

# TONIGHT AT 8:30

Stuart Spencer

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“The presence of fantasy in [Ferenc] Molnar’s work has often been misunderstood. It is never introduced to obtain pseudo-poetic effects. ... It is there because it is the distillation of theatre: illusion made real for the duration of two hours. He felt much the same about marriage, which he regarded as an artificial institution depending for its success on the degree of skill in role-playing shown by the protagonists.”

-Frank Marcus, Introduction to *The Guardsman*

The usual curtain time for Broadway shows today is 8:00 pm, sometimes earlier. But until the 1970s, when rising street crime in the theatre district persuaded producers to change it, standard curtain time for Broadway shows was always 8:30.

-The Author

# 1924

As Lynn remembered it, the turning point came on a cold, rainy spring afternoon when Alfred returned from lunch with Theresa Helburn of the Theatre Guild looking every inch the hunter home from the chase. No, conquering hero in his triumphal chariot. The bastard.

Through the narrow doorway of the dining room, where she'd been attempting with limited success to balance her chequebook, she observed what she could of his entrance. Alfred did nothing so well as to make an entrance, one had to admit. From her partial-view seat she saw him withdraw a manuscript — the prey; or, as it were, the spoils of war — from the protective interior of his sopping raincoat. It looked to be about 100 pages, bound with brass brads and rolled into a fat cylinder so that when Alfred set it on the Biedermeier console beside the front door it began to open itself like a venomous, tropical flower unfolding its petals.

“You're dripping, darling,” Lynn said, waving a long finger at a stream of water running over the brim of his fedora. “Go. Hang.” She pointed to the second floor.

It was their first real flat together and dirt cheap due to an eccentric floor plan spread over three separate floors. On the first was a foyer with a small but sweeping staircase, a tiny kitchen, and a windowless dining room with a narrow doorway. On the second floor were the bedroom, bath, parlor, and a cast iron staircase that spiraled upwards to a large studio, which on sunny days was flooded with light from a bank of skylights. Perfect for rehearsing, as Alfred never let her forget.

Alfred cursed his clumsiness and took his squeaking, dripping, Mac upstairs to the bathroom. Lynn eyed the unfolding belladonna on the Biedermeier. She called up to him, “She gave you something, I see.” Meaning Theresa Helburn of the Theatre Guild.

His clarion tenor with falsetto top notes — the high comedy voice — echoed among the porcelain fixtures. “Oh did she *ever*. She made a *terrific* pitch for it.” It was unconscious, she reminded herself. He couldn’t help it.

Lynn fingered the manuscript, its outer edges damp from the rain. Two months ago, in a moment of weakness, and very much against her better judgement, she had promised to appear with Alfred in another play, and ever since then he’d been pestering every playwright, agent, producer, director, and lift operator, looking with no success (so far) for the right one. Nothing had even come close. But from the sound of his voice, this monstrous, evil flower might be it.

Using her own stage voice to make sure Alfred heard every syllable, she called up the stairs. “I spoke to Helen on the telephone while you were gone.”

From inside the bathroom, toweling off, he said, “Yes? How’s Helen?”

“She said everyone in town was passing on something that the Guild was pushing.”

“Did Helen pass on it?”

“No, they didn’t make her an offer.”

He appeared at the top of the stairs, combing his dark wavy hair and relishing the pause. “So, not *everyone* then.”

She ignored him. “And now it arrives at last on our doorstep. How flattering.”

He came back down the staircase shooting his cuffs, rubbing his palms, and looking ravishing. With his long, fluent limbs, he always looked ravishing coming down staircases, and he knew it.

“I’m going to make myself a pot of coffee and read it this afternoon,” he said, and gave her a peck on her nose as he passed by. “It’s Molnar, you know.” He delivered this over his shoulder, as a throwaway, and disappeared into the kitchen.

That wasn't fair. Using Molnar was playing dirty. She'd have to do it if it was Molnar. Unless it was bad Molnar, and there wasn't much of that.

Alfred was clanking pots and pans in the kitchen, preparing Swedish coffee. As the tap water ran into the kettle, he appeared at the door, his richly curved lips open in a Mephistophelean smile. "Don't you want to know which one?"

"I don't, actually." She was a brilliant liar.

"It's not *Liliom*, if that's what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking anything. I'm not particularly interested."

"Liar."

"Shut up."

"You're dying to know and you know it."

