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# **LORD ARTHUR SAVILE'S CRIME**

**A play by**

**JULIA BRITTON**

**Based on a short story by Oscar Wilde**

## **CHARACTERS**

LADY WINDERMERE, 40  
LADY CLEMENTINA, Elderly  
COUNT ROUVALOFF  
LORD ARTHUR SAVILE  
MR. SEPTIMUS B. PODGERS  
LADY FRASER ("KITTY")  
SYBIL MERTON, Lord Arthur's fiancée  
STREET WOMEN (WITH PAINTED FACES)  
CONSTABLE  
SMITHERS, Lord Arthur's butler  
LORD SURBITON, Lord Arthur's younger brother  
A MEMBER OF LADY CLEMENTINA'S STAFF  
HERR WINKLEKOPF  
A FRENCH NEWSPAPER BOY  
A YOUNG GIRL

**LORD ARTHUR SAVILE'S CRIME** was first read at Theatre 62 in Adelaide, c. 1975.

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## SCENE ONE

**– LADY WINDERMERE'S GARDEN. A PARTY IS IN PROGRESS. A PIANO IS HEARD BEING PLAYED. LADY CLEMENTINA, AN ELDERLY, TALKATIVE HYPOCHRONDRIAC IS CHATTING TO COUNT ROUVALOFF. HE IS A MIDDLE-AGED RUSSIAN OF UNDISTINGUISHED APPEARANCE.**

LADY CLEMENTINA: I do hope you are enjoying the party, Count Rouvaloff.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: It is my first taste of English society, Lady Clementia, and I find it most interesting indeed.

LADY CLEMENTINA: How long have you been in England, Count?

COUNT ROUVALOFF: It is now one month since I came from St. Petersburg.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Ah! St. Petersburg! I can picture it. The frozen rivers, the sleigh bells tinkling and everywhere the snow... the snow...

COUNT ROUVALOFF: It is now summer in Russia, just as it is here.

LADY CLEMENTINA: How very extraordinary. I really must remember to tell Arthur. Arthur is my nephew, a dear boy, you must meet him. He's not quite my nephew, of course, a little more distant than that, but I like to think of him as a nephew.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: I have met so many charming people here this afternoon.

LADY CLEMENTINA: I'm sure you have. Lady Windermere attracts the most interesting guests. There are at least six cabinet ministers here – and did you see the Princess? Princess Sophia, I mean, of Karlsruhe, the rather heavily-built dark lady with the wonderful emeralds talking shocking French at the top of her voice. And the bishops! There's a perfect bevy of them following that stout prima donna about.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: I am fascinated too, by Lady Windermere herself. She is so... What is the word I want?

LADY CLEMENTINA: Gracious... gracious and lovely. She was a great beauty in her younger days... still is, of course and she has caused many a flutter in her time. Debrett credits her with *three* husbands, you know.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: *Three* husbands? Surely that is a little excessive.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Ah, but you see, she never changed her lover and so the world soon stopped gossiping about her. **(LORD ARTHUR approaches them)** Here is Arthur. Arthur, you simply must meet Count Rouvaloff, from St. Petersburg – Lord Arthur Savile.

LORD ARTHUR: Did you come to London with the Russian Ambassador, Count?

COUNT ROUVALOFF: No, no, indeed. Quite the opposite, I'm afraid. The Ambassador and I do not – how do you say it? Knock it off together at all. I am here on quite another mission.

LORD ARTHUR: Not political?

COUNT ROUVALOFF: No, no, not political at all. I am writing a book – on Peter the Great of Russia. The Tsar came over to England once, you know, to learn to be a carpenter, to work in a shipbuilding yard. I am making my researches there.

LORD ARTHUR: That should interest you, Lady Clem. Lady Clementina is a great reader of romances.

LADY CLEMENTINA: It all sounds most mysterious to me. I'm quite sure it is a cloak for something far more... exciting. Are you sure you are not planning to blow up the House of Lords, Count?

LORD ARTHUR: What an extraordinary idea, Lady Clementina... Whatever made you think of that?

LADY CLEMENTINA: I heard the Count say he was an expert on explosives a minute ago.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Yes, it is quite true, in a way... I have studied these things. But I assure you I do not intend to use them in England. In Russian I own some mines.

**ENTER LADY WINDERMERE. SHE IS ABOUT FORTY AND ATTRACTIVE.**

- LADY WINDERMERE:       **(Looking around)** Where *is* my cheiromantist?
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       Your what, Alice?
- LADY WINDERMERE:       My cheiromantist. I can't live without him.
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       Dear, dear Alice! You are always so original. **(To LORD ARTHUR)** Tell me, dear boy, what is a cheiromantist?
- COUNT ROUVALOFF:       **(Baffled)** A cheiromantist?
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       Not, I hope, the same as a chiropodist.
- LORD ARTHUR:            Something a little more psychic, Lady Clementina.
- LADY WINDERMERE:       He comes regularly, twice a week, to see my hand.
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       You see, he *is* a sort of chiropodist. How very dreadful. I hope he is not a foreigner at any rate. It wouldn't be quite so bad then.
- LADY WINDERMERE:       I must certainly introduce him to you.
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       Introduce him? You mean to say he is here? My dear, it has been a delightful afternoon, and now I really must be...
- LADY WINDERMERE:       Of course he is here. I wouldn't dream of giving a party without him. He tells me I have a really psychic hand and if my thumbs had been the least little bit shorter I should have renounced the world and gone into a convent.
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       Oh, I see. He tells fortunes, I suppose.
- LADY WINDERMERE:       And misfortunes too, any amount of them. Next year, for instance, I am in great danger, both by land and sea, so I am going to live in a large balloon and draw up my dinner in a basket each evening. It is all written down on my little finger, or the palm of my hand, I forget which.
- LADY CLEMENTINA:       But surely all this is tempting Providence, my dear.

LADY WINDERMERE: My dear Lady Clem, surely Providence can resist temptation by this time. I think everyone should have their hands told once a month so as to know what not to do. Now if someone doesn't fetch Mr. Podgers at once, I shall have to go myself. And we wouldn't want that now, would we?

LORD ARTHUR: Let me go, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE: Thank you so much, Arthur. But I'm afraid you wouldn't recognise him.

LORD ARTHUR: If he is as extraordinary as you say, Lady Windermere, I could scarcely fail to. Tell me what he like, and I'll bring him to you at once.

LADY WINDERMERE: Well, he's not at all like a cheiromantist. I mean he's not mysterious looking or esoteric or romantic. He's a little stout man, with a funny baldhead and great gold-rimmed spectacles.

LORD ARTHUR: He sounds like something between a family doctor and a country attorney.

LADY WINDERMERE: Exactly, my dear Arthur. I'm really so sorry. All my pianists look exactly like politicians and my politicians like pianists.

LORD ARTHUR: How extremely inconsiderate of them.

LADY WINDERMERE: I remember last season, asking a dreadful conspirator to dinner, a man who had assassinated ever so many people and always wore a coat of mail and carried a dagger up his shirt sleeve.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Was not that a little dangerous?

LADY WINDERMERE: Do you know, when he came, he just looked like a nice old boring clergyman and told us silly jokes all evening. And when I asked him about the coat of mail, he only laughed, and said it was too cold to wear it in England! **(MR. PODGERS approaches them)** Oh, here is Mr. Podgers. Now Mr. Podgers, I want to read Lady Clementia's hand. Lady Clem you must take your glove off. No, not the left, the other.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Dear Alice, I really don't think it is quite right.

LADY WINDERMERE: Nothing interesting ever is. That's the way of the world. But I must introduce you. Lady Clem, this is Mr. Podgers, my pet cheiromantist. Mr. Podgers, this is Lady Clementina, and if you say she has a larger mountain on the moon than I have, I will never believe in you again.

LADY CLEMENTINA: I am sure, Alice, there is nothing of this kind in my delicate hand.

MR. PODGERS: **(Taking her hand carefully)** Your ladyship is quite right. The mountain of the moon is not developed. Now... let me see... ambition, very moderate, line of intellect, not exaggerated.

LADY WINDERMERE: Now do be indiscreet, Mr. Podgers.

MR. PODGERS: Nothing would give me greater pleasure, if Lady Clementina had ever been, but I am sorry to say I find permanence of affection combined with a strong sense of duty.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Pray go on, Mr. Podgers...

MR. PODGERS: Economy is not the least of your ladyship's virtues.

**LADY WINDERMERE LAUGHS.**

LADY CLEMENTINA: Economy is a good thing. When I married Borthwick he had twelve castles and not a single fit to live in. Since he died, I have lived in my *tiny* little house in town. You see I like...

MR. PODGERS: Comfort, modern improvements, hot water laid on in every bedroom and the new electric light. Your ladyship is quite right. Comfort is the only thing our modern civilisation can give us.

LADY CLEMENTINA: What else do you see, Mr. Podgers?

MR. PODGERS: You are very fond of romances... suffer from stomach ailments... and the lifeline, let me see... yes, well marked except for one or two tiny little deviations.

LADY WINDERMERE: I knew it. Tell us about them.

MR. PODGERS: Kindly bend the wrist... a little more... yes, there's nothing startling there. A very satisfactory line indeed.

LADY WINDERMERE: You have read Lady Clem's character admirably, Mr. Podgers, except you never told us about her passion for marron glaces and strawberry ices. Really, it's quite uncanny. Count Rouvaloff, we are dying to hear all about your many and... *varied* indiscretions. Come, be the next victim...

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Oh, no, no. I should not at all like it.

LORD ARTHUR: Come on, be a sport.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: What does this mean "be a sport"? I do not like sport.

LORD ARTHUR: No, it's an expression. The English use it to blackmail you into doing something you don't want to.

LADY WINDERMERE: We simply won't take no for an answer. **(Taking his hand)** There now...

MR. PODGERS: An adventurous nature... four voyages in the past and several to come. Been shipwrecked three times... no, twice, one is to come. A life packed with, with...

LADY WINDERMERE: Yes?

MR. PODGERS: Activity...

LADY WINDERMERE: What sort of activity?

MR. PODGERS: With one or two uneventful periods... enforced leisure, perhaps... many important people have crossed your path, sometimes I fear, to their detriment... subject to occasional chest troubles...

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Extraordinary! I must tell my wife about this...

MR. PODGERS: Your third wife, Count.

LADY WINDERMERE: You see, it's impossible to hide anything. The truth will out. **(Sees LADY FRASER pass by)** Come Kitty, show Mr. Podgers your hand. **(To everyone)** Lady Fraser has such a flexible *and* artistic hand... or am I giving away *secrets*?

MR. PODGERS: Lady Fraser does not really care for art, but is extremely fond of... of artists.

LADY WINDERMERE: Here comes Sybil Merton... **(SYBIL MERTON enters with LORD SURBITON)** Do bring her to have her hand read, Arthur. Though I'm afraid Mr. Podgers won't be able to say anything except perfectly charming things about her.

SYBIL: I simply refuse to let you make me sound so uninteresting, Lady Windermere.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Taking her hand)** The prettiest hand in all of London.

LADY WINDERMERE: And don't tell us that Miss Merton and Lord Arthur are to be married soon, because that appeared last month in "The Morning Post".

MR. PODGERS: I see a long, happy life stretching out before you, mostly in the country. You are fond of flowers, animals, children... and you are an excellent pianist, but perhaps, hardly a musician. I see a slight shadow cast itself over your life...

LORD ARTHUR: What do you mean?

MR. PODGERS: But not for very long... and you will live to be...

SYBIL: No, don't tell me any more, I must keep some secrets for myself. Now Arthur, your hand.

