



Collected Plays

GRAHAM GREENE

'Greene's speed and economy, his uncanny gift for idiom, his skill in setting an atmosphere and developing suspense, are all masterly' *Guardian*

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COLLECTED PLAYS

Graham Greene was born in 1904. On coming down from Balliol College, Oxford, he worked for four years as sub-editor on *The Times*. He established his reputation with his fourth novel, *Stamboul Train*. In 1935 he made a journey across Liberia, described in *Journey Without Maps*, and on his return was appointed film critic of the *Spectator*. In 1926 he had been received into the Roman Catholic Church and visited Mexico in 1938 to report on the religious persecution there. As a result he wrote *The Lawless Roads* and, later, his famous novel *The Power and the Glory*. *Brighton Rock* was published in 1938 and in 1940 he became literary editor of the *Spectator*. The next year he undertook work for the Foreign Office and was stationed in Sierra Leone from 1941 to 1943. This later produced the novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, set in West Africa.

As well as his many novels, Graham Greene wrote several collections of short stories, four travel books, six plays, three books of autobiography - *A Sort of Life*, *Ways of Escape* and *A World of My Own* (published posthumously) - two of biography and four books for children. He also contributed hundreds of essays, and film and book reviews, some of which appear in the collection *Reflections* and *Mornings in the Dark*. Many of his novels and short stories have been filmed and *The Third Man* was written as a film treatment. Graham Greene was a member of the Order of Merit and a Companion of Honour. Graham Greene died in April 1991.

ALSO BY GRAHAM GREENE

Novels

The Man Within
It's a Battlefield
A Gun for Sale
The Confidential Agent
The Ministry of Fear
The Third Man
The End of the Affair
The Quiet American
A Burnt-Out Case
Travels with my Aunt
Dr Fischer of Geneva or
The Bomb Party
The Tenth Man
Stamboul Train
England Made Me
Brighton Rock
The Power and the Glory
The Heart of the Matter
The Fallen Idol
Loser Takes All
Our Man in Havana
The Comedians
The Human Factor
Monsignor Quixote
The Honorary Consul
The Captain and the Enemy

Short Stories

Collected Stories
The Last Word and Other Stories

May We Borrow Your Husband?

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Journey Without Maps
The Lawless Roads
In Search of a Character
Getting to Know the General

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Mornings in the Dark

Autobiography

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Ways of Escape
Fragments of an Autobiography
A World of my Own

Biography

Lord Rochester's Monkey
An Impossible Woman

Children's Books

The Little Train
The Little Horse-Bus
The Little Steamroller
The Little Fire Engine

GRAHAM GREENE

Collected Plays

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

*To
Catherine with love*

THE LIVING ROOM

*

CHARACTERS

MARY, *the daily woman*

MICHAEL DENNIS

ROSE PEMBERTON

MISS TERESA BROWNE

MISS HELEN BROWNE

FATHER JAMES BROWNE

MRS DENNIS

CAST

First presented on Thursday, 16 April 1953, at Wyndham's Theatre, London. With the following cast:

MARY	<i>Dorothy Dewhurst</i>
MICHAEL DENNIS	<i>John Robinson</i>
ROSE PEMBERTON	<i>Dorothy Tutin</i>
MISS TERESA BROWNE	<i>Mary Jerrold</i>
MISS HELEN BROWNE	<i>Violet Farebrother</i>
FATHER JAMES BROWNE	<i>Eric Portman</i>
MRS DENNIS	<i>Valerie Taylor</i>

The play was directed by PETER GLENVILLE

with settings by LESLIE HURRY

SCENES

Act One

Scene One The Living Room. An afternoon in January.

Scene Two The same. The next morning.

Act Two

Scene One The Living Room. Three weeks later. Late afternoon.

Scene Two The same. The next morning.

Act One

SCENE ONE

The Living Room. An afternoon in January.