She went upstairs to the bedroom and shut the door.

Alfred's Swedish coffee was a complicated process that involved an earthenware coffee pot, a raw egg, coffee grounds, half a gallon of water kept just *below* the boiling point (try it sometime) and a fair bit of patience. Half an hour later the clanking of footsteps on iron was heard going up to the studio. There'd be no sunlight up there today, but there was an electric floor lamp if he needed it, and he would have his steaming coffee pot, and a Hudson Bay blanket if it was chilly. He'd be fine.

She remained in the bedroom writing letters and appraising the April Vogue. Fashion was her indulgence. She was indifferent to hair styles, slightly bored by jewelry, and her makeup was conventional, but when she was in the right dress she knew who she was. Not just a good dress. The *right* dress. They were hard to find in New York and London wasn't much better. You really had to go to Paris, and she and Alfred didn't have the money for that, and never would if they

didn't stay in New York and look for work, which was exactly what Alfred was doing, actually, so it was hard to be angry at him in that sense. She'd been out of work since December when *In Love With Love* had closed and she longed to be on stage again.

But he insisted that they play together. It had to be the two of them. "And you know why," he'd said to her.

"I don't know why."

"You do know why."

"Yes, but I'm not allowed to talk about it."

"That's right, you're not. But you know."

She had agreed that they might play together — *might*, if it was the right play — partly because life was hell when she wasn't working but partly because she thought she was safe in making the deal. She could always say no to any play he brought her and that would be that.

But now Molnar.

It wasn't fair.



At 5:30, with the rain still coming down and Alfred still upstairs reading the manuscript, Lynn assembled ingredients for omelettes in the kitchen. Alfred had a performance of *Outward Bound* tonight — the lucky bastard was in a show, and as usual didn't appreciate it in the least — and when she wasn't working herself she always made him a light supper. On the kitchen counter, all two square feet of it, were eggs, butter, cheese, parsley and a handful of mushrooms that she'd bought at the green grocer's earlier that day. Omelettes were the only thing she knew how to make, and she was very good at them. She liked hers solid with no runny bits, while Alfred took his *baveuse*, French for 'drool'.

But before she'd cracked a single egg he descended the stairs holding the script in the air like a drum major's baton. "This. Is. It!"

"That good?"

"Oh boy, is it good. It's called *The Guardsman*, and you. Are. Going. To love it."

"Never heard of it."

"It was done here before the war, but Terry said they botched it. It's not really a farce, but you have to play it like one. It's a *psychological* farce."

"Oh, my," Lynn said.

"It's Molnar at his best — perfectly structured, two fuck-off good parts, one for each of us, and Linnie, my love, you promised."

"I promised to read it."

"And there it is." He placed the script, re-rolled into a cylinder, onto the countertop where it once again unfolded itself like an evil, narcotic flower.

Lynn cracked an egg. "I'm just a little busy, darling. You tell me about it."

"No. You have to read it."

"I will read it but you tell me about it first."

He refused. She would have to read it herself, he said. As she had promised to do, he said. Was she keeping her promise? Yes, she said. And she was absolutely sincere.

Alfred ate his omelette, kissed her goodbye, and left for the theatre.

She retightened the manuscript into a slim cylinder and went up the spiral staircase to the studio but, having settled herself on a sofa salvaged from *The Silver Cord* (their first show together) she couldn't bring herself to unfurl it. Now, strangely, she was afraid she might *not* like

it. Or that she'd like the play but not the role. Or that she'd like the role but think it wrong for her.

Alfred, after all, could bring the most preposterous characters to life. The less they were like him, the better. For Alfred, taking on a role was like plunging naked into an arctic sea — an act of courage and daring. A matter of impossible odds, the more foolhardy the better. He lived for the challenge of it, the danger, the chance of disaster.

For Lynn, finding a character was like slipping into a gown. It had to be right. She didn't become the character so much as the character became her. If the character wasn't right for her, she had to refuse. This time it would look like she was rejecting it because she didn't want to do another play with him, which was true. Or was it? If she wanted never to be on stage with him again, why was she nervous that she wouldn't like the play?

She spent an hour teasing that apart. Meanwhile she went downstairs, made herself some strong black tea, and brought a tray with little biscuits up to the studio. Thus fortified, she was about to open the manuscript when she realized that her first impulse might have been the truest after all. (When it came to her acting she invariably trusted her first impulse, but in life she dithered.) Obviously she was afraid that she *would* like the play and find her role perfectly suitable, and then, if she were to keep her promise — and she had to keep her promise, there was no question of that — there would be no choice. She'd have to do it. Which was why she couldn't bring herself to read it.