LORD ARTHUR: I'm sure Mr. Podgers has had enough for one session, Sybil.

SYBIL: Oh no, my dear. I had my turn. Now I want to hear all about your secrets, before it's too late...

LORD ARTHUR: This is rather ridiculous.

LADY WINDERMERE: You see how nervous he's getting. You'll probably find he has a bad temper, a tendency to gout and a wife living in Bayswater or somewhere...

LORD ARTHUR: I have nothing to hide. Sybil knows me as well as I know her.

LADY WINDERMERE: Ah, I am a little sorry to hear you say that. The proper basis for marriage is a mutual misunderstanding. No, I'm not at all cynical. I have merely got experience, which however, is my much the same thing.

SYBIL: Do read Lord Arthur's hand, Mr. Podgers, so that I can hear my fate too.

**MR. PODGERS TAKES LORD ARTHUR'S HAND, SHUDDERS, HIS FACE TWITCHES NERVOUSLY BUT HE SAYS NOTHING. HE TAKES OUT A LARGE HANDKERCHIEF AND WIPES HIS BROW.**

LORD ARTHUR: I am waiting, Mr. Podgers.

LADY WINDERMERE: We are all waiting, Mr. Podgers.

**MR. PODGERS MAKES NO REPLY.**

LORD ARTHUR: Your hand feels quite cold and clammy.

SYBIL: I do believe Arthur is going on the stage and Mr. Podgers is afraid of telling him.

**MR. PODGERS SUDDENLY DROPS LORD ARTHUR'S RIGHT HAND AND SEIZES HOLD OF HIS LEFT, BENDING SO LOW THAT HIS SPECTACLES NEARLY TOUCH THE PALM. HE GOES RIGID WITH HORROR. THEN WITH AN EFFORT, REGAINS HIS COMPOSURE.**

MR. PODGERS: It is the hand of a... of a charming young man.

LADY WINDERMERE: Of course it is. But will he be a charming husband? That is what I want to know.

SYBIL: I don't think a husband should be too fascinating, it's so very dangerous.

LADY WINDERMERE: My dear child, they never are too fascinating. But what I want to hear are the finer points, the details. Details are the only things that interest me. What is going to happen to Lord Arthur, Mr. Podgers?

MR. PODGERS: Within the next few months Lord Arthur will go on a voyage.

LADY WINDERMERE: Oh yes, his honeymoon, of course.

MR. PODGERS: ...and lose a relative.

SYBIL: Not his sister, I hope. I'm devoted to her.

MR. PODGERS: Certainly not his sister. A distant relative, merely.

LADY WINDERMERE: I'm dreadfully disappointed. No one cares about distant relatives nowadays. They went out of fashion years ago. But Sybil dear, perhaps you had better have a black silk gown made up just to have by, it always does for church, you know. Now, let us go for a little refreshment. Oh, Mr. Podgers, you look quite exhausted. Lady Clem, I'm sure you are tired.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Just a little, my dear. I suffer from a good deal of heartburn these days, indigestion, you know. It's quite upsetting. I think I shall call my carriage.

LADY WINDERMERE: I do hope our fortune telling hasn't been too much of an excitement for you.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Not at all, my dear Alice. I have enjoyed myself immensely and the chiropodist, I mean the cheiromantist is most interesting. **(Looking about)** Where can my tortoiseshell fan be? **(LORD ARTHUR hands it to her)** Oh, thank you, Arthur, so much. And my shawl? **(SYBIL assists her)** Oh, thank you Sybil, my dear girl. You must bring her to see me. She's a charming girl. And pretty...

**EXEUNT ALL EXCEPT LORD ARTHUR WHO PACES UP AND DOWN. HE LOOKS AT HIS HAND SEARCHINGLY. MR. PODGERS RE-ENTERS. THEIR EYES MEET AND THERE IS A MOMENT'S SILENCE.**

MR. PODGERS: Lady Clementina has left one of her gloves here and has asked me to bring it to her. Ah, I see it on the table. Good day, Lord Arthur...

LORD ARTHUR: Mr. Podgers, I must insist on your giving me a straightforward answer to a question I am going to put to you.

MR. PODGERS: Another time, Lord Arthur. Lady Clementina is so anxious. I am afraid I must go.

LORD ARTHUR: You shall not go. Lady Clementina is in no hurry.

MR. PODGERS: Ladies should not be kept waiting, Lord Arthur. The fair sex is apt to become impatient.

LORD ARTHUR: Lady Clem will be quite happy gobbling up cakes and devouring sandwiches. That's why she gets heartburn. But I cannot wait to hear what you saw in my hand that made you turn that sickly yellow. Tell me the truth. Immediately. I must know. I am not a child.

**MR. PODGERS BLINKING AND MOVING UNEASILY FROM ONE FOOT TO THE OTHER AND FIDGETTING WITH HIS WATCH CHAIN.**

MR. PODGERS: What makes you think I saw anything in your hand, any more than I told you?

LORD ARTHUR: I know you did, and I *insist* on your telling me what it was. I will pay, and pay you handsomely. I will give you a cheque for five hundred pounds.

MR. PODGERS: **(With quickening interest)** Guineas?

LORD ARTHUR: Certainly. I will send you a cheque tomorrow. What is your club?

MR. PODGERS: I have no club... that is to say, not just a present, Lord Arthur. **(He produces a calling card)** My address is...

LORD ARTHUR: **(Reading)** Mr. Septimus B. Podgers, Professional Cheiromantist. 103A West Moon Street.

MR. PODGERS: My hours are from ten to four and I make a reduction for families.

LORD ARTHUR: Be quick. They'll be back again soon.

MR. PODGERS: **(Glancing nervously around. Beckons him to a seat)** It will take a little time, Lord Arthur... You'd better sit down.

LORD ARTHUR: Be quick, sir.

**MR. PODGERS DRAWS A SMALL MAGNIFYING GLASS FROM HIS POCKET AND WIPES IT ON A WHITE HANDKERCHIEF.**

MR. PODGERS: You are a man of many... *talents*. And great resources.

LORD ARTHUR: To the point quickly. Don't waste time in the trimmings.

MR. PODGERS: There's a difficult time ahead of you, I am afraid.

LORD ARTHUR: I have gathered so much. Be explicit. What form will this difficulty take?

MR. PODGERS: It will take several forms, I am afraid you will be greatly distressed.

LORD ARTHUR: Distressed! I'm distracted already. Speak plainly. Am I going to die? Do I have an unspeakable disease, you know what I mean?

MR. PODGERS: No, Lord Arthur. You are not going to die. You're not ill. You are going to commit a murder.

## SCENE TWO

**– A STREET IN LONDON AT NIGHT. IT IS FOGGY AND LORD ARTHUR, IN EVENING ATTIRE WANDERS DISTRACTEDLY. STREET WOMEN WITH PAINTED FACES ACCOST HIM. A POLICE NOTICE IS LIT BY A GAS LAMP: "WANTED FOR MURDER". AS HE STANDS BEFORE IT, A CONSTABLE ON HIS BEAT TAPS HIM ON THE SHOULDER. HE STARTS ROUND IN TERROR. THE CONSTABLE HANDS HIM A WHITE GLOVE HE HAS DROPPED.**

## SCENE THREE

**- THE NEXT MORNING AT LORD ARTHUR'S FLAT. HE IS IN HIS ELABORATE DRESSING GOWN. DURING PART OF THE SCENE HE DRESSES.**

LORD ARTHUR: **(Muttering to himself)** Murder... murder, no - it must have been a bad dream. **(He rings a small bell)** Murder... oh, no, no. Oh my head. **(SMITHERS enters)** What's the time, Smithers? I must have overslept.

SMITHERS: It's nearly twelve o'clock, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: Great heavens! Have I slept so long?

SMITHERS: Your lordship was in so late last night that I hesitated to wake you. And you was so restless and talking in your sleep...

LORD ARTHUR: Talking? What was I saying? Did you hear?

SMITHERS: Oh nothing much, my lord, just words, like: "I must do it", "soon", "I must do it". Nothing indiscreet at all. Shall I bring your coffee and "The Times", my lord?

LORD ARTHUR: Just the coffee.

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

**SMITHERS GOES AND LORD ARTHUR WANDERS AROUND. HE FIDDLES WITH THE COLOURED CRAVATS LAID OUT FOR HIM, THEN PICKS UP A WHITE CARD FROM A TABLE.**

LORD ARTHUR: Septimus B. Podgers, 103A West Moon Street... So it wasn't a dream.

**HE GOES TO THE WINDOW AND GAZES OUT.**

SMITHERS: **(Entering with coffee on a silver tray)** Anything further, my lord?

LORD ARTHUR: I want you to take a letter to this address for me. Come back for it in a few minutes. I'll have it ready.

**SMITHERS EXITS. LORD ARTHUR SIPS HIS COFFEE MEDITATIVELY.**

SMITHERS: **(Re-entering)** Your lordship's brother, Lord Surbiton is here.

LORD ARTHUR: Oh. Tell him I'm out.

SMITHERS: Beg your pardon, my lord, but he already knows you're here.

LORD ARTHUR: Oh very well. Tell him I'm indisposed, I'm ill. Tell him anything you like, but get rid of him.

**LORD SURBITON, LORD ARTHUR'S YOUNGER BROTHER ENTERS – THE HEIGHT OF STYLE.**

LORD SURBITON: Hello Arthur, I...

LORD ARTHUR: Oh go away, Subbie, I am not feeling at all like conversation.

LORD SURBITON: That's all right. I'll just have some coffee – in silence. Bring another cup, Smithers and some more hot milk.

SMITHERS: Yes, Lord Surbiton.

**SMITHERS EXITS.**

LORD SURBITON: Why so down in the mouth, Arthur? Trouble with pretty Sybil?

LORD ARTHUR: Of course not. It's something quite personal and most important. It's essential that I have peace and quiet to work it out. I'm in an extremely difficult situation and I would appreciate it if you would like me alone with deal with it.

LORD SURBITON: I'm in a rather a tight spot myself, Arthur, I came around to ask you if...

LORD ARTHUR: If it's money, Subbie, I'll lend it. But don't worry me by hanging around.

LORD SURBITON: But I haven't had my coffee yet. **(He picks up the card from the table)** Septimus B. Podgers. What a funny name. What in the world is a professional cheiromantist? It sounds sinister.

LORD ARTHUR: Put the card down at once. It is nothing to do with you.

SMITHERS: **(Entering with coffee)** Is the letter ready, my lord?

**LORD SURBITON TAKES HIS COFFEE.**

LORD SURBITON: Thank you, Smithers.

LORD ARTHUR: Wait a moment. **(He takes a cheque book, writes a cheque, tears it out puts it into the envelope, seals and addresses it and gives it to SMITHERS. LORD SURBITON looks over his shoulder as he does this)** Deliver this letter to the address on this card. There will be no reply.

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

**HE TAKES THE LETTER AND GOES.**

LORD SURBITON: Five hundred guineas. Are you out of your mind?

LORD ARTHUR: Be quiet, Subbie. It's absolutely none of your business.

LORD SURBITON: What's the man up to? Is he blackmailing you?

LORD ARTHUR: Not at all. It's payment for some services he rendered me, if you must know.

LORD SURBITON: Cheiromantist? Isn't that some sort of crystal gazer or fortune teller? Surely you haven't been going to séances and raising up spirits and all the kind of thing again?

LORD ARTHUR: What do you mean *again*?

LORD SURBITON: Have you forgotten about the mad nun of Vampire Abbey?