At first sight, when the curtain rises, we are aware of something strange about the living room. The house is an ordinary Holland Park house, and there is nothing at first on which we can positively lay a finger and say, 'this is wrong', or 'this is strange'. Through a tall window at the back we see only the tops of the trees outside and the window is oddly barred up half its height. Is it that the furniture - in a fashion difficult to define - doesn't quite fit, as though it had been chosen for a larger room of a different shape? But there are many explanations for that in these days. There are two doors to the room - one is open on to the landing, the other up a small flight of stairs is closed. As the curtain rises, a bell downstairs is ringing.

[MARY comes rapidly in. She is un-uniformed and you could not believe that those heavy, shapeless legs could belong to anyone less independent than a daily woman. She mounts the stairs to the closed door and turns the handle. It is locked.]

MARY [*softly*]: Miss Teresa . . .

[She listens for a moment, and then as the bell rings again, goes out to the landing and we hear her rattling down the stairs.

Almost at the same moment we hear the sound of water pouring away from a basin in a closet, behind the second door. That for a moment seems to focus the oddness, the uneasiness of this room, for who would

expect a lavatory to open immediately out of a living room as though it were - perhaps we are now reaching the heart of the problem - really a bedroom? Voices mount the stairs - a man's voice and MARY'S.]

MARY: Miss Browne will be glad to see you here, Miss Rose, safe and sound.

MICHAEL: I hope she got my wire. Phew! This has been quite a climb.

MARY: It's warm for the time of year, sir.

MICHAEL: Is it? Not in the train. The heating wasn't on.

[MARY shows in MICHAEL DENNIS, a man in the middle forties with a strained, rather sullen face anxious about too many things and too anxious to disguise his anxiety, and ROSE PEMBERTON, a girl of about twenty with a look of being not quite awake, a bewildered tousled-pillow face, a face which depends for its prettiness on youth. It will never again be quite so pretty as this year - or even this month.]

MARY: Miss Browne will be down in a minute, sir. *[She goes out.]*

MICHAEL: Down? She must live in an attic.

[MICHAEL and ROSE stand stiffly, a little apart, looking round the room.]

Why have a living room on the third floor? Do you think it's to discourage callers? *[He moves restlessly around, but comes back to exactly the same spot, three feet away from the girl.]* What an odd room! It's the wrong shape. Do you see what I mean? Nothing quite fits. I wonder where that goes to? *[He indicates the stairs to the closet door, climbs them, and tries the handle. He returns to the same spot of carpet.]* The Browne family's skeleton? Browne with an E. Haven't you anything to say? Some joke? Something to show that we don't really care a damn?

[ROSE shakes her head.]

Well, I've delivered you safely. The reliable family friend. You are only twelve hours late. And we sent the right

considerate telegram. The orphan is safe. But they wouldn't have worried. You were in *my* hands.

[ROSE *puts out a hand and touches him. He puts his hand over hers, holding it tightly, but they keep the same distance.*]

Be careful! You can always trust me to be very careful. I've reached the careful age. Wasn't my planning perfect? The two rooms at opposite ends of the corridor. And even the Boots was not up when our alarm went. The shoes stood on parade all down the corridor - in the correct positions.

ROSE [*imploringly*]: Do you have to? Isn't it bad enough, darling?

MICHAEL: Careful, again. Darling is a word we mustn't use. Perhaps 'dear' would be all right, from a man of my age. A safely married man. But when I say dear, remember it means - just that. Dear.

ROSE: We can hear anybody coming up the stairs.

[*She kisses him, and at that moment a key turns in the closet door. They leap to their original positions as the door opens and MISS TERESA BROWNE comes out - an old lady who must have passed seventy a long while ago. She closes the door behind her.*]

Aunt Helen . . .

[TERESA BROWNE *pays not the slightest attention. She walks by them as though they were not there and out through the door on to the landing.*]

MICHAEL: Why did she go out like that? Why didn't she speak? Do you think she saw us?

ROSE: No. Perhaps she heard something.

MICHAEL: There wasn't much to hear.