But she had promised she would. And therefore must do so.

By the time she reached this conclusion the tea had gone cold. She had to go downstairs and start over. With a fresh pot beside her, she opened the manuscript to the first page on which was listed the cast of characters and the names of the translators. Two of them. Odd. Why two?

The little desk lamp up here in the studio really was inadequate. Besides it was high time she brought the big floor lamp up here from the bedroom, where it wasn't needed. For some time she struggled to get the massive thing up the spiral staircase, then realized it would be just as easy to leave the lamp in the bedroom and read the play propped up in bed. So she took the lamp back to the bedroom, went up to the studio and brought the play and the tea down to the bedroom.

The tea had gone cold again. She resisted the urge to make another pot. She had to get down to work. This was ridiculous. She plumped up her pillows, got herself into a more or less upright position, turned on the bedside lamp and was about to open the script again, but no, her head was too full. The first read of any play was hard work and required complete concentration. She needed a clean slate that could accept the impressions of whatever the script suggested.

She took a moment, closed her eyes, breathed deeply, played a Schubert sonatina in her head, purging the clutter from her mind — the cold tea, the cumbersome floor lamp, the spiral stairs, the dreaded poisonous flower. And so she closed her eyes and fell sound asleep until Alfred came home and found her with the unopened script on the bed beside her.



In bed that night in the dark, with the rain outside having faded to a soft drizzle, Alfred, who had been pouting insufferably, rolled onto his side and closed his eyes. Lynn said offhandedly, as though it hadn't been rehearsed, although the problem with Alfred was that the more she sounded unrehearsed the more he would know she'd been rehearsing, "Do you really think it's wise that we do another play together?"

He rolled over to face her. "Are you serious?"

"I am."

He rose up on one elbow and drew a long stare. “You promised me you’d read it.”

“And I will. I never said I wouldn’t.”

“Well, why bother if you won’t take the part?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t take it. I only asked. Do you think it’s *wise*?”

“Look, you either want to be on stage with me or you don’t. There’s nothing more to say.”

“Alfred, don’t be short with me. You know it frightens me.”

“I don’t think it frightens you at all. I think you know how much I want it and that gives you power over me and you love to *torment* me, that’s what *I* think.”

“Darling, don’t use the high comedy voice while we’re in bed.”

“The what?”

“‘*Torment* me. That’s what *I* think.’ It’s lovely on stage but not now.”

He swept aside the covers and stood up, searching in the dark for his dignity and a pair of slippers.

“Alfred, I only want to be with *you*, darling,” she reached out her hands to the sulking back of his head, “— not with this Hungarian soldier or whatever he is —”

“— *guardsman*, my precious. The play is indeed called *The Guardsman*.”

She pressed home her thought. “... not with some Hungarian guardsman, but with you.”

He went to the window, parted the gossamer curtains. With his back to her, he looked down onto 36<sup>th</sup> Street, lit by a lone streetlamp at the corner of Third Avenue. The rain and wind had ceased and the night had grown quiet. His lean, elongated back was ramrod straight but she could tell that his chest was heaving and his voice was low. “I need you with me, onstage. I don’t apologize for that.”

From the bed, Lynn said, “But I’m afraid, Alfred. I’m afraid we won’t be *us* anymore. I’m afraid we’ll end up characters in a play and that’s all.”

He let the curtain drop and turned to face her, though the streetlamp backlit him so she saw not Alfred but only a black silhouette that spoke.

“Why did I ever marry you? How could I have been such a fool?”

# 1916

In the summer before his junior year at Emerson College, Alfred auditioned for a touring company led by the legendary actress and impresario Laura Hope Crews. He never really expected to be cast, but he knew it would be Good Experience. In the audition hall, Miss Crews sat behind a long table flanked by the assistant director, the casting director, the stage manager, three producers, the girlfriend of one of the producers, the costumer, and Miss Crews' bright-eyed personal attendant, an aspiring actress no doubt.

"And what will you do for us today, Mr. ...?" Miss Crews' eyes fell to a piece of paper on the table. "... Mr. Lunt?"

"Hotspur," he said.