LORD ARTHUR: That. That was a boyish prank, Subbie. I've told you, this time I'm in serious, desperate trouble.

LORD SURBITON: Why don't you tell me about it? If it's only a matter of advice and not money, I might be able to assist you.

LORD ARTHUR: If I do tell you, you won't believe me.

LORD SURBITON: Is it as bad as that?

LORD ARTHUR: It couldn't be worse.

LORD SURBITON: Not some girl you've got yourself entangled with?

LORD ARTHUR: No, I don't think so.

LORD SURBITON: What do you mean, you don't *think* so? That situation at least, doesn't leave much room for doubt.

LORD ARTHUR: Listen carefully, Subbie. I'm going to commit a murder.

LORD SURBITON: Well, perhaps in the circumstances I better had better be going. After all, you won't want too many people in the way and at a time like this one must respect...

LORD ARTHUR: Whatever I do now and wherever I do it, you, because I have confided in you, are an accessory before the crime.

LORD SURBITON: No, Arthur. I really would rather not be. I have had absolutely no experience of that kind of thing...

LORD ARTHUR: There has to be the first time for everything. I have got to commit this murder. It's quite imperative – I simply cannot evade it.

LORD SURBITON: All right Arthur. If you say so. Shall I drop in tomorrow and we can talk it over? I might have some good ideas by then...

LORD ARTHUR: Don't move! Sit down and listen. It's here. **(Holds up his hand and stares at it)** Look. Look at the lines. Can't you see? It's as plain as the hand before your face. It's destiny. It's decreed in my fate. I can't escape it, and I know it.

LORD SURBITON: Well, if it's to be, it's to be. There's no cheating fate, not even for five hundred guineas.

LORD ARTHUR: No amount of money can turn aside the course of destiny.

LORD SURBITON: Are you sure? I take it this Podgers has seen something unpleasant in your hand. Perhaps for another small consideration he might see something quite different. Try him on where the mad nun buried Sir Eldred's diamond cross – if you think he can go back that far.

LORD ARTHUR: This was no parlour trick, Subbie. He saw murder in my hand all right. He was just as horrified as I was. There were beads of sweat on his forehead.

LORD SURBITON: With a name like that he probably sweats easily.

LORD ARTHUR: I've had plenty of proof that this man is genuine. He's practically infallible. And I'm convinced it's true. I don't mind myself. I'm resigned. It's Sybil I'm thinking about. Married to a murderer. The trial, the execution – no, it would be too much for her. But Subbie, I can't give her up. I love her far too deeply.

LORD SURBITON: Yes, it does seem a *little* awkward. Tell me, Arthur, is it only one murder you are fated to commit, or are you to embark on a whole series of grisly crimes – to run berserk, or amok or something picturesque of that kind?

LORD ARTHUR: No, no as far as I know, it's only the one.

LORD SURBITON: Well, that is something to be thankful for.

LORD ARTHUR: I can't say I find it particularly comforting. You do remember, Subbie, I am to be married next week? Do you realise what this means? Next week! I simply cannot face Sybil with this threat hanging over me. Even if it doesn't come true immediately, there is always the chance that it might later, sometime, somehow. And I have a dreadful premonition that it will.

LORD SURBITON: If that's the case, then, I suppose you'd better get it over.

LORD ARTHUR: What do you mean? Get it over?

LORD SURBITON: Exactly what I say. Don't you remember old Mumpsie telling us in the nursery 'if you've got something unpleasant to do, then the best thing is to get it over quickly'.

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, but the sort of thing she had in mind was getting splinters from under a toenail.

LORD SURBITON: The principle's the same. If you have to do this thing, the sooner you get it over the better. If it's done you won't have to worry any more, will you?

LORD ARTHUR: You're beginning to convince me. Yes, you may be right. **(He picks up a razor)** Immediate action. There's a great deal to be said for it. Yes, that's a sound piece of reasoning, Subbie, I didn't think you had it in you.

LORD SURBITON: Take care. Put that thing down. Don't mistake me, not too soon, Arthur, not immediately. We must give this matter thought. We must plan it. Plan it thoroughly, meticulously...

LORD ARTHUR: **(Still with razor in hand)** Precisely. Yes, it's my duty to Sybil to plan this carefully, carry it through efficiently, and have it all behind me before I take her hand in mine. I owe it to her to come to her with a clear conscience, with no ugly threat hanging over our happiness. This murder will not be a sin, but a sacrifice.

LORD SURBITON: Arthur, give me the razor, please.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Testing the razor's sharpness)** I must choose now, between living for myself and living for others and dreadful though the task may be, I must not let selfish feelings triumph over love.

LORD SURBITON: No, no, of course not.

LORD ARTHUR: The next step, then is to choose a victim, or shall we say a subject.

LORD SURBITON: Look here, Arthur, I simply cannot *and* will not concentrate while you are waving that razor about. It distracts me.

**HE PUTS IT DOWN.**

LORD ARTHUR: I'm sorry Subbie. It just helped me feel the part. Now, who is it to be?

LORD SURBITON: Does that matter very much?

LORD ARTHUR: No, I suppose it really doesn't...

LORD SURBITON: If you must murder someone, well, I mean, there's absolutely no need to brood about who it should be. Just seize the first convenient chance.

LORD ARTHUR: You are not, I hope, suggesting that I should murder a perfect stranger? That I find is a quite immoral suggestion. The person might prove unsuitable.

LORD SURBITON: You are scarcely in a position to ask for references. No, you must take your chance. Your first available opportunity...

LORD ARTHUR: But that would be cold-blooded murder.

LORD SURBITON: Haven't you any enemies?

LORD ARTHUR: I can't think of any. Unless one is outstanding in some way, one is unlikely to make enemies.

LORD SURBITON: Then you must choose a total stranger.

LORD ARTHUR: I don't agree. In matters of this kind it is far better to keep things in the family, or if that is impossible in one's close circle.

LORD SURBITON: Perhaps you are right. Have you any preference for either sex?

LORD ARTHUR: No. **(Thinks)** I don't think so.

LORD SURBITON: Is there any one of our connections you particularly dislike?

LORD ARTHUR: Quite a number. But I certainly do not want to conceive this in a mood of petty personal malice. No, Subbie, we must select someone is thoroughly suitable for the role.

LORD SURBITON: Any suggestions?

LORD ARTHUR: No, not off hand. This needs careful thought.

LORD SURBITON: What about the D'Esboroughs? The ones who live down in Somerset. There are such a lot of them, one would scarcely be missed. They're a loathsome bunch. There are several maiden aunts, too, and they are all distant – *very* distant relatives.

LORD ARTHUR: I don't know very much about them. I remember Harry, a most unsatisfactory individual. I always suspected he stole a bottle of claret from me at Eton. And there's Dorian...

LORD SURBITON: Do you remember grand-uncle Angus? The one who lived in a castle in Arran. We once had to visit him when we were children. He had a horrible smelly moat. Perhaps you could arrange to push him in. It would seem quite natural.

LORD: He died several years ago.

LORD SURBITON: What about one of the Liston girls? There are eight of them, I believe.

LORD ARTHUR: Too young and inexperienced. We need someone more mature. Wait! I think I have it... Lady Clementina.

LORD SURBITON: Lady Clem?

LORD ARTHUR: Why not? After all old Borthwick died years ago and she's always saying she wants to join him. Look at it this way, I'm doing her a wonderful favour. She had *dreadful* heartburn too, she told me so herself. Always complaining and complaining about it.

LORD SURBITON: But I'm rather fond of her.

LORD ARTHUR: So am I. In a way, I feel drawn to her.

LORD SURBITON: At least she lives near.

LORD ARTHUR: And there would be absolutely no motive. We have always been on the best of terms.

LORD SURBITON: I wouldn't like her to suffer at all, Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: Of course not, Subbie. I would *never* dream of allowing such a thing to happen. It must be absolutely painless.

LORD SURBITON: How?

LORD ARTHUR: Poison. Ring for Smithers. **(LORD SURBITON hesitates)** Ring Subbie. This is most urgent.

**HE DOES SO.**

LORD SURBITON: What are you going to do?

LORD ARTHUR: Wait. You will see.

**SMITHERS ENTERS.**

SMITHERS: My lord?

LORD ARTHUR: You delivered my letter?

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: I have another errand for you.

SMITHERS: Very well, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: I want you to take a message to the librarian of the Buckingham Club. Ask him to give you all the books he can on Toxicology.

SMITHERS: Toxi...?

LORD ARTHUR: Toxicology, Smithers. I'll write it down for you.

**HE SCRIBBLES IT ON A CARD.**

SMITHERS: **(Taking the card)** Very well, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: And Smithers...

SMITHERS: My lord?

LORD ARTHUR: Smithers call at the florist's on the way and have flowers sent to Miss Merton.

SMITHERS: Any special kind, my lord?

LORD ARTHUR: Tea roses... and white carnations, perhaps. As many as can be arranged. I leave it to him.

SMITHERS: **(As he leaves)** Toxicology... tea roses...

LORD SURBITON: Are you quite decided on poison. There are grave risks of detection.

LORD ARTHUR: I could not bear the thought of any kind of physical violence. Besides I would hate to murder Lady Clem in any way that might attract attention. I might find myself being lionised at Lady Windermere's parties and that would be most distasteful.

LORD SURBITON: To be conspicuous is always in bad taste and in this case might even result in your dropping out of society completely.

LORD ARTHUR: And I have Sybil's parents to consider. They are rather old-fashioned people, and they might object to the marriage if there was anything like a scandal – not that I think they are unreasonable. I'm sure if they knew the facts of the case they would be the first to appreciate my motives.

LORD SURBITON: Isn't that the doorbell?

LORD ARTHUR: I'm expecting Sybil. Be a good fellow and see who it is.

LORD SURBITON: If it is Sybil, shall I go?

LORD ARTHUR: Do this. Leave us for a few minutes. I must make some kind of explanation to her. Why not go into the little French café over the road and come back when she leaves? I do need your help still.

LORD SURBITON: I am getting hungry.

LORD ARTHUR: All right. You can have luncheon here. Meanwhile, you'll find they make very good buttered muffins over there. Go now.

**LORD SURBITON GOES AND SYBIL ENTERS.**

LORD ARTHUR: My darling. How charming you are look. Did you come alone?

SYBIL: I brought Eleanor with me for appearances' sake, but I told her to wait for me in that little French café across the road. I met Subbie at the door. He seemed in a hurry.

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, he has some urgent business to attend to about some muffins.

SYBIL: Muffins?

LORD ARTHUR: Did I say muffins? I meant... muskets. He's about to purchase some antique muskets for his collection.

SYBIL: Collection? I don't remember...

LORD ARTHUR: He's just began it. This is his first purchase. It's very sweet of you to visit.

SYBIL: I shan't be able to stay long, Arthur. There's so much still to be done about my trousseau. I have appointments for fittings practically all day. I've only just been able to squeeze you in between my milliner and my dressmaker.

LORD ARTHUR: Well, I hope they are both... charming.

SYBIL: They are both quite plain and well over fifty. And then I must see the embroiderers who working on my... my... oh dear, I can't mention them, but I do feel I should have the crest on absolutely everything, don't you darling?

LORD ARTHUR: Sybil, darling. I want you to come here and sit down beside me. I have something very important to tell you.

SYBIL: Arthur... what is it?

LORD ARTHUR: And I want you to be very brave and very understanding. And whatever you may feel, I want you to remember that I love you with all my life.

SYBIL: I feel quite afraid.

LORD ARTHUR: I don't know how to tell you, Sybil... I know it will be a dreadful and horrible shock. But the wedding must be put off.

