Veryan doesn't dance as well as he thinks he does.

Pawnie With that figure he ought to be marvellous.

Helen He's too athletic.

Pawnie Anyhow, I'm sure he's a success at the Bath Club.

Helen Doesn't Florence look astounding?

Pawnie Absolutely. She knows exactly what suits her.

Helen Where's David?

Pawnie He went off to his study to smoke.

Helen I do wish Florence wouldn't be irritable with him in front of everybody. I felt acutely uncomfortable at dinner.

Pawnie It makes Nicky furious as a rule, but to-night he was too occupied with that stupid little fool Bunty Mainwaring to take any notice.

Helen She's an excellent type.

Pawnie Very average; I only hope nothing will come of Nicky's mania for her.

Helen I don't think we need worry.

Pawnie Why?

Helen Wait and see, my dear.

Clara (*leaving Nicky at the piano and advancing on Pawnie*) Come and dance, Pawnie, and tell me how divinely I sang on Tuesday.

Pawnie (*agreeably*) You didn't.

Clara Ten for cruelty.

They start to dance. Helen moves over to the mantelpiece for a cigarette.

Helen Have you a match, Nicky?

Nicky Isn't this a marvellous tune?

Helen Fascinating! (*She goes over and sits next to him. Gently slipping her hand into his coat pocket.*) Darling, I do want a match. (*She brings out a little box.*) What a divine little box!

Nicky *stops playing and jumps up.*

Nicky (*violently*) Helen, give that to me —

Everyone stops dancing.

Clara Nicky, dear, *don't* be tiresome.

Nicky (*recovering himself*) I'm sick of playing, let's have the gramophone again. (*To Helen*) Here's a light, dearie.

He takes match-box out of another pocket and lights Helen's cigarette. She looks at him queerly for a moment, then he restarts the gramophone and everyone begins to dance again

except **Helen** and **Bruce Fairlight**. **Helen** goes over to the fireplace and takes a coffee-cup from the mantelpiece.

Helen Whose coffee is this? Someone drank mine, and I'd hardly touched it.

Bruce If it has no sugar in it, it's mine.

Helen (*draining it*) It had no sugar in it.

Florence You're dancing abominably, Tom.

Tom Oh, am I?

Florence What's the matter with you?

Tom I don't know, I suppose I'm tired.

Florence You're not usually tired when you're dancing with me.

Tom Oh, Florence, don't nag!

Florence How dare you speak to me like that?

She stops dancing and goes over to the fireplace.

Tom (*following her*) I say, Florence – I'm sorry —

Pawnie Let's stop the music for a moment and think of something really marvellous to do.

Bunty No, let's go on dancing.

Clara I'm exhausted.

Pawnie (*stopping the gramophone*) What was that divine game we played coming back from Paris, Helen?

Helen Just ordinary 'Clumps', wasn't it?

Bunty I loathe 'Clumps'.

Nicky What about the History game?

Bruce What's that?

Bunty Oh, no, Nicky, it's too intellectual.

Florence There's a Mah-jong set in the drawing-room.

Pawnie How divine – let's make up a table immediately.

Clara I won't be happy until someone gives me a set made entirely of jade.

Nicky Come on, Bunty.

Bunty (*looking at Tom*) I can't play it.

Nicky You can; you used to play it in Paris with Yvonne.

Bunty I've forgotten it.

Nicky You'll soon remember again.

He drags her off.

Pawnie Come along, Clara.

Clara I insist on Mr Fairlight learning.

Bruce I'm afraid I'm no good at that sort of thing.

Clara You'll be able to put it in one of your plays.

Pawnie Come and watch, it's too thrilling for words.

Clara, Bruce and Pawnie *go off.*

Helen Have you only one set, Florence?

Florence Yes, isn't it maddening? Clara promised to bring hers down but forgot.

Helen Does Bruce Fairlight play Bridge?

Florence No, I don't think so.

Helen Dramatists are such a comfort in a house-party, aren't they?

She goes off.

Tom Aren't you coming, Florence?

Florence No.

Tom (*nonplussed*) Oh!

Florence But please don't let me stop *you* going, I'm sure you're *dying* to be with the others.

Tom I say, Florence, I wish you wouldn't go on like that.

Florence I don't know what is the matter with you, you've never behaved like this before.

Tom I haven't behaved like anything.

Florence You've been exceedingly rude to me, both at dinner and afterwards.

Tom I wasn't at dinner.

Florence Yes, you were; you snapped me up when I said I didn't like Elsie Saunders.

Tom You know perfectly well she's a friend of mine.

Florence Well, she oughtn't to be, after the things she's said about me.

Tom You will go on imagining.

Florence Nothing of the sort – I *know!* If you weren't so dense you'd see, too – the jealousy I have to put up with. I get so tired of it all, so desperately tired.

She becomes a little pathetic.

Tom Talk about being different, you're different too —

Florence I'm unhappy.

Tom Why?

Florence Because I hate to see you being put against me.

Tom Florence!

Florence You'll understand one day. They're all very subtle, but I can see.

Tom Nobody's said a word to me about you, they'd better not try.

Florence Why, what would you do?

Tom I'd – I'd be furious.

Florence Oh!

Tom And I'd let them see it, too.

Florence (*holding out her hands*) Tom —

Tom Yes?

Florence I forgive you.

Tom I can't bear you being angry with me.

Florence Can't you, really?

Tom It makes me feel beastly.

Florence Come and sit here.

Tom (*sitting next to her on the club fender*) That's a lovely dress.

Florence It is sweet, isn't it?

Tom You always wear wonderful clothes.

Florence Do I, Tom?

Tom You know you do.

Florence Do you remember the very first time we met?

Tom Rather.

Florence Oxford's so full of romance, isn't it?

Tom It was when you came down.

Florence Thank you, Tom, dear.

Tom We did have fun.

Florence You used to come up to *matinées*, and I'd motor you back afterwards.

Tom Ripping!

Florence That reminds me, I've got seats for *Rolling Stones* on Tuesday – don't forget.

Tom You never said you were going to get them.

Florence It doesn't matter, I thought I did. We'd better dine at Claridges.

Tom But, Florence, I – I can't come!

Florence Why not?