She looked up sharply. Her girlish, porcelain doll face came alive, and she turned her enormous, searching eyes upwards to peer at him with a wounded curiosity. "Oh? Which scene?"

"Act II, Scene 3. Hotspur and his wife, Kate."

"That's a lovely scene."

"I did it in college."

"When were you in college?"

"I'm still in college."

"This is a tour, Mr. Lunt. You can't be in college and on tour at the same time."

"I'll drop out."

"I see," she said, either impressed or mocking him, he wasn't sure. She indicated the others around her. "I know the scene well but let's play it safe and set it up, yes?"

“Right. It’s, um, well, it’s *Henry IV, Part 1* of course. Hotspur’s gotten a letter, and he’s afraid that the writer might be about to betray the rebellion, so he suddenly — very suddenly — he decides to put the uprising into motion — that night. He calls for his horse but his wife, Kate — she doesn’t know about the plot against the crown — she thinks there’s something wrong between *them* — and she won’t let him go until he tells her. And she’s got him by his little finger — literally — and threatens to snap it in two if he doesn’t tell her. And that’s where I start.”

Alfred turned away from his auditors, took a moment to compose himself, then roared like a beast and turned back around, flicking his hand in pain as if someone had been twisting his finger.

“Away! Away, you trifler! Love! I love thee not, I care not for thee, Kate. This is no world to play with puppets and to tilt with lips. We must have bloody noses and crack'd crowns.”

A professional actor knows that you never look at the director while delivering the monologue — or at anyone else for that matter, but definitely not the director. Alfred, however, not being a professional, played the entire scene to Miss Crews. She didn’t seem to mind. In fact she seemed to expect that he would use her as his Kate. He had the sensation of a tide rising beneath him, buoying him up, pushing him along and rushing him towards her.

“What say'st thou, Kate? Come, wilt thou see me ride? And when I am on horseback, I will swear I love thee infinitely. But hark you, Kate; I must not have you question me whither I go, nor reason whereabouts. Whither I must, I must. And, to conclude, this evening must I leave you, gentle Kate.”

He stepped towards the long table and took Kate into his confidence, as though despite their being alone he wanted her, and only her, to hear him. “I know you wise. Constant you are,

and for secrecy, no lady closer. For I well believe thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know. And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate.”

This was where the monologue ended, but his chosen Kate leaned forward and said, indignantly, “How! So far?” As she did the table dissolved along with everyone else in the room.

There’s nothing now between Hotspur and Kate anymore — except his determination to lead a rebellion.

Hotspur, still borne by that same rushing tide, warns her. “Not an inch further. But hark you, Kate: whither I go, thither shall you go too. Today will I set forth, to-morrow you. Will this content you, Kate?”

Discontent but resigned, Kate says, “It must of force.”

Alfred blinked and the table reappeared, fully populated.

Miss Crews said, without breaking eye contact, “Thank you very much, Mr. Lunt, you’re hired.”



Miss Crews loved to rehearse. She spent long hours working every scene whether she appeared in it or not, and gave generous, inspiring notes to the company. Her own abilities seemed almost supernatural. She played Alfred’s mother in both plays — the company would do Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and Chekhov’s *The Seagull* in rep — and her ability to evoke a maternal intimacy was equally adept when she played Mrs. Alving, who dotes on her son Oswald in *Ghosts*, as it was when she played Irina, the self-involved actress in *Seagull* who struggles to show her own son any love at all.

Still, it was never the same as in the audition. The failure of this sudden magic to reappear left Alfred disappointed. What had happened during his monologue? It wasn’t his

imagination. Miss Crews had sensed the singularity of the moment, he was sure of that. For her, too, everyone else in the room had vanished, and they were alone together.

Now though, rehearsals were quite ordinary, and when they were over, nothing and no one could command Miss Crews' further interest. She never went for dinner with the rest of the cast and spent her free time alone. Reading, so she said.

"Reading what?" he asked. Rehearsal was over for the day. Mimi, the dewy-eyed assistant, stood at the door of the rehearsal hall holding Miss Crews' handbag, clearly ready to be on her way.

But Miss Crews turned her stout, muscular figure towards him and gave him her full attention. "At the moment, plays. We need a third play in the repertoire and I'm looking for it."

"Why a third play?"

"Sometimes," she said, looking him up and down as if gauging whether he were trustworthy, "you assemble a company, and you realize there's more in them than you thought. An embarrassment of riches, so to speak. You must find a play that will let them shine. And that's a great deal of work. Mimi, are we ready?" Her eyes remained on Alfred.