SYBIL: Put off? Whatever for? Do you mean that... you... that you have changed your mind?

LORD ARTHUR: No, no, it's only for a little while, and then, everything will be perfect again.

SYBIL: But why? The date is fixed, all arrangements have been made... the guests... Arthur! You can't be serious.

LORD ARTHUR: Be brave, Sybil, darling. This is one of the things decreed by fate that has to be. I can't even explain it to you fully. But trust me, Sybil, just trust me in this one thing. I know it will be the best for both of us.

SYBIL: What is it Arthur? Are you in some kind of trouble or...

LORD ARTHUR: Desperate trouble. But give me a little time – a few weeks, less perhaps, and it will be all over. Completely over and done with. And it will never recur. I shall devote my *entire* resources – mental and physical, if needs be, to freeing myself of this entanglement as fast as I can. But say you trust me, my darling...

SYBIL: Is it... it couldn't be another woman?

LORD ARTHUR: No, no, my love – or least not in the way you think. It's more – how can I put it? A family matter. But one I assure you, of a most pressing kind.

SYBIL: Tell me this. Are you quite certain that you love me?

LORD ARTHUR: I have never been more certain of anything in my life. I love you with all my heart and soul.

SYBIL: Then... I will trust you Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: I promise you that once this is over, I shall never make you sad, ever again. Don't cry Sybil. Let me kiss away your tears.

SYBIL: Tell me, Arthur, please tell me what this dreadful thing is. Perhaps I could help you.

LORD ARTHUR: No, my love, only I can deal with this. You can help me by being brave. It will only be a very short delay, I promise. But until this is... er... executed I cannot, I dare not make a definite date for the wedding day. You see, dearest, I might have to go abroad for a short time.

SYBIL: Abroad? It is something dangerous?

LORD ARTHUR: Not in the least. I may only have to be away for perhaps, a few days, a week. Just a very short stay, I hope. Can you forgive me? Look at me Sybil. You know how much I love you. If I loved you less I would leave this unpleasant business till after we were married. But I don't want to marry you under any shadow. It must be all summer sunshine for you.

SYBIL: I'm beginning to feel very nervous. Is it such a difficult thing to do?

LORD ARTHUR: It's as easy as putting sugar in your tea. But it must be done and now.

SYBIL: If only you could tell me more. I don't care what you have done. I don't care if you've committed a murder or...

LORD ARTHUR: A murder! Whatever put that into your head?

SYBIL: Yes, a murder. I should still love you and want to help you.

LORD ARTHUR: I really believe you would.

**SMITHERS KNOCKS AND ENTERS.**

SMITHERS: The books, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: Put them on the table, Smithers. That will be all.

SYBIL: I must go, Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: I shall write to your father today. Be brave and trust me for a little while. Do not try to see me till this is over. As soon as I am a free man I shall come to you immediately.

SYBIL: Goodbye, my love, my thoughts will be with you. Do take care of yourself.

**SHE GOES. LORD ARTHUR LOOKS THROUGH THE WINDOW, THEN TAKES UP A LARGE BOOK. HE PAGES THROUGH IT, SOMETIMES PAUSING WITH GREAT INTEREST. A CLOCK CHIMES, AS LORD SURBITON ENTERS.**

LORD ARTHUR: These are the books. We'd better get started straight away. Which will you have?

LORD SURBITON: This looks a good solid one. **(He flips through a few more pages and then reads)** "A Handbook of Toxicology" edited by Sir Matthew Reid, President of the Royal College of Physicians.

LORD ARTHUR: Where shall I begin?

LORD SURBITON: Here we are... Chapter four. Deadly and Fatal Poisons. Aqua hispana.... Taken in increasing doses over several months... no, that won't do. Here's one... distilled from the roots of a tropical plant found in the jungles of South American... no, too far. What about this? Venenum accerrimum... induces quassio, whatever that may be...

LORD ARTHUR: You should have paid more attention to your classical studies!

LORD SURBITON: Yes, my old tutor always told me that a sound classical education enables a man to deal with any situation and I'm beginning to think he was right.

LORD ARTHUR: Concentrate Subbie. What was that last one?

LORD SURBITON: Induces quassio and rigor in omnibus membris. I don't like the sound of that at all...

LORD ARTHUR: Let me look. Here's one. Aconitum, known as aconitine. A colourless, odourless liquid with a pleasant, sweetish flavour... so far, so good. Effects: somnifacients... that's better, induces sleep. A single dose has fatal consequences.

LORD SURBITON: That sounds like the perfect answer. What did you say it was called?

LORD ARTHUR: Aconitine. I must admit I've never heard of it.

LORD SURBITON: It's probably unobtainable.

LORD ARTHUR: Quite possibly. But at least we can try.

LORD SURBITON: How will you get it? What possible excuse can you make for wanting a deadly poison?

LORD ARTHUR: First of all let me work out what a fatal dose consists of. **(He studies it)** There I have it.

LORD SURBITON: Will you not need a medical certificate?

LORD ARTHUR: I think I shall be able to manage without that. I shall send a note to Mr. Pestle of Pestle and Humbey's in St. James's Street. Mr. Pestle is always extremely civil. He insists on coming out of his little glass box to serve me himself. I shall write him a confidential letter and explain to him that I want it for a large Labrador, or should I make it a St. Bernard? - That I am obliged to get rid of because it is showing signs of... of... incipient rabies.

LORD SURBITON: I hope he finds that convincing enough.

LORD ARTHUR: I shall add that Slasher has already bitten the coachmen twice in the calf of the leg, and that last Sunday he tore a piece off one of the Bishop's gaiters.

LORD SURBITAN: Let's suppose then that this Pestle fellow sends you the poison. The next step is Lady Clem. How will you get her to take it?

LORD ARTHUR: I shall think of a plan. But first of all Subbie, to get the poison. **(Calls)** Smithers! **(He sits and begins to write)** Smithers! **(Enter SMITHERS)** My dear Mr. Pestle...**(To SMITHERS)** I want you to take this note to Mr. Pestle, of Pestle and Humbey's. Mr. Pestle will give you a small bottle.

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Finishing the note)** There. Be very careful of the bottle, and bring it straight to me. **(SMITHERS begins to leave)** And Smithers! **(SMITHERS turns to him)** Thank you...

### SCENE THREE

**- LADY CLEMENTINA'S HOUSE IN CURZON STREET, LONDON. LADY CLEMENTINA IS SITTING BY A TEA TABLE READING A FRENCH NOVEL. LORD ARTHUR IS SHOWN IN.**

LADY CLEMENTINA: My dear, dear Arthur. This is an unexpected surprise.

LORD ARTHUR: I hope it is a pleasure.

LADY CLEMENTINA: A very great one. Now tell me, dear boy, why you haven't been to see me for so long? You always used to drop in to see me of an afternoon when you had nothing better to do.

LORD ARTHUR: My dear Lady Clem, I never have a minute to myself.

LADY CLEMENTINA: I suppose you mean that you go about all day with Miss Sybil Merton, buying chiffons and talking nonsense. I cannot understand why people make such a fuss about getting married. In my day we never dreamed of billing and cooing in public – nor in private for that matter.

LORD ARTHUR: I assure you I have not seen Sybil for twenty-four hours. As far as I can make out she belongs entirely to her milliners.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Of course. That is the only reason you come to see an ugly old woman like myself. I know. I caused a little stir in my time – you might not believe it, but I did. And here I am, a poor, rheumatic creature with a false front and a bad temper. Why if it were not for Lady Jansen who sends me all the worst French novels she can find, I don't think I could get through the day. I pass them on to the dear duchess, she adores them. And what are you doing with yourself?

LORD ARTHUR: I shall be going abroad for a few days, possibly a week, depending on how long a certain affair takes to reach a suitable conclusion.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Not an affair of the heart, I hope?

LORD ARTHUR: Not in the accepted sense.

LADY CLEMENTINA: I hope you will forgive me if I am being indiscreet. At my age I have so few pleasures...

LORD ARTHUR: Dear Lady Clem. You make me very, very happy.

LADY CLEMENTINA: What have I said? I really don't quite follow you.

LORD ARTHUR: Don't try to. After I return from abroad then there will be the wedding.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Of course, of course. Your marriage takes place quite soon. I have the invitation, of course, I was forgetting. I do find myself forgetting these days. I forget my novels completely as soon as I've read them. I wouldn't be at all surprised if I found myself reading the same ones twice, or three times.

LORD ARTHUR: Tell me, are you still troubled with heartburn? I remembered you mentioned it at Lady Windermere's.

LADY CLEMENTINA: I am a positive martyr to it, my dear boy. Hardly a week passes without an attack. And I eat so little. Just my plain sweets and a few little bonbons, more to while away the time than anything else... Come now, let me pour you a cup of tea. Put some sugar in for me, dear boy, four lumps...

LORD ARTHUR: And your doctor? Doesn't he prescribe anything for you.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Doctors are no use, except to get fees out of one. Not one of them has ever done me the slightest good. Cake? It's marble cake?

LORD ARTHUR: Thank you, but no.

LADY CLEMENTINA: No even Sir Matthew Reid of Harley Street has cured me. Help yourself to the sandwiches, Arthur dear. No, not for me. I'll just have a tiny marron glace. Try one, they're simply delicious. I have them specially sent from Charbonnieres.

LORD ARTHUR: I have a little surprise for you Lady Clem. I hope you will like it.

### **HE GIVES HER A LITTLE SILVER BOX.**

LADY CLEMENTINA: What a charming little bonbonniere. Is it really a present? How very kind of you to spoil me like this. You're a dear boy, Arthur and you'll make a good husband for Sybil.

LORD ARTHUR: It is my dearest wish that I should Now you must look inside. There's more to it. Open it up...

LADY CLEMENTINA: A lovely little bonbon. *Quite* beautiful. **(She holds it to the light)** It's like a jewel and it has a tiny bubble inside it.

LORD ARTHUR: It's more than a sweet. It's a cure for heartburn. It's a wonderful thing, they tell me, invented by an American.

LADY CLEMENTINA: An American? I don't think I quite trust American inventions, Arthur. In fact I'm quite sure I don't. I read some American novels lately and they were quite nonsensical.

LORD ARTHUR: Oh, but there's no nonsense about this. I assure you, it's a perfect cure. You must promise you will try it.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Well... it looks very palatable, I must admit. And if you say it will help me I promise to take it. What sort of flavour has it? Not peppermint, I hope. I really am quite bored with peppermint.

LORD ARTHUR: I'm sure it's very pleasant to taste. A delicate sort of flavour, I think. But the results are the main thing. Quite, quite spectacular.

LADY CLEMENTINA: Very well then, I'll take it at once.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Catching her hand)** Good heavens! You must do nothing of the kind. It's a homeopathic medicine and if you take it without having heartburn, it might do you no end of harm. Wait till you have an attack and then take it. You'll be astonished at the result.

LADY CLEMENTINA: I should like to take it now. It's such a pretty colour and the little bubble inside it quite fascinates me. The fact is, that though I hate doctors, I love medicines. However, I will keep it till my next attack.

LORD ARTHUR: And then will that be. Will it be soon?

LADY CLEMENTINA: I hope not for a week. I had a very bad time yesterday morning with it. But one never knows, one never knows...

LORD ARTHUR: Quite true. But you are sure to have one before the end of the month, Lady Clem?

LADY CLEMENTINA: I am afraid so. But how sympathetic you are today, Arthur. Really Sybil has done you a great deal of good. And now, you must run away. For I'm dining with some very dull people who simply won't talk scandal, and I know I shall never be able to keep awake during dinner.