Tom I promised to go out.

Florence Who with?

Tom Mother.

Florence Can't you put her off, it will be such a good first night?

Tom Well – you see, as a matter of fact – it's rather awkward – I put her off the other day —
There is a slight pause.

Florence (*a trifle coldly*) Oh, well, never mind, we'll go some other night.

Enter David.

David Hallo, Florence, I thought you were in the drawing-room.

Florence They're playing Mah-jong, and there's only one set. I shall break in presently.

Tom I'll just go and see how they're getting on.

This obvious excuse for getting out of the room is not lost upon Florence.

Florence Yes, do.

Tom Come and play soon.

He goes out quietly.

Florence Don't you think this is a divine frock?

David Very pretty.

Florence You and Helen seemed to be very thick at dinner. What were you talking about?

David Nothing much – I like Helen.

Florence Only because she flatters you and listens to everything you say.

David She doesn't flatter me.

Florence I suppose she was talking about the farm, and giving her opinions.

David We did discuss the farm a little.

Florence She doesn't know a thing about it, really.

David Perhaps not, but it passed the time.

He goes out.

Florence *sits still for a moment, then she wearily buries her face in her hands.* *Enter Nicky.*

Nicky (*going to her*) What's the matter, darling?

Florence Nothing, I've got a slight headache.

Nicky Why don't you go Byes?

Florence I can't, it's much too early.

Nicky I'm sick of Mah-jong.

Florence Who's playing now?

Nicky Pawnie and Helen and Clara are trying to teach Bruce Fairlight, he's an awful fool at it.

He sits down at the piano and plays absently.

Florence You must get Bunty out of that habit of contradicting everything people say.

Nicky I don't see why.

Florence It's bad breeding.

Nicky (*striking a note viciously*) Who cares nowadays? We've all got a right to our opinions.

Florence She seems to forget that I'm much older than she is.

Nicky That's no argument, mother; it's silly only to remember your age when someone says something you don't like.

Florence She's having a bad effect on you.

Nicky Nonsense!

Florence You've changed since Paris.

Nicky Naturally.

Florence You never used to be rude to me.

Nicky Oh, damn, I'm not rude.

Florence Yes, you are.

Nicky Well, don't start running down Bunty.

Florence Stop playing – stop playing!

Nicky (*getting up angrily*) Oh, God!

He goes towards door and collides with Helen.

Helen What's happening?

Florence Nothing, Bunty's just putting Nicky against me. I knew she'd try to.

She goes out.

Helen You must be having a delightful evening! You leave the drawing-room having rowed with Bunty, and come here and row with Florence.

Nicky Mother's impossible.

Helen She's no different from what she's always been.

Nicky Well, I haven't realised it before.

Helen (*taking a cigarette and lighting it*) You haven't been engaged before.

Nicky I'm hating this house-party.

Helen (*lightly*) Don't say that, dear, it's not kind.

Nicky You know I don't mean you.

Helen Are you very much in love?

Nicky Yes. – No. – I don't know.

Helen I wonder.

Nicky It's utterly devastating, anyhow.

Helen When did you meet her?

Nicky About five months ago.

Helen What was she doing in Paris?

Nicky Oh, I don't know – fooling about.

Helen Splendid.

Nicky She's been studying French literature.

Helen Why?

Nicky She's going to write – herself – some day.

Helen Oh, I see!

Nicky Helen, do you like her?

Helen I can't tell yet – yesterday was the first time I'd ever set eyes on her.

Nicky She's wonderfully intelligent.

Helen Yes – I'm sure she is.

Nicky You *don't* like her?

Helen I tell you – I'm not sure yet.

Nicky It's generally the way – one's friends always hate one another.

Helen (*smiling*) It *is* difficult for you, isn't it?

Nicky I should so like you to like her.

Helen Very well – I'll try.

Nicky She's utterly opposite to me in every way.

Helen Yes, I see that.

Nicky But that's as it ought to be, isn't it?

Helen It depends.

Nicky I need a sort of restraining influence terribly.

Helen Yes, Nicky.

Nicky She's awfully good for me.

Helen Is she?

Nicky Yes – she curbs me when I get temperamental and silly.

Helen I always felt you needed encouraging more than curbing.

Nicky (*laughing*) Oh, Helen – aren't you a darling!

Helen I mean it.

Nicky You're wrong, though – I'm all over the place.

Helen Anyhow, I do hope you'll be very happy with her.

Nicky I don't suppose I shall ever be that – I haven't got the knack.

Helen Do you work hard?

Nicky Yes.

Helen Really hard?

Nicky Frightfully.

Helen Liar!

Nicky If you'd seen me in Paris – studying, studying – all night long until the grey dawn put the guttering candle to shame – and my nerveless hands dropped from the keys –

Helen Candles gutter awfully quickly when they're burnt at both ends.

Nicky Meaning that I look a debauched wreck of my former self?

Helen Exactly.

Nicky If you go on encouraging me at this rate I shall commit suicide.

Helen You do resent anyone taking a real interest in you, don't you?

Nicky I distrust it.

Helen Why?

Nicky I don't know – I'm not worth it.

Helen You seem to be suffering from a slight inferiority complex.

Nicky Not a bit of it – I'm gay and witty and handsome.

Helen Oh, Nicky, you're so maddening.

Nicky Don't be cross, Helen.

Helen I'm one of the few people who know what you're really like, and you won't give me the credit for it.

Nicky Do you think you do, honestly?

Helen Yes – and I'm exceedingly worried about you.

Nicky You needn't be.

Helen You're sensitive and reserved and utterly foolish.

Nicky Thank you – I'm beginning to feel beautifully picturesque.

Helen And you're scared.

Nicky Why! What have I to be scared about?

Helen Would you like me to tell you?

Nicky No.

Helen Why not?

Nicky Because you're a sentimentalist, and you see things that aren't there at all.

Helen You're far more sentimental than I.

Nicky Darling Helen – you've got such a lovely mind – like a Christmas card – with frosted robins and sheep wandering about in the snow – bleating.

Helen All the same, I should give up drugs if I were you.

Nicky Helen!

Helen Well?

Nicky I don't know what you mean.

Helen Do you think I can't see?