Mimi said, "We're ready Miss Crews."

And off they went.

How was love supposed to blossom under conditions like these?

By the end of August they were on the road, but Miss Crews never stopped honing her own performance and that of her players'. They gathered onstage after every performance for notes, and certain actors were sometimes singled out to work a scene the following day. After a performance of *The Seagull* in Schenectady, on a three-day engagement, she told Alfred to meet her the next day at the theatre. They would work their French scene in Act III.

“Be sure to bring the bandage,” she said. Alfred’s character, Constantine, has tried to kill himself between acts and wears a bandage where the bullet grazed his skull.

The next day, alone in the theatre, the watchful Mimi having remained in New York City, Miss Crews and Alfred, his head swathed in linen, began to run the scene. They arrived before long at Constantine’s line, “Will you change my bandage, mother? You do it so well.”

Miss Crews said, “That’s it. Right there. I don’t think that’s right somehow. It gets things going in the wrong direction. *You do it so well*. It’s a tricky line, isn’t it? What could he mean by that? *You do it so well*.”

Alfred shrugged. “I suppose he likes the way she changes his bandage.”

“Mr. Lunt, don’t make me wish I never hired you.”

His sinuses cleared. “Well, he wants her attention too, of course.”

“Yes but he always wants that.”

“He sees an opportunity now. They’re alone.”

“Opportunity for what?”

“To get her to drop her boyfriend. He hates Trigorin and he wants her —“

“Hates him?”

“Doesn’t he?”

“Hate is too general.”

“Jealous then.”

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. He’s jealous of his mother’s boyfriend. How awkward.”

Alfred began to catch on. “He wouldn’t want her to know that of course.”

“But it’s a fact. He really is, in a sense, trying to seduce her, to wrest her away from her lover. And because he *doesn’t* want her to know, because it *is* so awkward, he’d never let her know it — certainly not in the way he asks her to change the bandage. He wouldn’t plead. He wouldn’t be sentimental, or self-pitying. Would he.”

She was right of course. He’d been playing the line in the most obvious, ordinary way. He tried it again.

Sounding half-distracted, as though amusing himself with the thought of her dressing the wound, as though the question of whether she actually did so was irrelevant, Constantine says, “Will you change my bandage, mother? You do it so well.”

It went easily after that.

Irina reaches for the iodine and box of bandages. Irritated, she says, “The doctor’s late.” She dresses the wound, and Constantine, having won this first battle through stealth, gives in to his worse instincts and starts to complain about the detestable Trigorin until finally Irina screams “You nobody!” at him and the scene is over.

Miss Crews and Alfred finished work in less than half an hour.

“It has a nice shape now, doesn’t it?” she said. “It really goes somewhere. I may be glad I hired you after all.”

“Since we’re done early, may I buy you coffee?”

She looked surprised. “What a nice idea, but I’ve got work.”

“Yes, reading plays,” said Alfred.

“No, I have a lunch date at noon.”

“You made a lunch date during our rehearsal?”

“The rehearsal is over.”

“But you said it would be two hours. You made a lunch date right in the middle of it.”

“I knew you’d be a quick study.”

“But you said two hours.”

“Now, Alfred, please understand, I’d like to spend more time with *everyone* in the company, but I ...”

“What happened at my audition?”

She was gathering her script and prop, but stopped cold.

“You got a job, that’s what happened.”

“Something happened. I know you know.”

Miss Crews let her shoulders down. Her prodigious bosom was, as a result, slightly less imperious, and her smile was warm. “Let me tell you something, Alfred. The theatre is a mysterious place. We’re all superstitious, every one of us. I haven’t met an actor yet who didn’t believe in the supernatural. You know why we put out the ghost light in the theatre at night, don’t you? To propitiate the spirits who congregate in theatres.”

“I thought the ghost light was so nobody fell into the pit.”

“That’s another thing we do. We tell stories, we exaggerate, we change things around, leave things out, remember them — well — *differently*, let’s say. And I hope, Alfred, my newest, brightest, most brilliant young player, that you never lose sight of that.”

And she kissed Alfred fleetingly but exquisitely on the lips.



On a crisp morning in November, as their train rumbled into Rochester, Minnesota, the company gathered in the lounge car. Miss Crews had an announcement. She’d come to a decision. They would be adding to the repertoire Bernard Shaw’s *Candida*. She assigned roles,

going down the cast list, describing each character in a few choice words before making the assignment. At last she came to Marchbanks. Her eyes pinched with mischief as she considered her adjectives.