LORD ARTHUR: You won't forget to take your little bonbon, will you?

LADY CLEMENTINA: Of course I won't, you silly boy. I think it most kind of you to think of me, and I shall certainly write and tell you if I want any more. Now, you must kiss me on the cheek...

#### **SCENE FOUR**

**- VENICE. LORD ARTHUR AND LORD SURBITON HAVE TAKEN AN ELEGANT SUITE OF ROOMS IN AN OLD PALACE.**

LORD ARTHUR: Did you send Smithers out to look for "The Times" again, Subbie?

LORD SURBITON: Yes, he went off in the gondola some time ago. I told him to bring back all the English papers he could lay hands on. He should be back any minute.

LORD ARTHUR: It's surprising how difficult it is to find an English newspaper and one feels quite lost without them. One can always rely on the English press to keep one well informed about anything completely unimportant.

LORD SURBITON: All Smithers brought back yesterday were two copies of "The Schoolboy's Own" and "The Young Lady's Companion".

LORD ARTHUR: I am becoming extremely worried, Subbie. How long is it since I gave her the box?

LORD SURBITON: It's nearly a month.

LORD ARTHUR: Surely she must have had another attack, and if she did, she must have taken it. She promised me she would. Do you think she can have forgotten all about it? Her memory is failing a little. I noticed that.

LORD SURBITON: Perhaps you could write and remind her.

LORD ARTHUR: No, that would be too dangerous. Suppose there were a post mortem.

LORD SURBITON: Have you heard from Sybil again?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, I had a letter this morning. I meant to tell you about it. Such a fine, brave little letter, but so sad. Subbie, I wonder if we should not slip back to London for a few days just to make sure there has been no mischance. I'm beginning to think that some unfortunate accident must have befallen Lady Clem. I feel concerned for her.

LORD SURBITON: For my part I'd go back to London like a shot. I must admit I'm thoroughly bored with Venice. It's getting too hot to ride cable cars on the Lido – and there's nothing amusing to do. I sometimes wonder what the crowds of visitors find to amuse them. I see hundreds of them trailing in and out of palaces with little books.

LORD ARTHUR: What are we doing tonight, Subbie?

LORD SURBITON: I have invited Count Antino and the Contessa we met last week, with her two daughters, to dine on the yacht with us. I met Lord Guildford at Florian's yesterday and asked him. You remember Giffie? He's quite a sport.

LORD ARTHUR: Well, I suppose we'll have to resign ourselves to it all for a little longer. There must be some news soon.

LORD SURBITON: Why don't we get out of Venice for a little while? We could take a run down the coast to Ravenna. I hear there's some good shooting to be got there.

LORD ARTHUR: Too far away, Subbie. Suppose the news came and we didn't hear it. No, I must allow myself to think of idle pleasures. I owe it to Sybil to suffer, if needs be, for her sake. I should never forgive myself if I put my own comfort before her happiness. **(SMITHERS enters. He is humming a cheerful Italian folk-song and carries a packet of letters)**  
Smithers!

SMITHERS: Beg pardon, my lord. The tunes are so catchy.

LORD ARTHUR: It really is time we returned to London.

SMITHERS: The letters, my lord.

LORD SURBITON: What about the newspapers, Smithers? Did you get them?

SMITHERS: Yes, Lord Surbiton. They're below. We're unloading them from the gondola.

LORD ARTHUR: Unloading them?

SMITHERS: Lord Surbiton said as I was to get all the English newspapers I could find.

LORD ARTHUR: Very commendable, Smithers. Bring them up as fast as you can.

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

**HE EXITS.**

LORD ARTHUR: Nothing from England. All invitations, by the look of it. The Contessa della Valina is holding a masked ball...

**ENTER SMITHERS WITH A LOAD OF NEWSPAPERS THAT HE DEPOSITS.**

LORD ARTHUR: That will be all Smithers. Thank you.

**HE EXITS.**

LORD SURBITON: These will take some sorting.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Picking up a paper)** I can scarcely believe the news of Lady Clem would find its way into "The Racegoer's Reliable Prospects".

LORD SURBITON: Nor could she be of much interest to reads of "The Beekeeper" with which is incorporated "The East Anglian Ferret Breeder".

LORD ARTHUR: Let's make a start. First of all, sort out "The Times" and "The Morning Post".

LORD SURBITON: **(Engrossed)** You remember that little filly, Fast Jenny, I fancied? She came in at Doncaster.

LORD ARTHUR: Put that down. You take "The Morning Post". Do concentrate Subbie. The obituaries.

LORD SURBITON: Good heavens!!

LORD ARTHUR: What is it?

LORD SURBITON: Old Winthorpe, you know the one who married that carrot-haired little Gaiety girl and caused such a scandal – they've had triplets.

LORD ARTHUR: You're in the wrong column. **(Searching several papers and throwing them down)** Absolutely nothing here.

LORD SURBITON: **(Passing some over)** Some more "Times" for you. Shall I try "The Telegraph"?

LORD ARTHUR: Look under "Court and Society".

LORD SURBITON: Here's someone we know. **(Reads)** "The Dowager Duchess of Antrim passed peacefully away at her home in Curzon Street... on June 21." That's funny. That's the day after.

LORD ARTHUR: My dear Subbie, what possible connection could there be?

LORD SURBITON: They were the greatest of friends. The old dowager duchess was always in and out borrowing French novels.

LORD ARTHUR: My God. You're right. They were.

LORD SURBITON: And other thing. The duchess used to complain about indigestion. I heard her telling mother about it the last time I saw her.

LORD ARTHUR: You don't think she could have...

LORD SURBITON: She might.

LORD ARTHUR: I don't believe it... I won't believe it. Lady Clementina would *never* do such a thing. I have great faith in Lady Clem. She promised me she would take it and I cannot think she would be guilty of such base ingratitude. Let us continue the search. **(They look through more newspapers)** It's here! It's here! **(He jumps with excitement)** In print, Subbie. In black and white. Good old Lady Clem. I knew she wouldn't let me down.

LORD SURBITON: Let me look at it. **(Reads)** Lady Clementina, widow of the late Sir Frederick Borthwick of Borthwick Manor, Hants., died peacefully in her sleep in her London home. Lady Clementina had celebrated her 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday the previous day. She...

LORD ARTHUR: In her sleep... I'm glad about that. So it worked. It worked perfectly. I must say I was beginning to have horrid doubts.

LORD SURBITON: It was an inspiration.

LORD ARTHUR: I'm free at last. I'm feeling light in the head. It's over, Subbie. It's over and done with and I shall never have to think about it again. Dear Lady Clem. Reliable to the last, in spite of failing memory, of failing health, true to her obligations.

LORD SURBITON: She was always fond of you.

LORD ARTHUR: Too late to send a wreath. When I get back I shall heap her graves with dozens and dozens of white and yellow roses. Sweets to the sweet.

**HE SEEMS LOST IN A DREAM.**

LORD SURBITON: I vote we waste no time in getting back.

LORD ARTHUR: We leave today. **(Calls)** Smithers! Smithers!

**SMITHERS ENTERS QUICKLY.**

SMITHERS: My lord?

LORD ARTHUR: Start packing immediately.

SMITHERS: We are leaving Venice, my lord?

LORD ARTHUR: At once, Smithers, at once. We are leaving for London. Pack everything. Pay off the servants. Here. Pay them Double wages... **(He gives him a wad of notes)** And Smithers, send a telegram to Miss Sybil Merton for me. Say: "Returning today all my love Arthur".

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: And Smithers?

SMITHERS: My lord?

LORD ARTHUR: You may sing. You may sing as much as you like. And if you want to, you may dance as well!

**SCENE FIVE**

**- LADY CLEMENTINA'S HOUSE. SYBIL AND LORD ARTHUR ARE SORTING LADY CLEMENTINA'S PERSONAL EFFECTS.**

SYBIL: It was really sweet of Lady Clem to leave you all her personal possessions and this dear little house. Did you know she was going to?

LORD ARTHUR: No, Sybil, I had no idea.

SYBIL: I find it quite touching. She must have been very fond of you, Arthur. Was she a relative of yours?

LORD ARTHUR: A distant sort of relative.

SYBIL: You don't want to talk about her, do you? I do understand. I know you were fond of her. But do tell this. The lawyers said she made a last minute alteration of her will, when she left you her little Curzon Street house and all her little things. Why did she? Was there any special reason?

LORD ARTHUR: I can't think of one. In fact it is I that owe a debt of gratitude to Lady Clem. She helped me out of one of the most difficult situations of my life.

SYBIL: Did you see her before died?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. I had tea with her, here, in this very room, just over a month ago. She sat there. In that chair. We had marble cake, watercress sandwiches and marron glaces.

SYBIL: What must I do with these bundles of old letters?

LORD ARTHUR: Throw them away. I'm sure she would not have wanted anyone to read them. Poor Lady Clem. She did suffer so with her heartburn. In a way it was a welcome release.

SYBIL: I don't think she suffered very much at all. She liked something to talk about. She was as spry as a rabbit.

LORD ARTHUR: Not a very apt simile for a practically bed-ridden old lady in her seventies.

SYBIL: Was she as old as that? She was remarkable without spectacles, and she went to all the first nights at the Gaiety.

LORD ARTHUR: I thought she looked very frail. Sometimes, she had a faraway look in her eyes as though she were already looking towards another world.

SYBIL: That was the indigestion, darling.

LORD ARTHUR: She left you something too, didn't she?

SYBIL: Yes, a beautiful old amethyst necklace. She said it was for 'Arthur's bride'. It makes me want to cry. It was so thoughtful of her.

LORD ARTHUR: She was a thoughtful person. We both owe a very great deal to her, and I for one shall never, never forget what Lady Clem did for us.

SYBIL: Oh dear, there are such a lot of things to sort. I suppose we must go on with it. Did the lawyers give you a list?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, it's here. There's a long, long list of Lady Clem's bills to be dealt with too. She never kept any proper accounts. It will take a long time to get everything straight. Did you find your amethyst necklace?

SYBIL: I did. Put it on for me. It's like a wedding present. Somehow I feel there was a special link between Lady Clem and us, and it's only since she died that I have realised it. Wouldn't it have been lovely if she were still alive and could come to the wedding?

LORD ARTHUR: Let's get on with the books. **(Reads from list)** The works of Balzac, George Sand and de Musset and single copies of "Les Nuits de Paris", "La Passion d'une Jeune Fille", "Les Amours de Marguerite", "Fifi de la Moulin Rouge"... Oh dear, there's an enormous list, we can't possibly go through all these. Let's just give the whole collection to the Seamen's Institute.

SYBIL: Can't I read them first?

LORD ARTHUR: Certainly not! French novels should not be read by ladies under seventy.

SYBIL: Oh Arthur... Do you like my necklace?

LORD ARTHUR: I think it's too old for you, my love. Keep it till you're a grandmother.

SYBIL: Oh Arthur, I am so glad to have you back again. I went through such agonies of misery while you were away. Isn't it heavenly to think that your troubles, whatever they were, have cleared away? I won't even ask about them. It's enough to know they've gone and that you won't ever leave me again. Promise you will never leave me, Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: I am yours forever. As it is my dearest wish that I shall never again cause you a minute's pain. I too, have suffered. But we must put all that behind us. It belongs to the past.

SYBIL: **(Breaking away and picking up a box)** Back to our work. This box is full of all kinds of oddments. Old bottles of smelling salts, sal volatile, spirits of camphor, chlorodine, peppermint essence – that's empty though – sachet fevres, powder pills, pastilles. It smells just like a chemist's shop.