Nicky (*forcing a laugh*) You're being terribly funny, aren't you?

Helen You fool! You unutterable little fool!

Nicky Don't be dramatic, dear.

Helen I thought you had common sense; I credited you with more intelligence than that.

Nicky If you persist in being absurd.

Helen (*suddenly with intense feeling*) Nicky, don't resist me, don't fight me, I'm your friend, I wouldn't have said a word if I weren't. You've got to stop it; you haven't gone very far yet, there's still time – for God's sake listen to reason.

Nicky Shut up, shut up, don't speak so loudly.

Helen Nicky, throw it away.

Nicky When did you find out?

Helen To-night, you know, when you were playing, but I've guessed for ages.

Nicky You needn't be frightened, Helen, I only take just the tiniest little bit, once in a blue moon!

Helen If anything goes wrong, you'll take a lot – throw it away.

Nicky What could go wrong?

Helen Never mind, throw it away!

Nicky I can't – look out, somebody's coming.

Enter David.

David Hallo!

Nicky Hallo, father!

David What's the matter?

Nicky The matter – why?

David You look very worried.

Nicky Helen and I have just had a grand heart-to-heart talk; we've undone our back hair, loosened our stays and wallowed in it.

David Oh, I see!

Helen We haven't seen one another for so long – it was inevitable.

David You never came and looked at the Farm this morning – I waited for you.

Nicky I'm awfully sorry, father – I just went on sleeping.

Helen I'll see you later, Nicky.

Nicky All right.

Helen *goes out.*

David How do you think your mother's looking?

Nicky Splendid – the same as ever.

David Would you like a cigar?

Nicky No thanks, father – I'm not very good at them.

David I was just on my way to bed – there are far too many people in the house.

Nicky (*smiling*) You must be used to that by now.

David You ought to stay down here, you know – during the week and get some fresh air.

Nicky I've got such millions of things to do in London.

David Worth doing?

Nicky Yes, of course.

David You look as though you needed a rest.

Nicky You needn't worry about me – I feel splendid.

David She seems a nice girl.

Nicky Who – Bunty?

David Yes. Quiet and untiresome.

Nicky She's a darling!

David When do you propose to get married?

Nicky I don't know – the engagement's only a sort of try-out, you know.

David Oh, I see – I didn't realise that – I'm so unversed in modern technicalities.

Nicky It's her idea really – just to tread water for a bit.

David It sounds an excellent plan.

Nicky I'm awfully glad you like her.

David Is she musical?

Nicky Oh, yes – frightfully!

David Good!

Nicky Father, I think I will come down here for a few days – and work quietly.

David If you do that I'll only go up to London every other day – I see so little of you when you're at the flat.

Nicky That's settled then. I wonder what mother will say!

David I'll talk to her.

Nicky All right – she won't bother about us much.

David No – I don't suppose she will – I think I'll be getting along to bed now. Good night, my boy!

Nicky Good night, father!

They shake hands, and David pats Nicky's shoulder rather tentatively. He goes upstairs and Nicky wanders to the piano. He plays absently, and Bunty enters.

Bunty I want to talk to you.

Nicky *(still playing)* All right.

Bunty Perhaps you'd stop playing for a minute.

Nicky Won't you let me woo you with a little Scriabin?

Bunty Please stop.

Nicky *(rising)* I'm unappreciated – that's what it is.

There is a slight pause – he goes over to her.

I say, Bunty –

Bunty What?

Nicky Before you say anything awful to me, I *am* sorry for being rude just now.

Bunty So you ought to be.

Nicky Will you forgive me?

Bunty Yes, I forgive you.

Nicky I've been irritable all the evening.

Bunty Give me a cigarette, Nicky.

Nicky Here.

They both smoke.

Bunty Thanks.

Nicky What did you want to talk to me about?

Bunty Lots of things – Us!

Nicky (*hardening*) Oh, I see!

Bunty Don't you think it's rather silly – being engaged?

Nicky No, not at all.

Bunty I do.

Nicky Just because we bickered a bit to-night?

Bunty No, not only because of that.

Nicky Why then?

Bunty Can't you see?

Nicky No.

Bunty Well, we're not very suited to one another are we?

Nicky Why do you suddenly say that?

Bunty Because I've only just realised it.

Nicky I'm sorry.

Bunty It's not your fault particularly.

Nicky I'm glad.

Bunty It's circumstances and surroundings.

Nicky Oh, that can be altered quite easily. We'll change the shape of the house – we'll take all that wall away and turn that into a studio – you love studios, don't you? – then we'll transform the drawing-room into an enormous aviary.

Bunty It's practically that now!

Nicky And then we'll —

Bunty Shut up, Nicky!

Nicky I'm only trying to be amenable.

Bunty Are you, really?

Nicky Yes, I'm putting up a sort of defence, Bunty. I have a feeling that you're going to be unpleasant, and I want to establish myself comfortably before you start.

Bunty I don't want to be unpleasant – only honest.

Nicky You won't let the two run together, will you?

Bunty (*with vehemence*) You're hopeless, hopeless, hopeless!

Nicky Yes – I think I am rather.

Bunty In a way I'm glad – it makes it easier.

Nicky Does it?

Bunty You're not in love with me, really – you couldn't be!

Nicky Please, don't say that.

Bunty Why don't you face things properly?

Nicky One generally has to in the end – I like to put it off for as long as possible.

Bunty That's cowardly.

Nicky Don't be pompous, darling.

Bunty You're a great help, I must say.

Nicky Why should I help to destroy my own happiness?

Bunty That's self-pity and self-deception.

Nicky Why are you going on like this?

Bunty Because I tell you – I've realised the truth.

Nicky I suppose you've taken a hatred to mother!

Bunty No, not a hatred.

Nicky You don't like her.

Bunty Not very much.

Nicky Why not? She likes you.

Bunty She detests me.

Nicky Nonsense, why should she?

Bunty Because I'm young.

Nicky What a filthy thing to say!

Bunty It's true.

Nicky It's nothing of the sort.

Bunty You're so stupid sometimes.

Nicky Thank you.

Bunty Don't let's start bickering again.

Nicky We won't discuss mother any more then.

Bunty You started it.