[TERESA *re-enters. She holds out her hand and smiles with restrained cordiality.*]

TERESA: My dear, you must be Rose. Mary never told me you'd arrived.

ROSE [*kissing her*]: And you are Aunt Helen. Or do I have to call you Great-Aunt?

TERESA: I'm Aunt Teresa, dear.

ROSE: How silly of me!

TERESA: Not silly after all these years. You were only six, weren't you?

ROSE: Only six. This is Mr Dennis, Aunt Teresa.

TERESA: I'm interested to meet you, Mr Dennis. My poor niece mentioned you often in her letters.

ROSE [*to MICHAEL*]: My mother.

MICHAEL: Of course. I hope you don't think, Miss Browne, that I've let down your trust already.

TERESA: I don't know what you mean, Mr Dennis. Trust?

MICHAEL: We're twelve hours late. It seemed sensible to catch an early morning train instead of travelling after the funeral.

TERESA: I was sorry not to be there, dear. But I couldn't leave your uncle and your Aunt Helen. You found a room in the village, I hope, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: Oh, yes. The Red Lion.

TERESA: Mass was said for your mother this morning, dear, by Father Turner.

ROSE: Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I should have been there.

TERESA: We were all there - even my brother - we remembered you with her. Are you a Catholic, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL [*abruptly*]: No.

TERESA: How odd that my niece should have left you her executor.

ROSE [*with asperity*]: Why not? My father wasn't a Catholic.

TERESA: No, dear. Poor man. Would you like a cup of tea, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: You mustn't bother. I only came to hand over Rose . . .

TERESA: A labourer deserves his hire. Excuse me a moment, Mr Dennis. [*She goes to the door and calls 'Mary!' No*

answer. She goes out on to the landing and calls again 'Mary'. From the landing] What time is it, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: Just gone five.

TERESA: Mary always leaves so punctually, but she's paid till five-fifteen.

MICHAEL: I've really got to go.

TERESA: My brother always likes his cup. Mary! [*She goes downstairs.*]

MICHAEL: Well, we've broken the ice. That's not a good phrase, is it, for a pair of people skating like we are.

ROSE: Darling, what are you worrying about? Me? You don't have to. I swear it. [*With a touch of bitterness.*] I loved you the night of my mother's funeral. That's an oath, isn't it, like mixing blood. For ever and ever. Amen.

MICHAEL: Oh, it's myself I'm worrying about. I'm afraid you're going to disappear. In a wood of old people. I'm afraid I'm losing you - the minutes are hurrying. What happens tomorrow? [*He moves around the room while she stays still, at a loss, in the centre of it.*]

ROSE: You don't have to worry - You can't lose me. After all, you're the executor.

MICHAEL: You mean the executor, yes, I suppose I can always see you on business. [*Mounting the stairs.*] She came from up here. [*He opens the closet door.*] It just doesn't make sense. The third floor. A bathroom out of the sitting-room. This must have been a bedroom.

[MISS HELEN BROWNE *enters.*]

HELEN: You're Rose?

[*They kiss.*]

My dear little sweetheart, I used to call you. And you are Mr Dennis?

[*They shake hands.*]

Oh, you wouldn't believe what a bad little sweetheart she could be sometimes.

[*She is a little younger than her sister - a fat woman, with a certain bonhomie. She can steer straight through*

other people's lives without noticing.]

Teresa told me you'd arrived. She's making tea. The maid left too early, but the clock in the kitchen's fast. Rose, dear, perhaps you'd give her a hand with the bread-and-butter.

ROSE: I'm afraid I don't know where . . .

HELEN: Straight down the stairs and into the basement. You'll hear her clattering around. [*To MICHAEL*] My poor sister's eyesight's failing. It's to be expected, of course, at seventy-eight.

ROSE [*to MICHAEL*]: I'll see you . . . ?

HELEN: Mr Dennis will stay to tea, won't you, Mr Dennis?

[*ROSE leaves the room - unwillingly.*]

I was so sorry not to have been at the church. But you do understand, don't you, I couldn't leave my brother and sister. Do sit down.