“Marchbanks is romantic, poetic, sensitive, wounded, and charmingly vain,” she said.

“Or is it vainly charming? Either way, Alfred is perfect.”

Everyone laughed. But how, Alfred wondered, could he be vain when he thought so little of himself and so much of her? How could she *say* such a thing?

Miss Crews said she would work through the play with one actor at a time in her train compartment over the next several weeks. She liked table work because it was easy to try things. “On your feet you can only do what you can do. At the table you can fly to the moon and back.”

She saved Alfred for last. One afternoon as they clickity-clacked across the steppes of North Dakota, he sat across from her, script in lap, knocking knees every time the train rounded a bend. He read Marchbanks; she, everyone else. Though she never really read anything. She knew every line by heart. Whenever he looked up, her eyes were on him.

“You’re always looking at me,” he said, when they took a break.

“Where else should I look?”

“You never look at the script I mean.”

“If I looked at the script, I couldn’t look at you.”

“Why is that so important?”

He thought he was being very clever to draw her out, but she stared at him and answered slowly as if to make sure he could follow.

“Because you’ve been cast in my company. And I don’t. Want you. To flop.”

He sat back in his seat, stung. “Why did you call me vain?”

“You *are* vain.”

“I am not vain.”

“You are.”

“How am I vain? Tell me that.”

“You’re a talented, handsome young man who thinks he can snap his finger and every lady will fall at your feet. You’re a shameless flirt, Mr. Lunt.”

Alfred was stupefied. “I’m a flirt! You have me around your little finger and I’m a flirt.”

“You see, there it is — vanity. Why would I want you tangled around my finger? My finger has far better things to do, I can assure you. Now back to work.”

Act III, later that evening. Marchbanks is alone with Candida reading poetry by the fireside, and his head and arms inevitably find their way into her lap. Even in Miss Crews’ cramped train compartment, Alfred instinctively began to sink to his knees before her.

“Not yet,” Miss Crews said. “This is table work. Besides, it’ll be very simple to stage it once we get into a theatre.”

He was down on one knee already. “Exactly. It’s so simple to do, I can just ...”

“Sit up.”

“Why don’t you want me to?”

“Because this is not a love affair.”

“I’m playing the role. Marchbanks is on his knees with his head in her lap. That’s what Shaw says.”

“It’s not a love affair because Candida’s not in love with him.”

“Well he’s certainly in love with *her*.”

“Marchbanks is a boy. He knows nothing of love.”

“He knows enough to get as far as he has,” he said. “And if she’s not in love, then why is she here?”

“It’s her house, isn’t? Marchbanks is a guest.”

“More than that I’d say. He hasn’t let her out of his sight for an entire month. She must know that. Why has she allowed him to stay here, alone with her, if she isn’t in love with him?”

“She takes pity.”

What could he say to that? It was nonsense but what could he say?

They read the scene up to the moment Marchbanks (but not Alfred) places his arms in her lap.

Candida asks, “Do you want anything more?”

Marchbanks says, “No: I have come into heaven, where want is unknown.”

It was not exactly the electrifying moment Shaw had clearly intended, but they pressed on without comment to the end of the play. When they were done, Miss Crews seemed pleased.

“You liked that,” Alfred said, mystified.

“Miles to go, of course, but heading in the right direction,” she said brightly. He remained slumped in his seat. “You don’t think so?”

“She’s in love with him,” he pouted.

She looked at Alfred like a benevolent but stern boss. “Alfred, a word of advice. Never tell another actor what to play.”



A week later the company was in Ray, North Dakota, giving Ibsen’s *Ghosts* at the Ray Opera House, when the snow began to fall. By the next morning there were 32 inches of it

blanketing the continent from Spokane to Sioux Falls. No one was sure when exactly the next train would arrive.

“Could be a day,” said Sigurd the station master, postman, telegraph operator, and local Chautauqua organizer. “On the other hand, could be a week.”

The telegraph lines were down too.