Nicky I wish I could make you understand her like I do – I mean she's awfully irritating, I know – but deep down she's marvellous in spite of everything.

Bunty (*coldly*) Everything?

Nicky (*vehemently*) Yes, *everything!* Don't be a beast, Bunty, just try to see her point a little, even if you do dislike her. She is terribly silly about being 'young', I know, but she's been used to so much admiration and flattery and everything always, she feels she sort of can't give it up – you do see that, don't you? And she hasn't really anything in the least comforting to fall back upon, she's not clever – real kind of brain cleverness – and father's no good, and I'm no good, and all the time she's wanting life to be as it was instead of as it is. There's no harm in her anywhere – she's just young inside. Can't you imagine the utter foulness of growing old? 'Specially if you've been lovely and attractive like she was. The beautiful Flo Lancaster! She used to be known as that – I can remember her when I was quite small, coming up to say good night to me, looking too perfectly radiant for words – and she used to come to the school, too, sometimes, and everyone used to go mad over her, and I used to get frightfully proud and excited —

Bunty I've never heard you talk like this before.

Nicky I don't think I ever have.

Bunty I like you better clear cut, not blurred by sentiment.

Nicky *looks at her for a moment in amazement.*

Nicky To describe you as hard would be inadequate – you're metallic!

Bunty I can see straight.

Nicky (*politely*) Can you?

Bunty Yes. We could never be happy together.

Nicky Perhaps not.

Bunty Shall we just – finish – then?

Nicky Certainly, I'm sorry we were too modern to have an engagement ring, you'd have been able to give it back to me so beautifully.

Bunty Don't be ridiculous!

Nicky Better than being blurred by sentiment.

Bunty *lights another cigarette and, kicking off her shoes, perches on the club fender and proceeds to warm her feet at the fire.*

Enter Clara Hibbert.

Clara My dear, I'm *shattered* – and I'm going straight to bed – probably for several weeks.

Bunty Why?

Clara Shshsh! He's coming.

Bunty Who's coming!

Clara Bruce Fairlight – I've been teaching him Mah-jong – these master brains – agony, dear –

Enter Bruce Fairlight.

Bruce Very interesting, that game.

Clara (*weakly*) I thought you'd like it.

Bruce It's interesting *psychologically!* The concentration and suspense –

Enter Florence, Helen, Pawnie and Tom. Tom is grasping a whisky and soda – Pawnie is eating a biscuit.

Pawnie I'm quite exhausted – it must be the country air –

Florence– it was too lovely, because I started with two red dragons in my hand –

Helen I wondered who had them –

Pawnie One more tune, Nicky, before we go to bed –

Florence Yes, just one –

Nicky(*looking at Bunty*)I'll play 'I love you!' – such a romantic tune.

He puts on the gramophone.

Bunty Do.

Helen What time's everyone going up in the morning?

Florence The ten o'clock's the best – we'll have breakfast at nine downstairs.

Pawnie (*confidentially*) Do you know that in London I can never do more than nibble a piece of thin toast, and whenever I'm away I eat *enormously!*

Nicky How very peculiar!

Pawnie Your tone revolts me, Nicky – you must never be irascible with your old friends.

Nicky I haven't got any.

Helen Nicky!

Nicky Sorry, Helen.

Florence I don't know what's the matter with Nicky – he's been in a vile temper all the evening – his first week-end home, too.

Nicky Such a pity, when so much trouble has been taken to make me happy and cosy.

Tom Come and dance, Bunty.

Bunty No, not now.

Nicky Dance with him, Bunty – chaps must have exercise.

Florence You dance with Bunty, Pawnie – I'll dance with Tom – come on.

She and Tom dance.

Helen The great thing in this world is not to be obvious, Nicky – over *anything!*

Florence and Tom dance, also Helen and Pawnie. *Everyone talks at once, as in the beginning of the act.*

Pawnie You are infuriating, Helen – it's a wonderful book.

Helen Thoroughly second-rate.

Pawnie What do you think about *Mischievous Passion*, Fairlight?

Bruce I never read novels on principle.

Pawnie Well, you must read this – it's colossal.

Helen Don't be led away by Pawnie, Mr Fairlight, he has no discrimination.

Pawnie But I tell you it's brilliant! Absolutely *brilliant!*

Helen Nonsense.

Pawnie There are times, Helen, when I could willingly see you dead at my feet.

Florence A little slower, for Heaven's sake!

Nicky How's that?

He makes it far too slow.

Florence I think you'd better go to bed, Nicky.

Helen We're all going, anyhow.

Nicky Not yet, please, mummy dear – I'm having such a lovely time!

He slams off in a rage.

Pawnie I always knew the Continent was fatal for the young.

Bunty Nicky's upset – it's my fault – we're not engaged any more.

Florence Why – what's happened?

Bunty Nothing happened – it was never very serious, really.

Helen I had a feeling that it was.

Bunty You were wrong.

Florence Well, I must say it's all been rather abrupt.

Bunty It's better to finish things off at once – cleanly – if you're not quite sure, don't you think?

Florence Well, I'm sorry, Bunty – if you feel like that about it there's nothing more to be said.

Bunty I wouldn't have mentioned it at all – only you all seemed to be blaming him for being irritable

Helen Poor Nicky!

Clara I really must go up to bed now. I'm so tired. Good night, Florence dear.

Florence Good night, Clara. Breakfast at nine. Have you got books and everything you want?

Clara Yes, thanks. Good night, everyone.

Everyone murmurs good night politely.

Florence Tom, be an angel and fetch me a glass of milk – it's in the drawing-room.

Tom All right.

He goes off.

Helen Come on up, Florence, I'm dead.

Florence So am I. Will you turn out the lights when you come?

Pawnie With beautiful precision, dear.

Florence (*as she and Helen go upstairs*) Tell Tom to bring my milk up to me, somebody.

Pawnie All right.

Florence Good night, Mr Fairlight.

Bruce Good night.

Pawnie Good night, Florence.

Florence and Helen *go off.*

Bruce I suppose we'd all better go up.

Bunty I don't feel I could sleep yet.

Re-enter Tom with a glass of milk.

Tom Hallo! where's Florence!

Bunty Gone up to bed – will you take her milk to her?

Pawnie What's become of Nicky?