MICHAEL: I hadn't meant to stay.

HELEN: Oh, but there's so much we would like to hear. [*She sits firmly down in the most comfortable chair.*] The Brownes all have long ears, like the Flopsy Bunnies. You know the Flopsy Bunnies, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: I don't think I do.

HELEN: Not dear Beatrix Potter? But, of course, she was my generation. I saw her once shopping at Debenham's. Now I'd expected you - somehow - to be an older man.

MICHAEL: I'm forty-five. [*He sits unwillingly.*]

HELEN: Catholics are much too clanny sometimes, don't you think? Dear Teresa was quite surprised when my niece chose someone who wasn't a Catholic as a trustee.

MICHAEL: I was her husband's friend, you know - his pupil, too. I owe everything to him. Even my job now - at London University.

HELEN: You'll think us rather bigoted, but we never cared very much for poor John's profession. It would have been so awkward for my niece if it had been - condemned.

MICHAEL: I'm afraid you won't approve of my profession then - but I'm a mere *lecturer* in psychology. Not a professor.

HELEN: Oh well, of course, it doesn't matter about you, does it, Mr Dennis? We aren't concerned. And the will? We've had no details yet. [*Coyly*] Long ears again.

MICHAEL: Rose will have about eight hundred a year of her own at the age of twenty-five. Until then, your brother and I are trustees.

HELEN: It might have been better to have kept it in the family instead of troubling you. [*Coyly*] Now I'm being clanny too.

MICHAEL: You see, her father appointed me a trustee before he died, and Mrs Pemberton just let it stand. His friends were always her friends. I used to visit them every summer after his death.

HELEN [*sadly*]: She was the first Browne to marry a non-Catholic.

MICHAEL [*with a smile*]: The first Browne?

HELEN: The first of *our* Brownes. And you are the executor too, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: As I was trustee I suppose the lawyers thought it would make things go more smoothly. I shall resign as trustee as soon as the will's executed. You'll be free of me.

HELEN: Oh, but of course I didn't mean . . .

MICHAEL: I don't think I'm quite made to be a trustee, Miss Browne.

HELEN [*almost as though she had taken his point*]: We were a little anxious about Rose until we got your telegram.

MICHAEL: She was tired by the funeral. It would have been too much to travel all night. I thought the day train -

HELEN: Poor Rose - it must have been lonely in that house all by herself.

MICHAEL: Better than travelling, of course. [*Explaining a little too much*] I got a room at the Red Lion for myself.

HELEN: So right of you, Mr Dennis. In a village like that there'd have been a lot of silly talk if you'd stayed in the house.

MICHAEL: Even about a man of my age and a girl of hers?

HELEN [*cheerfully and inexorably*]: Human nature's such a terrible thing, Mr Dennis. Or is that very Roman of me?

MICHAEL: I haven't found it terrible. Complicated, tangled, perhaps unhappy. Needing help.

HELEN: My niece wrote in one of her last letters that you had been very helpful. We are so grateful for that. There was little we could do.

[*She notices that MICHAEL is a little absent. The room still puzzles him. He cannot help looking here and there, particularly at the stains on the wall.*]

[*Making conversation*] But now we can all help Rose to forget.

MICHAEL: I'm very sorry. What was that? Forget?

HELEN: Her dear mother.

MICHAEL: Is it always a good thing to forget? Of course my job is usually to teach people the importance of remembering.

HELEN: What are you staring at, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: Was I staring?

HELEN: I'm afraid it *is* rather a cluttered room. But you see, it's our only living room.

MICHAEL: It looks quite a big house from outside.

HELEN: A great many of the rooms are closed.

MICHAEL: War damage?

HELEN [*guardedly*]: For one reason or another.

[*As he still looks around*]

All the rooms need repapering, but one doesn't like to spend capital, does one?

[*Teresa enters, carrying a cake-stand with bread-and-butter on one level and a plum cake on another.*]

TERESA: The kettle's boiling, Helen. We shan't be a moment, Mr Dennis. Everything's set.