LORD ARTHUR: Throw the whole lot away, or give it to the housemaid, if you like. Look at these miniatures. They are really quite charming. I must give them to my mother. She collects them, you know.

SYBIL: **(Holding up a small bottle)** This one looks like crystal. **(She takes off the stopper and smells it)** Oh. **(She sneezes)** Should I really throw all these things away?

LORD ARTHUR: Unless you intend to suffer from heartburn, there's really no point in keeping them.

SYBIL: Oh Arthur. Look at this. Isn't it too lovely?

LORD ARTHUR: Wait a minute. I'm checking the champagne glasses. There are some very good Venetian ones, dear. Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five...

SYBIL: Do look, Arthur. There's something inside too. It looks so pretty.

LORD ARTHUR: You'll make me lose count... twenty-six, twenty-seven...

SYBIL: Do you think I could eat it?

LORD ARTHUR: Eat what? Dash it all, I really have lost count. Now what's this treasure you've found?

SYBIL: It's the sweetest little filigree silver box. Do look at it.

LORD ARTHUR: My God. Give it to me at once. Don't touch it!

SYBIL: There's a very tempting little sweet inside.

**SHE MOVES AROUND THE TABLE.**

LORD ARTHUR: Give it to me Sybil. Please! I must see it.

SYBIL: **(Taking the capsule out and holding it up)** What an *exquisite* colour. I'm sure it must taste delicious...

LORD ARTHUR: Don't touch it, Sybil. I beg of you. It might be a deadly poison.

SYBIL: What would Lady Clem be doing with deadly poison?

LORD ARTHUR: She might have got it for a dog.

SYBIL: But she didn't have a dog.

LORD ARTHUR: She had a parrot. It's still here. In the breakfast room.

SYBIL: Why should she want to poison a parrot?

LORD ARTHUR: It might have had some dangerous disease. Psittacosis... that's it, they're highly subject to it.

SYBIL: Arthur, you're being ridiculous!

**SHE PRETENDS TO EAT THE CAPSULE.**

LORD ARTHUR: **(Rushing round after her, knocking bric-a-brac over)** *No!* No, Sybil, oh what are you doing, don't trifle with death, put it down – for God's sake.

SYBIL: Very well. I'll put it back. But I'm not going to give you the box. I found it. You shan't have it.

LORD ARTHUR: Of course you may keep the box. But the capsule, please give it to me. I'm deadly serious. I must have the capsule.

SYBIL: Arthur! You look quite pale and distraught. Have you seen this box before?

LORD ARTHUR: As a matter of fact, I gave it to Lady Clem not long before she died.

SYBIL: I am so sorry. I didn't realise. Of course you shall have it.

**SHE GIVES IT TO HIM.**

LORD ARTHUR: **(To himself)** So she never took it after all. My God, my God, how could she trick me like this? **(He throws the box into the fireplace)** She told me... she promised me... oh no, no... no...

**HE BURIES HIS HEAD IN HIS HANDS.**

SYBIL: Arthur dear... tell me what has upset you so? Tell me, dearest?

LORD ARTHUR: I can't believe it! I can't believe Lady Clem would do such a thing.

SYBIL: What did that box mean to you? You are looking very strange, as though you had seen a ghost. You frighten me, Arthur...

LORD ARTHUR: Sybil, you must be brave, very brave... there is something I must tell you...

**SCENE SIX**

**- LORD ARTHUR'S FLAT.**

LORD SURBITON: **(Writing)** There! I think that's the lot.

LORD ARTHUR: Don't let us rush into a decision, Subbie. I feel quite strongly on that point.

LORD SURBITON: Do you remember that eccentric old countess who used to come and stay at Belgrave Square in the winter? The one with hair like a bird's nest, covered with tartan sashes and cairngorms?

LORD ARTHUR: No...

LORD SURBITON: You must remember her, she had seventeen King Charles' spaniels. She's a distant relation.

LORD ARTHUR: Aren't they all? Look her up in Debrett.

LORD SURBITON: **(Looking her up)** Here she is. Clarissa, wife of the Earl of Dumififeline, eldest daughter of...

LORD ARTHUR: Why does she live?

LORD SURBITON: Dumfifeline, Edinburgh, and she has a house in the Outer Hebrides. She might be there.

LORD ARTHUR: If I am called on to make sacrifices, I must make them willingly. A week in the Outer Hebrides. Subbie, I will not flinch. Put her on the list.

LORD SURBITON: Very well. **(Counting)** Nineteen... All distant relatives. Some more distant than others.

LORD ARTHUR: Blindfold me, Subbie and give me the pin.

LORD SURBITON: **(Blindfolding him)** Can you see?

LORD ARTHUR: No.

LORD SURBITON: Are you quite sure?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, and in addition I have closed my eyes.

LORD SURBITON: Ready, steady – go! **(LORD ARTHUR stabs at the list)**  
Right.

#### **HE UNTIES THE BLINDFOLD.**

LORD ARTHUR: **(Looking at the list)** The Dean of Chichester! **(Pause)**  
Well, taking everything into consideration, I think it's a very suitable choice.

LORD SURBITON: Do you know him?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, quite well. He lives in a rather pleasant little place. There's a wonderful maze there, made of boxwood and he has two distasteful sons and several plain-featured daughters, all devoted to good works.

LORD SURBITON: Now, to be practical. Should we try poison again?

LORD ARTHUR: Never. I have proved conclusively that poison, as a means of elimination is utterly unreliable. I shall not touch poison again. No, I have already thought of a better plan. Do you remember Count Rouvaloff? I met him once at Lady Windermere's.

LORD SURBITON: Yes. He's the Russian and he knows a great deal about...

LORD ARTHUR: Explosives. Correct. This time I do not want to leave anything to chance. Dynamite is the answer, Subbie. Or perhaps gelignite. I shall take advice on the subject.

LORD SURBITON: Whose advice?

LORD ARTHUR: I have asked Count Rouvaloff to come here. He is already late.

LORD SURBITON: How do you propose to blow up the Dean, without blowing up the entire household?

LORD ARTHUR: I am not sure, but Count Rouvaloff is certain to have some similar problems to deal with. He will instruct us.

**SMITHERS ENTERS.**

SMITHERS: Count Rouvaloff, my lord.

**COUNT ROUVALOFF ENTERS.**

LORD ARTHUR: My dear Count. How kind of you to come. Smithers, the vodka and caviar. You remember my brother, Lord Surbiton?

COUNT ROUVALOFF: I do.

LORD ARTHUR: How are your shipbuilding researches progressing? Please...

**LORD ARTHUR GESTURES TO A CHAIR.**

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Excellently. **(They all sit)** I have been able to make a careful study of the most important ship-yards and just at present I am concentrating on caulking and rivetting.

LORD ARTHUR: Fascinating, I'm sure. But your other hobby, explosives. I trust you are not neglecting that?

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Not entirely, Lord Arthur. I hope to have more opportunity for experiment quite soon.

LORD ARTHUR: Splendid, I'm delighted to hear it. **(SMITHERS brings in vodka and caviar on a silver tray. He hums)** Smithers! You must excuse him. Ever since he went to Italy with me he has become devoted to folksong.

**SMITHERS HANDS THEM VODKAS, FOLLOWED BY CAVIAR.**

COUNT ROUVALOFF: **(Drinking his down)** This vodka is superb. **(He is about to fling his glass into the fireplace, but is restrained by SMITHERS, who takes his glass and refills it)** Yes, this is excellent. You have friends in Russian I see?

LORD ARTHUR: One of my cousins is married to a nephew of the Tsar.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: That is very interesting. In your note, Lord Arthur, you said you had something important to discuss with me.

**SMITHERS EXITS.**

LORD ARTHUR: I have a problem.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Who doesn't...

LORD ARTHUR: And I should like to ask your advice on the use of explosives. I wish to blow someone up.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Ah... So you are taking up politics seriously?

LORD ARTHUR: I'm sorry to disappoint you on that score, Count, but this is purely a personal, almost a family matter.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: I do not wish to criticise, but surely a family matter can be arranged more – shall we say, amicably; a pistol duel, perhaps I have a useful sword stick I could lend you.

**HE OFFERS IT. LORD SURBITON SHOWS GREAT INTEREST.**

LORD ARTHUR: I am afraid this would not meet the case.

LORD SURBITON: If I might be allowed to examine it...

COUNT ROUVALOFF: I have a friend who makes some very ingenious ones, I could let you have his address.

LORD ARTHUR: Most kind. But for the situation I have in mind, I am it is unsuitable.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: In Russia we reserve the use of dynamite for social and political purposes – but I suppose it might have its uses in the domestic field. I have not considered that. But the English are always so... so...

LORD SURBITON: Eccentric?

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Yes. **(To LORD ARTHUR)** Now what can I do for you?

LORD ARTHUR: Let me explain the problem. My object is to place the dynamite in a certain object, and by some device make sure that the object will explode at a fixed time.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: So far, that would seem fairly simple, Lord Arthur. What kind of an object is it that you have in view?

LORD ARTHUR: The person I wish to explode is a great collector of clocks.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Clocks. Aha!

LORD ARTHUR: He has a collection dating back to the fifteenth century and containing a great many very interesting pieces. I wish to place the explosive in such a manner that on the stroke of twelve noon, the clock and of course, the person beside it will, well... disintegrate.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: A most ingenious idea. I must congratulate you on your quick grasp of the essentials. If you should wish to continue your interest in..

LORD ARTHUR: No, Count, this will be the only occasion.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Now, in the matter of the clock. I think I can help you. I have a contact, a Herr Winklekopf, an artist in his way who would, I am sure, take a personal interest in your scheme. This is where he lives. **(He writes on a card)** There. Scotland Yard would give a great deal to know this address.

LORD ARTHUR: Well they shan't have it. I give you my word. I will guard it carefully. I am most grateful to you for your help.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: It is my please Lord Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: If I can provide you with introductions in England you must come to me. Perhaps you would like to meet my uncle Rear Admiral Sir James Shipworth.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Thank you, but it is better that I pursue my modest studies icognito. But one day you will perhaps give me an introduction to your cousin and the Tsar's nephew. That might help me greatly in... er... clearing the ground for future research.

**HE LAUGHS. LORD SURBITON FILLS THEIR GLASSES.**

LORD ARTHUR: To Imperial investigation!

**THEY DRINK.**

COUNT ROUVALOFF: To domestic disintegration!

**THEY DRINK DOWN THE VODKA AND LORD SURBITON THROWS HIS GLASS INTO THE FIREPLACE WITH A SHOUT. THE OTHER TWO DO THE SAME. COUNT ROUVALOFF BREAKS INTO A WILD RUSSIAN DANCE. A HORRIFIED SMITHERS APPEARS IN THE DOORWAY.**

## **SCENE SEVEN**

**- HERR WINKLEKOPF'S WORKSHOP. THERE ARE CLOCKS EVERYWHERE. LORD ARTHUR IS WAITING. HERR WINKLEKOPF ENTERS, A WINE-STAINED NAPKIN TUCKED INTO HIS WAISTCOAT, A FORK IN HIS LEFT HAND.**

LORD ARTHUR: Count Rouvaloff has given me an introduction to you, and I am anxious to have a short interview on a matter of business. My name is Smith – Mr. Robert Smith.

WINKLEKOPF: Charmed to meet you, Lord Arthur. Don't look so alarmed. It is my duty to know everyone and I remember seeing you one afternoon at Lady Windermere's. I do hope her ladyship is well?