Tom In the smoking-room, I think.

Bruce Good night, Miss Mainwaring.

Bunty Good night.

They shake hands.

Pawnie I shall come, too – good night.

Tom Good night.

Pawnie (*to Bruce as they go upstairs*) When you're writing, do your characters grow as you go along?

Bruce No, I think each one out minutely beforehand.

Pawnie How too intriguing!

They go off.

Tom So you've broken it off already?

Bunty Yes.

Tom I didn't know you were going to do it so soon.

Bunty It's better to get things over.

Tom What did he say?

Bunty Nothing much.

Tom Was he furious?

Bunty Oh! what does it matter? Don't let's go on about it.

Tom It's all damned awkward.

Bunty What?

Tom The whole thing.

Bunty You're rather scared, aren't you?

Tom No, not exactly – now that I've got you to back me up.

Bunty I shall be glad when we're out of this house.

Tom So shall I.

Bunty I hate the atmosphere.

Tom I don't know how I've stood it for so long.

Bunty You didn't notice it until I came, any more than I noticed Nicky's atmosphere until you came.

Tom It's queer, isn't it?

Bunty We're reverting to type, don't you see?

Tom How d'you mean?

Bunty Never mind, it's true.

Tom Do you think I'm being a cad to Florence?

Bunty Yes, I do rather.

Tom But, Bunty! You said this morning —

Bunty That I didn't see how you could help yourself, neither I do – it's frightfully difficult, but it's not altogether your fault, any more than it would have been mine if I'd married Nicky. One gets carried away by glamour, and personality, and magnetism – they're beastly treacherous things.

Tom You are wonderful.

Bunty Don't be silly.

Tom You're so cool and clear, and you see everything.

Bunty I'm sorry – for Nicky.

Tom Oh, damn Nicky!

Bunty (*laughing*) Oh, Tom!

Tom Why, what's up?

Bunty You're so dead set.

Tom You're worth ten of him any day. What's the use of a chap like that? He *doesn't do* anything except play the piano – he can't play any games, he's always trying to be funny –

Bunty Shut up, Tom, you're being rather cheap; I haven't reverted to type so quickly that I can't see some of the things I'm missing.

Tom I wish I knew what you were talking about.

Bunty Oh, God! I feel so miserable!

She bursts into tears.

Tom(*flummoxed*)I say – Bunty – for Heaven's sake –

He puts his arms round her.

Bunty (*shaking him off*) Don't, don't – give me my shoes –

He picks up her shoes; she puts them on. She is half sobbing all the time.

Tom I say, old girl, hadn't you better go to bed? You're all wrought up!

Bunty He said beastly things.

Tom I'll wring his neck.

Bunty (*with a fresh burst of tears*) Shut up, Tom, shut up –

Tom Bunty, stop crying – there's a dear – please, please stop crying –

He takes her in his arms and kisses her, she is groping for her handkerchief. Florence comes quietly downstairs.

Bunty I can't find my hanky!

Tom Here's mine.

Florence (*like a pistol shot*) Tom!

Tom and Bunty *break away.*

Tom Yes, Florence?

Florence (*ominously*) What does this mean?

Tom I'm sorry, Florence – I –

Florence You utter cad!

Bunty Look here – I should like to say –

Florence Be quiet – mind your own business.

Nicky *enters.*

Nicky (*seeing tears on Bunty's face*) What's the matter – is anybody hurt?

Florence (*ominously*) No, not hurt!

Bunty I banged my hand, that's all.

Florence Liar!

Nicky Mother – don't be so stupid –

Tom Florence – I –

Florence Don't *speak* to me –

Nicky (*quietly*) Mother – not now – not now – it's all wrong – control yourself! Bunty – Bunty – do go to bed – please.

He goes to the piano and begins to play jazz.

Bunty All right – Tom –

Florence *goes to the fireplace, trembling with rage. Nicky goes on playing. Tom and Bunty go towards the stairs.*

Florence Stop – I want an explanation, please!

Bunty How dare you speak to me like that?

Florence Get out of my house! Get out of my house!

Bunty This is disgusting!

Tom I say, Florence –

Florence Get out of my house!

Bunty I shall leave the first thing in the morning, it's much too late to-night.

She goes off.

Nicky *never stops playing for a moment.*

Florence Tom. (*He goes towards her absolutely silent.*) You kissed her – you kissed her – I saw you –!

Tom Yes.

Florence In this house!

Tom Yes, Florence, I apologise.

Florence Apologise! You're beneath contempt – never speak to me again, never touch me again – I hate you!

Tom Look here, Florence – I'm desperately sorry – you see, I'm afraid I love her.

Florence (*hysterically*) You dare to stand there and say that to me? It's incredible – after all I've done for you – after all we've been to one another. Love! You don't know what it means. You've lied to me – all these months. It's contemptible – humiliating. Get out of my sight!

Tom (*turning and going upstairs*) Very well.

Florence (*suddenly realising that he is gone*) Tom – Tom – come back – come back —!

She runs upstairs after him. Nicky at last stops playing and lets his hands drop from the keys.

CURTAIN

ACT 3

The scene is Florence's bedroom the same night – about two hours have elapsed. When the curtain rises Florence is lying face downwards on the bed, she is dressed in a very beautiful but slightly exotic negligé.

Helen is standing by the window fully dressed, she is holding the curtain aside, and a bar of moonlight comes in to mingle with the amber of the dressing-table lights. Florence is obviously extremely hysterical.

Helen Florence, what is the use of going on like that?

Florence I wish I were dead!

Helen It's so cowardly to give way utterly – as you're doing.

Florence I don't care – I don't care!

Helen If you don't face things in this world, they only hit you much harder in the end.

Florence He loved me – he adored me!

Helen Never! He hadn't got it in him.

Florence After all I've done for him, to go to – to Bunty!

Helen (*leaving the window*) If it hadn't been Bunty it would have been someone else – don't you see how inevitable it was?

Florence How dared they! – Here! – In this house!

Helen That's a little thing, it doesn't matter at all.

Florence It does – it does —

Helen Florence, sit up and pull yourself together.

Florence (*sitting up slowly*) I think I'm going mad.

Helen Not a bit of it, you're just thoroughly hysterical.