[*In this household she is obviously the anxious Martha; the weaker character intent on carrying out orders. The orders are first thought up somewhere else, presumably*]

behind that mask of bonhomie her slightly younger sister presents to the world.]

MICHAEL: It's good of you, but I hadn't meant to stay.

TERESA: Oh, but you must meet our brother.

HELEN: Don't press Mr Dennis, Teresa. He may have all sorts of things . . .

MICHAEL: Perhaps I ought to have a word with - your niece, before I go.

TERESA: With my niece? But she's . . . she's . . . dead.

HELEN [*sharply*]: He means Rose, dear.

MICHAEL: There's still a lot of business to be done. About the will. You see, the other executor is abroad.

TERESA: What a good thing you're a careful man, Mr Dennis!

MICHAEL: Am I careful?

TERESA: That's what you were telling Rose, wasn't it? 'You can always trust me,' you said, 'to be very careful.' I thought it was so sweetly put.

MICHAEL [*covering up*]: Well, an executor has to be careful - or he goes to jail.

HELEN [*defining his sphere of interest*]: You should really see my brother about all those legal things. Rose is too young to understand. Dear little sweetheart! Teresa, if Rose is tired, tell her to lie down. We can entertain Mr Dennis.

[*ROSE returns on that word, carrying the tea-things.*]

ROSE: I'm not a bit tired.

HELEN: Well then, if you'll all sit down (do take off your coat, Mr Dennis), I'll push James in. (You know he's been confined to his chair for years.) Start pouring out the tea, dear. [*She goes out.*]

TERESA [*fussing with the tea-things*]: Now find yourselves chairs. No, not that one, Rose. That's your Aunt Helen's.

[*ROSE and MICHAEL sit down together. They don't look at each other. Constraint keeps their eyes on a mutual object, as if it is only there, where TERESA deals with the tea-things, that their gaze can meet vicariously.*]

Where did you say you went to Mass today, dear?

ROSE: I didn't, Aunt Teresa.

TERESA: But it's a Holiday of Obligation, dear. Oh well, perhaps it doesn't matter if you were travelling.

ROSE: I forgot. I could have gone before the early train. But I slept so sound.

TERESA: One lump, Mr Dennis?

MICHAEL: Thank you.

TERESA: And you, Rose?

ROSE: Yes, please, Aunt.

[TERESA *is pouring out the tea as she talks.*]

TERESA: I started a novena for you as soon as I heard of your poor mother.

ROSE: Thank you, Aunt Teresa.

TERESA: I expect you'd like to go to Mass tomorrow. It's the second of nine we've arranged for her. Mary doesn't come in till eight-thirty, but we'll wake you ourselves.

ROSE: Thank you.

TERESA: Help yourself to bread-and-butter, Mr Dennis.

[ROSE *and* MICHAEL *both put out their hands, touch each other and recoil over the plate.*]

[*To* ROSE] Has Helen told you about your room?

ROSE: No, but there's no hurry.

TERESA: You see, dear, we are very cramped for space here. So many rooms are closed. We thought perhaps you wouldn't mind sleeping in here. The sofa's very comfortable. And the end lets down.

ROSE: Of course. I don't mind.

MICHAEL: I was saying to your sister, Miss Browne, that it seemed quite a large house from the street.

TERESA: Oh, it was. It was. But many rooms had to be closed.

MICHAEL: War damage?

TERESA: Not exactly.

HELEN [*outside*]: Here we are! Will somebody open the door?

[HELEN *pushes in a chair in which sits her brother, JAMES BROWNE, a man of about 65, with a face to which one is not sure whether nature or mutilation has lent strength.*]

All his vitality perhaps has had to find its way above the waist. A shawl is over his legs, and he wears a scarf round his neck.]

[*To* JAMES] James, here is Rose - and Mr Dennis, the executor.

JAMES: It's good to see you, my dear. After all these years. You've changed more than I have.

[*ROSE bends down and kisses him.*]

ROSE: How are you, Uncle?