LORD ARTHUR: Oh yes, she was in excellent health last time I saw her.

WINKLEKOPF: Count Rouvaloff obtained an invitation for me. I was most grateful. One meets so many important people.

LORD ARTHUR: Did I disturb you at breakfast?

WINKLEKOPF: **(Waving his fork)** No matter, no matter... Please sit, Lord Arthur.

**A CLOCK CHIMES.**

LORD ARTHUR: **(Sitting)** You have an astonishing collection of clocks, Herr Winklekopf.

WINKLEKOPF: Yes, yes, I will show you them all. But first do you mind if I bring my little plate of breakfast **(He gets up and goes to the door)** Perhaps you would care for a little? There is an excellent pate.

LORD ARTHUR: Thank you, I have just breakfasted.

**ANOTHER CLOCK CHIMES. WINKLEKOPF BRINGS IN A PLATE, A BOTTLE AND TWO HOCK GLASSES ON A TRAY.**

WINKLEKOPF: Some wine?

LORD ARTHUR: Thank you, I should like some.

WINKLEKOPF: Good, good. **(He pours some and hands it to LORD ARTHUR)** My friends are kind enough to say that my Rhine wine is better than any they get at the German Embassy.

LORD ARTHUR: It is delightful.

WINKLEKOPF: Marco Brunner '49. Practically a vintage year.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Examining his glass)** This is surely the Imperial Crest, is it not?

WINKLEKOPF: Oh yes, yes! My friends gave me these glasses. I have some very kind friends – so many of them everywhere. Now, Lord Arthur, what can I do for you?

LORD ARTHUR: Herr Winklekopf, this is a mission of some delicacy.

WINKLEKOPF: Naturally, naturally.

LORD ARTHUR: I wish to acquire an explosive clock.

**A CLOCK CHIMES LOUDLY.**

WINKLEKOPF: Explosive clock... ja... that I have. You have had experience of explosive clocks, Lord Arthur?

LORD ARTHUR: No, but I have every faith in their efficiency.

WINKLEKOPF: Of course. To the amateur, if you will forgive the phrase, the explosive clock has an instant appeal. But I must warn you, the explosive clock has *severe* limitations. It is not, for instance, a good thing for foreign exportation. **(LORD ARTHUR tries to speak, but he continues...)** You see, even if the train services are so irregular that the clocks usually go off before they reach their proper destination. The last one I dispatched – it was intended for a very distinguished personage – merely blew up a railway siding in Ostend and a few unimportant officials.

LORD ARTHUR: It sounds a reliable product to me.

WINKLEKOPF: Of course, if you want it for home use, I can supply you with an excellent article, and guarantee that you will be satisfied with the result.

LORD ARTHUR: The clock I require is intended for use quite near to town. It will only have to make a journey of a few hours.

WINKLEKOPF: May I ask for whom it is designed? If it is for the police, or anyone connected with Scotland Yard, I am afraid I can do nothing for you.

LORD ARTHUR: Oh no, I assure you.

WINKLEKOPF: You see, the English detectives are really our best friends, and I have always found that by relying on their stupidity we can do exactly what we like. No, I could not spare a single one of them.

LORD ARTHUR: I assure you, Herr Winklekopf, it has nothing to do with the police at all. In fact, the clock is intended for the Dean of Chichester.

WINKLEKOPF: Dear me. I had no idea you felt so strongly about religion, Lord Arthur. So few young men do nowadays.

LORD ARTHUR: I am afraid you overestimate me, Herr Winklekopf. The fact is I really know nothing about theology.

WINKLEKOPF: Is it a purely private matter, then?

LORD ARTHUR: Purely private – quite personal.

WINKLEKOPF: Very well. Excuse me. **(He goes out. Another two clocks chime. He returns with a small cake of dynamite and a pretty little French clock surmounted with an Ormolu figure)** This should be more than adequate for the purpose.

LORD ARTHUR: This is just what I want. Now tell me how it goes off.

WINKLEKOPF: Ah, that is my secret. Let me know when you want it to explode, and I will set it to the moment.

LORD ARTHUR: Today is Tuesday and if you could send it off at once...

WINKLEKOPF: That is not possible. I have a great deal of important work on hand for some friends of mine in Moscow. Still, I might send it off tomorrow.

LORD ARTHUR: Oh it will be quite time enough if it is delivered tomorrow night, or Thursday evening.

WINKLEKOPF: And the time it must be set for?

LORD ARTHUR: Friday at noon, exactly. The Dean is always home at that hour preparing his sermon.

WINKLEKOPF: **(Writing in a ledger)** Friday at noon exactly.

LORD ARTHUR: And now, pray let me know how much I am in your debt.

WINKLEKOPF: It is such a small matter, Lord Arthur, that I do not care to make any charge. The dynamite comes to... say seven and sixpence... and the clock will be three pounds ten and the carriage about five shillings. I am only too pleased to oblige any friend of Count Rouvaloff.

LORD ARTHUR: But your trouble, Herr Winklekopf?

WINKLEKOPF: Ach, it is nothing. It is a pleasure to me. I do not work for money. I live entirely for my art.

LORD ARTHUR: Then I must simply thank you again most warmly for your kindness.

**HE PUTS THE MONEY DOWN.**

WINKLEKOPF: On Saturday next we are having a little gathering – just a few anarchist friends of mine. We are having a meat tea, and we would so much like you to join us, if you are free.

LORD ARTHUR: Thank you, Herr Winklekopf, I am afraid I shall have to sadly decline. You see my brother and I are leaving immediately for the South of France.

**A CLOCK CHIMES NOON. LORD ARTHUR AND HERR WINKLEKOPF LOOK AT EACH OTHER.**

**SCENE EIGHT**

**- A BEAUTIFUL BEACH AT CANNES. THE GENTLE SOUND OF WAVES. LORD ARTHUR IS CLAD IN A WHITE FLANNEL SUIT AND LORD SURBITON IN A FASHIONABLY STRIPED BATHING SUIT.**

LORD SURBITON: Garçon! Le "Times" de Londres, s'il vous plait.

BOY: Pardon Monsieur?

LORD SURBITON: **(He holds up various papers)** Non, No, le "Times" of London. Non, pas "L'Echo" de Paris... Non, je ne veux pas le "Figaro". No, c'est "La Vie Parisienne". Je desir les Temps de Londres. No, je ne desir pas les Naughty Postcards. **(To LORD ARTHUR)** He hasn't got "The Times", or any English papers as far as I can see.

**A YOUNG GIRL (IN A SUN HAT) ENTERS AND SITS ON A DECK CHAIR AND OPENS A NEWSPAPER AND BEGINS TO READ. LORD SURBITON LOOKS AT IT.**

LORD SURBITON: Oh look, Arthur! I do believe it's "The Times".

LORD ARTHUR: Perhaps she'll take a stroll and leave it here. **(LORD SURBITON gets up, strolls towards her and tries to read the back of the newspaper)** No Subbie, I won't have you doing that. We will wait. **(SMITHERS arrives with a basket and takes out a bottle of wine and crystal glasses. He hums: "Aupres de ma Blonde")** Smithers!

SMITHERS: My lord?

LORD ARTHUR: Has the English mail arrived yet?

SMITHERS: Not yet, my lord.

LORD ARTHUR: Go back to the hotel and look once more will you?

SMITHERS: Yes, my lord.

**HE EXITS.**

LORD ARTHUR: Surely it should be here by now. Anyone would think we were on the other side of the globe.

**A BALLOON FLOATS ACROSS. THE YOUNG GIRL GRABS IT AND IT BURSTS LOUDLY. LORD ARTHUR JUMPS UP IN TERROR, DROPPING HIS GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE.**

YOUNG GIRL: I am so sorry if I frightened you. It must belong to that little boy over there.

LORD SURBITON: Poor child. He's crying. Don't you think we ought to go over and buy him another from the stall? Come and help me choose one...

YOUNG GIRL: Oh, I wonder what mother would say? She's gone back to the hotel. You see the sunshine is much too strong for her complexion.

LORD SURBITON: Do come. We shan't be away more than a minute. You're from England, aren't you?

YOUNG GIRL: Yes, we live in Leamington.

LORD SURBITON: Do you know the Webb-Chalmers of Binley Court?

YOUNG GIRL: Of course. Jane Webb-Chalmers is my second cousin.

**THEY WANDER OFF. LORD ARTHUR QUICKLY SEIZES "THE TIMES" LOOKS THROUGH IT QUICKLY AND THROWS IT DOWN IN DISGUST. SMITHERS RETURNS.**

SMITHERS: The letters, my lord.

**LORD ARTHUR TAKES THE LETTERS, SMITHERS EXITS. LORD ARTHUR STARTS TO READ THEM AS LORD SURBITON RETURNS.**

LORD SURBITON: Any news? Did you look in "The Times"?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, but absolutely nothing – on all fronts. It's more than ten days since it was due to go off. I only hope it got there safely. I suppose if it didn't go off on the proper date, there's no telling when it will go off. This suspense is getting on my nerves, Subbie.

LORD SURBITON: Any post for me?

LORD ARTHUR: Nothing. There's one here from Sybil. I'm just in the middle of it. I'll tell you if there's any news. **(He goes on reading and LORD SURBITON glances through "The Times")** She says her father is still a good deal perturbed about the putting off of the wedding and her mother is doing all she can to make her break off the match. Poor Sybil. She's being very loyal indeed. It must be extremely difficult for her. She tells me she's enclosed a letter from a friend of hers. She says it *might* amuse me – and I'm to read it you.

LORD SURBITON: Well, read it.

LORD ARTHUR: I don't feel like being amused.

LORD SURBITON: Then let me read it – perhaps it's some scandal. **(LORD ARTHUR turns away sadly. LORD SURBITON reads a little)** Good heavens! It's from the Deanery, Chichester.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Turning quickly)** Who wrote it?

LORD SURBITON: It's from Jane, Jane Percy...

LORD ARTHUR: Hurry read it! It may tell us something.

LORD SURBITON: **(Reads)** My dearest Sybil, thank you for your letter. I am so sorry to hear your marriage has been put off again because Anne and I are hoping to get new dresses from Papa for the occasion. Anne wants a pale blue corded silk and a tiny muff trimmed with fur and I want a pretty rose brocade with six flounces in the new style. Jennings says that everyone wears bows now and that the underskirt must be frilled. Would you have bows or not?

LORD ARTHUR: Definitely not. Go on...

LORD SURBITON: I must tell you about some fun we had over a clock that an admirer sent Papa last Thursday...

LORD ARTHUR: The clock. Go on...

LORD SURBITON: It arrived in a wooden box from London, carriage paid and Papa feels it must have been sent by someone who had read his sermon: "Is Licence Liberty?" for on the top of the clock was a figure which he said represented Liberty. Parker unpacked it and Papa put in on the mantelpiece in the library. We were all sitting there on Friday morning when just as the clock struck twelve we heard a whirring noise and a little puff of smoke blew out of the pedestal, and the figure of the goddess of Liberty fell off and broke her nose on the fender.

LORD ARTHUR: The incompetent bungler! I should *never* have trusted him.

LORD SURBITON: Shall I continue?

LORD ARTHUR: We might as well hear the whole humiliating story.

LORD SURBITON: Maria was quite alarmed, but it looked so ridiculous that James and I went off into fits of laughter. Even Papa was amused.

LORD ARTHUR: **(Groaning)** No, no...