Florence Give me some water.

Helen *goes to the bathroom and returns with a glass of water.*

Florence (*taking it*) What time is it?

Helen (*looking at her watch*) Ten-past one.

Florence Don't go to London by the early train, Helen; stay and come up with me in the car.

Helen Very well.

Florence Thank God, you were here!

Helen I wish I'd known what was happening, I might have done something.

Florence What can I do to get him back?

Helen Don't be silly.

Florence What can I do – what can I do —?

Helen Do you mean to say you'd *take* him back after to-night?

Florence No, never. Not if he crawled to me – never —

Helen Well, then, make up your mind definitely never to see him again whatever happens.

Florence Yes – I will.

Helen Why don't you go to bed now?

Florence I couldn't sleep.

Helen Put it all out of your mind – make an effort.

Florence I can't – I'm too unhappy.

Helen Think of Nicky.

Florence Nicky's young.

Helen That doesn't make it any better for him.

Florence He'll get over it in the long run.

Helen The long run never counts at the moment.

Florence He wasn't in love – really?

Helen As much as either you or he are capable of it.

Florence He's well rid of her – she'd never have appreciated him properly – she hasn't the intelligence.

Helen I don't agree with you there – she's got intelligence right enough.

Florence Treacherous little beast!

Helen Yes, but far-seeing.

Florence Are you standing up for her? Do you think it was *right* of her to get Tom away from me?

Helen Yes, quite right.

Florence Helen!

Helen To do her justice, she didn't deliberately set herself out to get him away from you at all. She discovered that in spite of the somewhat decadent years Tom was still her type, and likely to remain so. So with common sense she decided to shelve Nicky forthwith and go for him.

Florence Her type indeed!

Helen Yes, she'd have been quite a nice girl really if she'd been left alone and not allowed to go to Paris and get into the wrong set.

Florence You are extraordinary, Helen. Do you realise that you're making excuses for the girl who's betrayed your best friend?

Helen Don't be so utterly absurd – I'm not making excuses, and anyhow she hasn't betrayed you. She hardly knows you in the first place, and she's just followed her instincts regardless of anyone else's feelings – as you've done thousands of times.

Florence Helen – you're being horrible to me!

Helen I'm not, I'm trying to make you see! You're battering your head against silly cast-iron delusions, and I want to dislodge them.

Florence Helen, I'm so unhappy – so desperately unhappy.

Helen Yes, but not because you've lost Tom, it's something far deeper than that.

Florence What then?

Helen You're on the wrong tack, and have been for years.

Florence I don't understand.

Helen You *won't* understand!

Florence *gets off the bed and goes over to the dressing-table. She sits and stares at herself in the glass for a moment without speaking.*

Florence My eyes are sore. (*She powders her face and sprays a little scent on her hair.*) It's so lovely this – and so refreshing.

Helen I think I'll go to bed now.

Florence No, wait a little longer with me – please, Helen – just a few minutes.

Helen It's so hot in here.

Florence Open the window, then.

Helen All right.

She goes to the window and opens it. Florence takes a cigarette out of a box and then shakes a scent-bottle and rubs the cigarette lightly with the stopper.

Florence Do you ever do this? It's divine.

Helen What a wonderfully clear night – you can see the hills right across the valley – the moon's quite strong.

Florence *goes to the window and stands next to Helen looking out – she is puffing her cigarette.*

Florence I chose this room in the first place because the view was so lovely.

Helen Do you ever look at it?

Florence (*listlessly*) Of course I do, often!

Helen It's been raining – I wish you'd throw away that cigarette – it spoils the freshness.

Florence (*turning away*) It's soothing me – calming my nerves.

Helen I do wish I could help you – really.

Florence You are helping me, darling – you're being an angel.

Helen (*suddenly angry*) Don't talk so emptily, Florence, I'm worth more than that.

Florence I don't know what you mean.

Helen It sickens me to see you getting back so soon.

Florence Getting back?

Helen Yes, to your usual worthless attitude of mind.

Florence Helen!

Helen A little while ago you were really suffering for once, and in a way I was glad because it showed you were capable of a genuine emotion. Now you're glossing it over – smarming it down with your returning vanity, soon you won't be unhappy any more – just vindictive.

Florence Don't go on at me like that – I'm too wretched.

Helen (*going to her*) Florence dear, forgive me, but it's true – and I don't want it to be.

The door opens and Nicky enters. He is in dressing-gown and pyjamas. His face looks strained and white.

Florence Nicky!

Nicky Helen, I want to talk to mother, please.

Helen All right, Nicky.

Florence What is it?

Nicky I couldn't sleep.

Helen Florence dear – good night.

Florence No – no, Helen – don't go yet –

Helen I must.

Florence Helen – stay with me.

Nicky Please go.

Helen I can't stay, Florence – it's quite impossible.

She goes out.

Florence I don't know what you mean – by coming here and ordering Helen out of my room.

Nicky I'm sorry, mother. I felt I had to talk to you alone.

Florence At this hour of the night – you're mad!

Nicky No, I'm not, I think I'm probably more unhappy than I've ever been in my life.

Florence You're young – you'll get over it.

Nicky I hope so.

Florence I knew the first moment I saw her – what sort of a girl she was.

Nicky Oh, mother!

Florence It's true. I had an *instinct* about her.

Nicky It's all been rather a shock, you know –

Florence (*becoming motherly*) Yes, dear – I know – I know – but you mustn't be miserable about her – she isn't worth it. (*She goes to kiss him.*)

Nicky (*gently pushing her away*) Don't, mother!

Florence Listen, Nicky – go back to bed now – there's a dear – my head's splitting.

Nicky I can't yet.

Florence Take some aspirin – that'll calm your nerves.

Nicky I'm afraid I'm a little beyond aspirin.

Florence I don't want you to think I don't sympathise with you, darling – my heart *aches* for you – I know so well what you're going through.

Nicky Do you?

Florence It's agony – absolute agony – but, you see – it will wear off – it always does in time. (**Nicky** *doesn't answer.*) Nicky, please go now!

Nicky I want to talk to you.

Florence To-morrow – we'll talk to-morrow.