JAMES: Pretty well, my dear. Thank God you won't play trains with my chair now! Well, Mr Dennis, I hope she hasn't been a trouble to you. We expected you last night.

MICHAEL: The morning train seemed a better idea, Mr Browne.

HELEN: *Father* Browne, Mr Dennis. My brother's . . .

MICHAEL: Of course. I'm sorry.

JAMES: Now you've seen all the family again, can you bear us, Rose? We are a bit older than we were, but we aren't so bad.

ROSE: It was good of Mother to leave me to you. I'd have been lost without you.

JAMES: The only Catholic Pemberton. But somehow I never think of you as a Pemberton.

TERESA [*handing* JAMES *a cup*]: Your tea, dear.

ROSE: Some bread-and-butter, Uncle?

JAMES: No, thank you, dear. Just the tea. I'm not an eating man.

TERESA: Oh, Rose! Such a funny thing happened last night! A lady rang up and she asked if we were the Brownes who were expecting a niece.

ROSE: Who was she?

TERESA: I've no idea. When I told her you weren't arriving till today she just rang off.

HELEN: You never told me, Teresa. What a secret little thing you are!

TERESA: I've only just remembered. [*To* ROSE] I expect it was a friend of yours who wanted to inquire.

ROSE: I can't think of anybody - in London. [*She looks at MICHAEL with apprehension.*]

TERESA: Oh, if it's anything important, I expect she'll ring again. Talking of important, James, Mary left a quarter of an hour early today.

HELEN: It wasn't her fault. The clock in the kitchen is always twenty minutes fast.

[*While the old people talk, ROSE and MICHAEL sit awkwardly together, saying nothing. They have no small-talk for each other.*]

TERESA: Since it's always fast she must know the real time. Will you speak to her, James? She would take it better from you. Oh . . . [*Putting her cup suddenly down, she makes for the door.*]

HELEN: Now, dear, what is it?

TERESA: If Mary left early, I don't know how the oven is.

HELEN: It can wait for a few minutes. What a little Martha you are!

TERESA: You'd be the first to complain tonight about the pie.

HELEN: Well then, let me go, dear, and I'll have only myself to blame.

TERESA: The cooking tonight is *my* responsibility. Isn't that so, James?

JAMES: It's a Thursday. Yes.

HELEN: I'll help you, dear. I can't bear to see you lifting heavy things.

[*During the argument ROSE and MICHAEL have drawn a little apart from the others.*

TERESA *leaves the room.*

HELEN *is about to follow her when she looks round and sees*

MICHAEL's *hand touching ROSE's as he takes her empty cup.*]

ROSE: Thank you, dear. [*She tries to swallow the last word, but it's too late.*]

HELEN: See that Mr Dennis has a slice of my plum cake, James.

[She leaves.]

JAMES: She has a wonderful hand with cakes, Mr Dennis.

MICHAEL: I don't think I will. I ought to be going home.

ROSE: I'm sorry.

MICHAEL: Why?

ROSE: I mean, I've been such a trouble.

MICHAEL: No trouble. But my wife gets anxious rather easily. She's - not very well. I should have gone straight home, but I thought there were things we ought to discuss - about the will.

ROSE [*anxious to ensure seeing her lover the next day*]: No, no. It can wait. Till tomorrow. You'll be coming in tomorrow? We can talk then.

MICHAEL: Of course. Any time that suits you. I'll ring you up in the morning. Have a good rest tonight.

[They are trying to reassure each other in FATHER BROWNE's presence.]

ROSE: You've done so much for me.

MICHAEL: It's my job. I'm the executor - not the executer.

ROSE: It was a silly slip. I was never much good at English.

MICHAEL: As the executor and trustee [*slowly and firmly*] I'll try not to make any slips at all. Good-bye, Father Browne.

JAMES: Good-bye, Mr Dennis. We'll be seeing each other again soon, I hope.

ROSE: You put some papers down . . . over there, I think.