LORD SURBITON: When we examined it we found it was a sort of alarm clock. If you set it to a particular hour and put some gunpowder on a cap under the little hammer it went off whenever you wanted. Papa said it must not remain in the library, as it made a noise, so Reggie carried it away to the schoolroom and it does nothing but have small explosions all day long. Do you think Arthur would like one for a wedding present?

LORD ARTHUR: Any more?

LORD SURBITON: P.S. Do tell me about the bows. The silk ones...

**SMITHERS ENTERS TO COLLECT THE PICNIC BASKET.**

LORD ARTHUR: Pack everything, Smithers! We're leaving for...

SMITHERS: London, my lord. Yes, my lord.

**SCENE NINE**

**- LORD ARTHUR'S FLAT. NIGHT. LORD SURBITON IS SMOKING AND DRINKING GLOOMILY. LORD ARTHUR ENTERS IN OUTDOOR CLOTHES. THE ROOM IS LIT WITH GAS LAMPS.**

LORD SURBITON: Did you see Winklekopf?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, I did.

LORD SURBITON: And what did he say?

LORD ARTHUR: He offered me another clock free of charge. And an apology.

LORD SURBITON: Oh.

LORD ARTHUR: Oh and a case of nitro-glycerine. And some bombs at cost price.

LORD SURBITON: Some what?

LORD ARTHUR: Bombs.

LORD SURBITON: Oh.

LORD ARTHUR: He said he had a new invention – an explosive umbrella that goes off as soon as you open it. He wants me to try it.

LORD SURBITON: What did you say?

LORD ARTHUR: I have lost faith in dynamite. Even Herr Winklekopf admits that it isn't what it used to be.

LORD SURBITON: And did you see Sybil?

LORD ARTHUR: No.

LORD SURBITON: Wasn't she in?

LORD ARTHUR: I don't know, Subbie.

LORD SURBITON: **(Pours him a drink)** Have this, old boy. It will do you the world of good. **(LORD ARTHUR takes the glass and drinks)** Why didn't you see Sybil?

LORD ARTHUR: I meant to. I set out to see her and I walked down Park Lane, but somehow I just hadn't the courage to face her.

LORD SURBITON: But Arthur, you must. It's only fair to her. You know how wonderful she has been before. She will stand by you. I know she will.

LORD ARTHUR: It's her loyalty that puts me to shame. I'm making too greater demands on her. I'm asking her to sacrifice so much – and what for?

LORD SURBITON: But Sybil loves you. I know she loves you deeply.

LORD ARTHUR: It's no good. There's no way out.

LORD SURBITON: There's Clarissa, countess of Glendowrie. There's a very fast train service to Edinburgh these days...

LORD ARTHUR: No, Subbie. It's no use. I've tried to do my duty, as I saw it, but however good one's intentions, fate steps in and foils them. I cannot face another fiasco. I can see clearly I am to be nothing but the plaything of destiny, mocked at by dud bullets, damp gunpowder, bent arrows, kindling that flickers and dies... no, I've thought of it all and I can't go on.

LORD SURBITON: Not for Sybil's sake?

LORD ARTHUR: I know what I must do for her sake. I must ask her to break off the match.

LORD SURBITON: Don't be precipitate, Arthur. There must be some way...

LORD ARTHUR: No, my mind is made up, I'm afraid. I can't hold her to an engagement to a man who can never be free. To a man in the miasma of crime, perhaps in the shade of the gallows. Sybil will suffer for a while, but she has a strong, noble nature. She will recover – *eventually*.

LORD SURBITON: And you, what will you do, Arthur? Will you recover – *eventually*?

LORD ARTHUR: What does it matter what becomes of me? **(He drinks)** I have ceased to care. There is always some way in which a man can die, some cause for which he can give up his life. The Foreign Legion, perhaps, or China...

LORD SURBITON: There's always Australia. **(LORD ARTHUR goes towards the door)** Where are you going, Arthur? You can't set out at this time of night.

LORD ARTHUR: I can't stay into night. I must walk in the cool night air and collect my thoughts.

LORD SURBITON: Let me come with you.

LORD ARTHUR: No, Subbie. I have made my decision and I want to think this out alone.

LORD SURBITON: Don't do anything desperate, Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: No, you may reply on me. I shall not attempt to change the course of destiny again.

**HE EXITS. LORD SURBITON FINISHES HIS DRINK.**

**SCENE TEN**

**- A LONELY PART OF A LONDON EMBANKMENT THE SAME NIGHT. LORD ARTHUR WALKS SLOWLY, HE STANDS SILHOUETTED WITH HIS BACK TO THE AUDIENCE. AFTER A WHILE A SHORT STOUT MAN ENTERS AND STANDS NEARBY. THE SHORT MAN TURNS TO LORD ARTHUR AND RECOGNISES HIM.**

MR. PODGERS:                   **(Approaching LORD ARTHUR)** Why, if I'm not mistaken, this is surely Lord Arthur! I must admit I did not think to meet you in these unexpected surroundings.

LORD ARTHUR:               **(Turning)** Septimus B. Podgers, professional cheiromantist, what more do you want of me?

MR. PODGERS:               *Want,* Lord Arthur? I do not know what you are implying. I am unaware that I have ever asked you for anything. It was you, if you remember, who wanted something...

LORD ARTHUR:               Oh fate, must you mock me still?

MR. PODGERS:               Perhaps you would like to arrange another session. Thanks to your generosity I have moved into a more spacious abode – I call it my studio.

LORD ARTHUR:               No, Mr. Podgers, I shall not require your services again. I can see now only too clearly the course destiny has in store.

MR. PODGERS:               You heard about Lady Clementina's sad demise? I saw it in her hand that night at Lady Windermere's. A definite break in the life line, but of course I could not tell her. It was there, though, and there was no – *no* escape. Perhaps you might be interested to have my new address... some of your friends...

LORD ARTHUR:               One last question, Mr. Podgers. The thing you saw in my hand, is there no escaping it?

MR. PODGERS:               This is a very painful subject, Lord Arthur. I had hoped we had put it out of our minds. I have no more to add to what I told you at Lady Windermere's. I know it was a shock, but you must remember this. I simply *cannot* foretell when it will happen, it may be thirty, forty years before it eventuates.

LORD ARTHUR: Thirty or forty years. That is a life sentence. No, I cannot wait so long...

MR. PODGERS: How quiet it is by the river tonight. It's very dark, very murky – the river. I often come to meditate. It helps me to recover from the great emotional strain my profession demands of me. I suffer with my clients, you know, I often suffer just as much as they do. You look distressed, Lord Arthur. Let this peaceful scene, the river, and the stars, help you to regain your own peace of mind.

LORD ARTHUR: Do you believe in the stars, Mr. Podgers? Do you believe our destiny is written in them?

MR. PODGERS: Indeed I do, Lord Arthur. I am shortly embarking on a new venture in the studio - astrological consultations. I studied in Egypt you know, with Professor Ali al Hamid, the world's greatest authority on...

LORD ARTHUR: I find this thought of great comfort to me, Mr. Podgers. Our fate, both your fate and my fate, is inevitable, inexorable... it is written in the firament... you do feel quite *certain* that our fate is governed by the stars?

MR. PODGERS: As sure as I am standing here, Lord Arthur. Do you see those stars up there? The three bright ones at the head of the Great Bear?

LORD ARTHUR: Yes, I think I see the ones you mean...

MR. PODGERS: Look where I am looking. **(He walks to the edge of the embankment and points upwards)** I can see you have a great interest in astrology, Lord Arthur. You must let me draw your astrological chart.

LORD ARTHUR: That won't be necessary. But do tell me about the three stars...

MR. PODGERS: This is the most *unusual* sight... look at the lowest of the three... **(They both gaze upwards and LORD ARTHUR moves behind MR. PODGERS)** It is only in that position once in a hundred years...

LORD ARTHUR: How very remarkable.

MR. PODGERS: What is your star sign, Lord Arthur, if I may inquire?

LORD ARTHUR: As I recollect an astrologer in Cairo once told me it was Scorpio.

MR. PODGERS: Scorpio! Then it is the *most* critical time in your life. Now, Lord Arthur, if you have significant decisions to make, you should implement them at once!

**LORD ARTHUR VIOLENTLY PUSHES MR. PODGERS OVER THE PARAPET. THERE IS A LOUD SPLASH. A BRIEF PAUSE, AS THE RIVER SETTLES AGAIN. A CONSTABLE COMES UP BEHIND LORD ARTHUR.**

CONSTABLE: Excuse me, sir, but did you drop anything?

**LORD ARTHUR TURNS AROUND TO HIM.**

LORD ARTHUR: **(With a faint smile)** Nothing of any importance, Constable.

#### **SCENE ELEVEN**

**- LADY WINDERMERE'S GARDEN. ANOTHER PARTY IS IN PROGRESS. A PIANO IS BEING PLAYED.**

LADY WINDERMERE: Of course it was a dreadful tragedy. Didn't you hear, Count? **(COUNT shakes his head)** They found his body washed up just in front of the Ship Hotel in Greenwich. He'd been missing for some days, it seems. **(Whispers to him)** The corpse was almost unrecognisable, poor man...

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Was foul play suspected?

LADY WINDERMERE: Apparently not. It seems he must have committed suicide. The papers said: "under the influence of a temporary derangement due to overwork".

SYBIL: How very sad. I remember he told me something about being musical and...

LADY WINDERMERE: His new book will be published shortly. It's entitled: "Destiny and the Human Hand". How very apt.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: Will you read it?

**LORD ARTHUR JOINS THEM WITH A GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE IN HIS HAND.**

LADY WINDERMERE: I don't think so. I've lost interest in cheiromancy, I'm afraid.

LORD ARTHUR: Did I hear right, Lady Windermere? What was the shocking statement you made?

LADY WINDERMERE: I don't care for cheiromancy any more, Arthur.

LORD ARTHUR: But this is heresy!

LADY WINDERMERE: After all, once you've had your hand read, well, you can't progress any further. One loses interest.

LORD ARTHUR: Surely that depends on what is in your hand.

LADY WINDERMERE: Ah, one knows one's own characteristics already, only too well. And as for the future, I don't believe a little man like Mr. Podgers could really and truly fortell it.

COUNT ROUVALOFF: What do you think, Lady Arthur? Did he tell you that you would be the loveliest bride of the season?

SYBIL: I don't believe in it for one moment, Count. I never have done. I simply think it's all a lot of mumbo jumbo...

LORD ARTHUR: Sybil, my dear, I am most surprised; I am quite pained to hear you say such things.

LADY WINDERMERE: You don't mean to say that *you* believe in cheiromancy!

LORD ARTHUR: Of course I do.

LADY WINDERMERE: But why?

LORD ARTHUR: Because I owe to it all the happiness of my life.

LADY WINDERMERE: My dear Arthur, what do you owe to it?

LORD ARTHUR: My wife.

LADY WINDERMERE:

What nonsense, I have never heard such nonsense in all my life. Come now, I want you all to meet my very latest discovery... He is absolutely incredible, and absolutely infallible too. He practices telepathy – he can read your mind like an open book. **(Calls)** Wherever are you, Mr. Skinninton? **(To SYBIL)** I can't live without this extraordinary young man. **(To LORD SURBITON)** Lord Surbiton, do look for him. I think he's in the conservatory with those Liston girls. **(LORD SURBITON goes off in search)** He is so diverting. He can tell instantly *exactly* what you are thinking. The scandals and gossip, my dear! It's so amusing, you simply cannot hide a thing. **(LORD ARTHUR moves quietly away)** He must start with Arthur, I know he has hundreds of decadent and dreadful secrets... **(She looks around, disappointed)** Oh, Lord Arthur's gone.

**THE END**

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