Nicky No, now – *now!*

Florence You're inconsiderate and cruel – I've told you my head's bursting.

Nicky I want to sympathise with you, too – and try to understand everything – as well as I can –

Florence Understand everything?

Nicky Yes, please.

Florence I don't know what you mean –

Nicky Will you tell me things – as though I were somebody quite different?

Florence What kind of things?

Nicky Things about you – your life.

Florence Really, Nicky – you're ridiculous – asking me to tell you stories at this hour!

Nicky (*with dead vehemence*) Mother – sit down quietly. I'm not going out of this room until I've got everything straight in my mind.

Florence (*sinking down – almost hypnotised*) Nicky – please – I –

Nicky Tom Veryan has been your lover, hasn't he?

Florence (*almost shrieking*) Nicky – how dare you!

Nicky Keep calm – it's our only chance – keep calm.

Florence (*bursting into tears*) How dare you speak to me like that – suggest such a thing – I –

Nicky It's true, isn't it?

Florence Go away – go away!

Nicky It's true, isn't it?

Florence No – no!

Nicky It's true, isn't it?

Florence No – I tell you – no – no – no!

Nicky You're lying to me, mother. What's the use of that?

Florence You're mad – mad –

Nicky Does father know?

Florence Go away!

Nicky Does father know?

Florence Your father knows nothing – he doesn't understand me any more than you do.

Nicky Then it's between us alone.

Florence I tell you I don't know what you're talking about.

Nicky Mother – don't go on like that, it's useless – we've arrived at a crisis, wherever we go – whatever we do we can't escape from it. I know we're neither of us very strong-minded or capable, and we haven't much hope of coming through successfully – but let's try – it's no good pretending any more – our lives are built up of pretences all the time. For years – ever since I began to think at all, I've been bolstering up my illusions about you. People have made remarks not realising that I was your son, and I've pretended that they were inspired by cattiness and jealousy. I've noticed things – trivial incriminating little incidents, and I've brushed them aside and not thought any more about them because you were my mother – clever and beautiful and successful – and naturally people *would* slander you *because* you were so beautiful – and now I *know* – they were right!

Florence Nicky – I implore you – go away now – leave me alone.

Nicky No, I can't.

Florence You're cruel – cruel to torment me –

Nicky I don't want to be cruel –

Florence Go to bed then, and we'll talk everything over quietly another time.

Nicky It is true about Tom Veryan, isn't it?

Florence No. No –

Nicky We're on awfully dangerous ground – I'm straining every nerve to keep myself under control. If you lie to me and try to evade me any more – I won't be answerable for what might happen.

Florence (*dropping her voice – terrified*) What do you mean?

Nicky I don't know – I'm frightened.

Florence Nicky – darling Nicky – I –

She approaches him.

Nicky Don't touch me, please.

Florence Have a little pity for me.

Nicky Was Tom Veryan your lover?

Florence (*in a whisper*) Yes.

Nicky I want to understand why —

Florence He loved me.

Nicky But you — did you love him?

Florence Yes.

Nicky It was something you couldn't help, wasn't it — something that's always been the same in you since you were quite, quite young —?

Florence Yes, Nicky — yes —

Nicky And there have been others, too, haven't there?

Florence (*with her face in her hands*) I won't be cross-questioned any more — I won't — I won't —

Nicky I wish you'd understand I'm not blaming you — I'm trying to help you — to help us both —

Florence What good can all this possibly do?

Nicky Clear things up, of course. I can't go on any more half knowing —

Florence Why should that side of my life be any concern of yours?

Nicky But, mother!

Florence I'm different from other women — completely different — and you expect me to be the same — why can't you realise that with a temperament like mine it's impossible to live an ordinary humdrum life — you're not a boy any longer — you're a man — and —

Nicky I'm nothing — I've grown up all wrong.

Florence It's not my fault.

Nicky Of course it's your fault, mother — who else's fault *could* it be?

Florence Your friends — the people you mix with —

Nicky It wouldn't matter *who* I mixed with if only I had a background.

Florence You've got as much money as you want — you've got your home —

Nicky (*bitterly*) Home! That's almost funny — there's no peace anywhere — nothing but the ceaseless din of trying to be amused —

Florence David never complains.

Nicky I don't suppose you've looked at father during the last few years — or you wouldn't say that.

Florence He's perfectly happy because he's sensible — he lives his own life and doesn't try to interfere with mine.

Nicky It must be your vanity that makes you so dreadfully blind — and foolish.

Florence Understand once and for all, I *won't* be spoken to like this —

Nicky You've had other lovers besides Tom Veryan — haven't you?

Florence Yes, I have – I have. Now then!

Nicky Well, anyhow – that's the truth – at last —

He rises, turns his back on her and stands looking out of the window.

Florence *(after a pause – going to him)* Nicky – don't be angry – please don't be angry with me.

Nicky I'm not angry a bit – I realise that I'm living in a world where things like this happen – and they've got to be faced and given the right value. If only I'd had the courage to realise everything before – it wouldn't be so bad now – it's the sudden shock that's thrown the whole thing out of focus for me – but I mean to get it right – please help me!

Florence *(dully)* I don't know what to do.

Nicky It's your life, and you've lived it as you've wanted to live it – that's fair —

Florence Yes – yes.

Nicky You've wanted love always – passionate love, because you were made like that – it's not your fault – it's the fault of circumstances and civilisation – civilisation makes rottenness so much easier – we're utterly rotten – both of us —

Florence Nicky – don't – don't —

Nicky How can we help ourselves? – We swirl about in a vortex of beastliness – this is a chance – don't you see – to realise the truth – our only chance.

Florence Oh, Nicky, do stop – go away!

Nicky Don't keep on telling me to stop when our only hope is to hammer it out.

Florence You're overwrought – it isn't as bad as you think.

Nicky Isn't it?

Florence No, no. Of course it isn't. To-morrow morning you'll see things quite differently.

Nicky You haven't understood.

Florence Yes, I have – I have.

Nicky You haven't understood. Oh, my God, you haven't understood! You're building up silly defences in your mind. I'm overwrought. To-morrow morning I shall see things quite differently. That's true – that's the tragedy of it, and you won't see – To-morrow morning I *shall* see things differently. All this will seem unreal – a nightmare – the machinery of our lives will go on again and gloss over the truth as it always does – and our chance will be gone for ever.