[It is an excuse for them to move behind the old man's chair, out of his vision. They are afraid to kiss, but they hold each other for a moment.]

MICHAEL: They must be in my overcoat pocket.

[They go together to the door.]

Don't come down. It's a long way to the hall. I'll see you tomorrow, Rose.

ROSE: Yes.

MICHAEL [*with a last look at this room which is the wrong shape*]: Good-bye. [*He goes.*]

[*ROSE follows him on to the landing. We can hear his steps on the stairs, but she still doesn't return. A pause.*]

JAMES: Come in, dear, and have another cup of tea.

ROSE [*returning*]: I don't awfully like tea.

JAMES [*guessing her thoughts*]: Yes, it's a long way down, isn't it? Only the kitchen is in the place you'd expect. In the basement. Even if you don't like tea, come in and sit down. I don't see many strangers.

ROSE: Am I a stranger?

JAMES: One can love a stranger.

ROSE: Yes. [*She comes back, but her mind is away.*] Why are so many rooms closed, Uncle?

JAMES: Have you noticed? So quickly?

ROSE: I mistook the floor just now – it's a strange house – the rooms down there seemed locked.

JAMES: I suppose I ought to tell you. But it comes from something very foolish.

ROSE: Yes?

JAMES: I wouldn't tell you if you were just staying a while. But this has got to be your home. You'll see it for yourself. You'll watch your Aunt Teresa . . . your Aunt Helen, and I suppose there's a lot to puzzle you.

ROSE: I thought it was funny the way Aunt Teresa came out of there, not paying any attention . . .

JAMES: Yes, it's funny, isn't it? Go on thinking it's funny – a bit pathetic, too. There's no harm in it. Don't let it get on your nerves. I sometimes think the young have worse nerves than we have. Age is a good drug and it doesn't lose its effect.

ROSE: But you still haven't told me.

JAMES: My dear, it's so absurd! And I should have been able to stop it. I hope you'll laugh. Please laugh – it's very funny – in its way:

ROSE: Yes?

JAMES [*nerving himself*]: You see, your Aunt Helen sleeps in the old drawing-room. Because I'm an invalid they would have insisted on the dining-room for me, but I told them they couldn't get me up and down stairs to the living room, so I have what used to be a nurse's little sitting-room here - by the night nursery - this was the night nursery in the old days. Aunt Teresa has the day nursery next to me. You see the bedrooms are all closed.

ROSE: But why?

JAMES [*slowly and reluctantly*]: They don't like using a room in which anybody has ever died.

ROSE [*not understanding*]: Died?

JAMES [*purposely light*]: It's a habit people have - in bedrooms. So the bedrooms are all shut up - except this. It's an old house, and they aren't taking any chances. They risked this one - it had been a night nursery for a long time, and children don't die very often. Anyway, they don't die of old age.

ROSE: When did it all start?

JAMES: I'm not sure. I only noticed it when our father died. It had seemed quite natural when my mother's room was shut; there was nobody else to sleep in it. I only came for the holidays, and they had no visitors. But when this [*he taps his leg*] happened and I came to live here, I noticed our father's room was closed too, and when I wanted a room on the second floor Teresa said - I think it was Teresa - 'but that was Rose's room'.

ROSE: Rose?

JAMES: Your grandmother. She was the only one of us who got married. She died here, you know, when your mother was born.

ROSE: Was that when it started?

JAMES: It may have been. Who knows when anything really starts? Perhaps it was when we were all children together in this room.

[*A pause.*]

ROSE: It's - creepy, isn't it?

JAMES: No, no, my dear. Not creepy. I used to laugh at them and threaten to die in here. What will you do for a living room then? I'd say. But I think at the last moment they'd push me into my own room - and that could be closed afterwards.

ROSE: But I still don't understand.

JAMES: Nor do I. Perhaps it's the fear of death - of the certainty of death. They don't seriously mind accidents. They aren't so much worried about your poor mother - because she was still young. She needn't have died. It's the inevitable they hate. Of course when someone dies they'll do all the right things - they are good Catholics. They'll have Masses said - and then as quickly as possible they forget. The photographs are the first things to disappear.

ROSE: But why? why?

JAMES: You'll have to ask Dennis. He lectures and writes books and teaches psychology. I expect he'd call it an anxiety neurosis. Or something more difficult. I'm a priest and I've given up psychology. They are good people, I doubt if they've ever committed a big sin in their lives - perhaps it would have been better if they had. I used to notice, in the old days, it was often the sinners who had the biggest trust. In mercy. My sisters don't seem to have any trust. Are you afraid of death?

ROSE: I don't think so. I haven't thought.

JAMES: Of course it seems closer to them than to you.

ROSE: Are you afraid of it, Uncle?

JAMES: I used to be - twenty years ago. And then something worse happened to me. It was like God reproving me for being such a fool. When that car smash came I ceased to be any use. I am a priest who can't say Mass or hear confessions or visit the sick. I shouldn't have been afraid of dying. I should have been afraid of being useless.

ROSE: But you *are* of use to them, Uncle?

JAMES: A priest isn't intended to be just a comfort to his family. Sometimes in the morning when I am half asleep, I imagine my legs are still here. I say to myself, Oh dear, oh dear, what a day ahead! A meeting of the Knights of Saint Columba, and then the Guild of the Blessed Sacrament, a meeting of the Altar Society, and after that . . . It's strange how bored I used to be with all the running around.

ROSE: Now I'm here, can't we go out together to the river and the park?

JAMES: Yes, I'd like to now and then. But it means hiring a couple of men. It's a long way down the stairs, and I'm heavy. But I'm not going to use you, my dear. I hope soon you'll be getting married.

ROSE: There's plenty of time.

[HELEN *enters*.]

HELEN: Poor little fusspot. The oven was perfectly all right. Mary's very reliable. Has Mr Dennis gone?

JAMES: He went a few minutes ago.

HELEN: A nice man, but not much sense of humour, I'm afraid. I was telling him about the Flopsy Bunnies. He'd never heard of them.

JAMES: You mustn't be hard on him for that. I've never read *Paradise Lost*.

[TERESA *enters in a hurry*.]

TERESA: Has Mr Dennis . . . ?

HELEN: He's gone, dear.

TERESA: That lady is on the telephone again. The one who called before. She wants to talk to him.

ROSE: I have his number. [*With a trace of bitterness at the last word.*] She can get him at home.

TERESA: I said I thought I'd heard him go, and she wants to talk to you, Rose.

ROSE [*scared*]: Me?

TERESA: She says she's Mrs Dennis. Will you speak to her, dear? She's asking all sorts of questions I can't answer.

ROSE: But I don't know her. I've never even met her.

[HELEN *is listening intently.*]

JAMES: What questions, Teresa?

TERESA: She said she tried to speak to Mr Dennis last night. She wasn't well. Where do you say he stayed, dear?

ROSE: I don't know. In the village.

TERESA: And then she tried your house, and you weren't there. She sounds a little - strange. I wish you'd come, dear. She's waiting on the telephone.

JAMES: Better have a word with her.

ROSE [*desperately*]: I can't. I don't know her. Michael will be home any moment.

HELEN: Don't worry, my little sweetheart. She's tired. Such a long journey. Your Aunt Helen will take care of it for you. [*She leaves.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE TWO

The Living Room. The next morning.

[MICHAEL DENNIS *is alone. He is ill at ease. He opens a briefcase, takes out some papers and puts them back. He goes to the window and looks out. TERESA BROWNE enters.*]

TERESA: Good morning, Mr Dennis.

MICHAEL: Good morning. I promised yesterday I'd come in.

TERESA: We hadn't expected you quite so early.

MICHAEL: I have a lecture at eleven.

TERESA: My brother hasn't finished his breakfast. You see, my sister and I went to Mass this morning.

MICHAEL: I didn't want to bother your brother. It was really Rose I came to see.

TERESA: Oh, but Rose is out. She didn't go to Mass.