Florence Chance – chance? What are you talking about – what chance?

Nicky I must make you see somehow.

Florence You're driving me mad.

Nicky Have patience with me – please – please —

Florence(*wildly*)How can I have patience with you? – You exaggerate everything.

Nicky No I don't – I wish I did.

Florence Listen – let me explain something to you.

Nicky Very well – go on.

Florence You're setting yourself up in judgment on me – your own mother.

Nicky No, I'm not.

Florence You are – you are – let me speak – you don't understand my temperament in the least – nobody does – I —

Nicky You're deceiving yourself – your temperament's no different from thousands of other women, but you've been weak and selfish and given way all along the line —

Florence Let me speak, I tell you —!

Nicky What's the use – you're still pretending – you're building up barriers between us instead of helping me to break them down.

Florence What are you accusing me of having done?

Nicky Can't you see yet?

Florence No, I can't. If you're preaching morality you've no right to – that's my affair – I've never done any harm to anyone.

Nicky Look at me.

Florence Why – what do you mean?

Nicky You've given me *nothing* all my life – nothing that counts.

Florence Now you're pitying yourself.

Nicky Yes, with every reason.

Florence You're neurotic and ridiculous – just because Bunty broke off your engagement you come and say wicked, cruel things to me —

Nicky You forget what I've seen to-night, mother.

Florence I don't care what you've seen.

Nicky I've seen you make a vulgar, disgusting scene in your own house, and on top of that humiliate yourself before a boy half your age. The misery of losing Bunty faded away when that happened – everything is comparative after all.

Florence I didn't humiliate myself—

Nicky You ran after him up the stairs because your vanity wouldn't let you lose him – it isn't that you love him – that would be easier – you never love anyone, you only love them loving you – all your so-called passion and temperament is false – your whole existence had degenerated into an endless empty craving for admiration and flattery – and then you say you've done no harm to anybody – Father used to be a clever man, with a strong will and a capacity for enjoying everything – I can remember him like that, and now he's nothing – a complete nonentity because his spirit's crushed. How could it be otherwise? You've let him down consistently for years – and God knows I'm nothing for him to look forward to – but I might have been if it hadn't been for you –

Florence Don't talk like that. Don't – don't – it can't be such a crime being loved – it can't be such a crime being happy –

Nicky You're not happy – you're never happy – you're fighting – fighting all the time to keep your youth and your looks – because you can't bear the thought of living without them – as though they mattered in the end.

Florence (*hysterically*) What does anything matter – ever?

Nicky That's what I'm trying to find out.

Florence I'm still young inside – I'm still beautiful – why shouldn't I live my life as I choose?

Nicky You're not young or beautiful; I'm seeing for the first time how old you are – it's horrible – your silly fair hair – and your face all plastered and painted –

Florence Nicky – Nicky – stop – stop – stop!

She flings herself face downwards on the bed. Nicky goes over to her.

Nicky Mother!

Florence Go away – go away – I hate you – go away –

Nicky Mother – sit up –

Florence (*pulling herself together*) Go out of my room –

Nicky Mother –

Florence I don't ever want to see you again – you're insane – you've said wicked, wicked things to me – you've talked to me as though I were a woman off the streets. I can't bear any more – I can't bear any more!

Nicky I have a slight confession to make –

Florence Confession?

Nicky Yes.

Florence Go away – go away –

Nicky *(taking a small gold box from his pocket)* Look —

Florence What do you mean — what is it —?

Nicky Don't you know?

Florence *takes the box with trembling fingers and opens it. She stares at it for a moment. When she speaks again her voice is quite dead.*

Florence Nicky, it isn't — you haven't —?

Nicky Why do you look so shocked?

Florence *(dully)* Oh, my God!

Nicky What does it matter?

Florence *suddenly rises and hurls the box out of the window.*

That doesn't make it any better.

Florence *(flinging herself on her knees beside him)* Nicky, promise me, oh, promise you'll never do it again — never in your life — it's frightful — horrible —

Nicky It's only just the beginning.

Florence What can I say to you — what can I say to you?

Nicky Nothing — under the circumstances.

Florence What do you mean?

Nicky It can't possibly matter — now.

Florence Matter — but it's the finish of everything — you're young, you're just starting on your life — you must stop — you must swear never to touch it again — swear to me on your oath, Nicky — I'll help you — I'll help you —

Nicky You!

He turns away.

Florence *(burying her face in her hands and moaning)* Oh — oh — oh!

Nicky How could you possibly help me?

Florence *(clutching him)* Nicky!

Nicky *(almost losing control)* Shut up — shut up — don't touch me —

Florence *(trying to take him in her arms)* Nicky — Nicky —

Nicky I'm trying to control myself, but you won't let me — you're an awfully rotten woman, really.

Florence Nicky — stop — stop — stop —

She beats him with her fists.

Nicky Leave go of me!

He breaks away from her, and going up to the dressing-table he sweeps everything off on to the floor with his arm.

Florence (*screaming*) Oh – oh – Nicky —!

Nicky Now then! Now then! You're not to have any more lovers; you're not going to be beautiful and successful ever again – you're going to be my mother for once – it's about time I had one to help me, before I go over the edge altogether —

Florence Nicky – Nicky —

Nicky Promise me to be different – you've got to promise me!

Florence (*sinking on to the end of couch, facing audience*) Yes – yes – I promise – (*The tears are running down her face.*)

Nicky I love you, really – that's why it's so awful.

He falls on his knees by her side and buries his face in her lap.

Florence No. No, not awful – don't say that – I love you, too.

Nicky (*sobbing hopelessly*) Oh, mother —!

Florence (*staring in front of her*) I wish I were dead!

Nicky It doesn't matter about death, but it matters terribly about life.

Florence I know —

Nicky (*desperately*) Promise me you'll be different – promise me you'll be different —

Florence Yes, yes – I'll try —

Nicky We'll both try.

Florence Yes, dear. – Oh, my dear —!

She sits quite still, staring in front of her – the tears are rolling down her cheeks, and she is stroking Nicky's hair mechanically in an effort to calm him.

CURTAIN