The citizens of Ray fought over dibs to board the New York City actors. The mayor and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Hirtz, claimed Miss Crews. The remaining ladies of the company roomed with the Widow Hargreaves, who lived in a three-story folly with three turrets, a porte cochere, and wraparound porch. The four men were parceled out to one home apiece, with Alfred quartered in a spare room of Mr. Axel Anders and his wife, Mrs. Anders. As it happened, it was in the rear half of Anders’ Dry Goods that the Ray Opera House was located. (You accessed the theatre through a door set between the dried beans and the winter corn.) Before Alfred had set down his luggage, Mrs. Anders confided to him that some years before, when she was unmarried and living in Bismarck, a touring company of *Floradora* had drafted the local talent to fill out the chorus, and she was selected. As Alfred unpacked, she serenaded him with “Tell Me Pretty Maiden”, both the male and female parts.

Her singing was interrupted when Miss Crews appeared at the Anders’ front door and asked that, since the theatre sat empty during these snowbound days, could they be allowed to rehearse there in the meantime? They were adding a new play to the repertoire and this would be the perfect opportunity.

Mr. Anders was about to agree, but Mrs. Anders asserted herself.

“On one condition, Miss Crews! You must show us the fruits of your labors before you depart.”

And so it was agreed.



The time is 1894. The place, a modest vicarage in London's unfashionable South Hackney. Here live the Rev. James Morell, socialist vicar and charismatic orator, and Candida, his freethinking but dutiful wife who happens also to be stunningly beautiful. They are the golden couple, the envy of their circle. His secretary secretly pines for him, as do most of his female parishioners; of her, countless men are enamored, the latest being Eugene Marchbanks, an eccentric 18-year poet and son of an earl, who, due to confusion over how to cash the £55 check in his pocket, was forced to sleep on the Embankment one night where James found him and, being James, brought him home and parked him in front of the fire.

The play begins a month later with Marchbanks showing little interest in returning to the bosom of his titled family, and for one very good reason. He's fallen in love with Candida. The first act closes with him confessing his feelings to James and warning that he intends to confess them to Candida.

That evening, while James is out delivering one of his famous speeches, Marchbanks is alone with Candida. He reads poetry to her fireside, and it's at this moment that his head and arms end up in her lap — the very moment that Alfred and Miss Crews had still not staged, even after 3 days of rehearsal.

On the 4th snowbound day, a telegram arrived from Minot that the plow train would reach Ray by noon the following day. If the company was going to keep its promise to Mrs. Anders, it would have to perform *Candida* that same night. Miss Crews released them all for lunch but took Alfred aside. She told him to meet her at the theatre in the afternoon.

"We have to stage our scene," she said.

When he arrived at the appointed time, he found Miss Crews already at the theatre waiting for him.

“Am I late?” he said, removing his overcoat and the rubber snow boots lent to him by Mr. Anders.

“You’re early, but I was earlier.”

She too had taken off her overcoat and laid it over the upright piano. He laid his beside it and turned to face her.

“And so we arrive at our big scene,” she said. “I’ve changed my mind about it. I think she *is* in love with Marchbanks — at that moment. In her own way.”

“Oh,” he said, disarmed.

“Does that mean you’re happy now? Because we can’t run the scene with you in a cross mood, can we.”

She took her place in Candida’s armchair that stood before a flat painted to be the fireplace, Alfred took his place on the floor, and they began. When Marchbanks’ arms arrive in her lap, Alfred placed his head and arms there.

Candida asks, “Do you want anything more?”

Marchbanks says, with absolute sincerity, “No: I have come into heaven, where want is unknown.” For a brief second, Alfred thought that he too was sent soaring into a perfect ecstasy merely by being in the presence of the woman he loved. But only a second.

The door leading to the storefront banged open and Axel Anders came down the center aisle, mop in one hand and bucket in the other.

“Don’t pay me any mind,” he said. “Got to get the place mopped izall.”

“I think we’re done for the afternoon,” Miss Crews said placidly.

It was as though she knew that Anders would come slamming through the door just then.



That night, Miss Crews gave a curtain speech explaining to the audience that they were privy to a secret ritual known as the ‘gypsy run through’, access to which was normally granted only to members of the theatrical profession. “To the ‘gypsies’, as we call ourselves, due to our peripatetic nature.”

Spines straightened with anticipation.

She reminded them that until now they had only rehearsed individual scenes. This would be the first time they had played the show from beginning to end. And of course they would have only rehearsal props, and they had borrowed the flats and furniture from the other plays.

But the performance was strangely good, one of those happy accidents that happen when, despite lack of proper rehearsal, or possibly because of it, things fall more or less into place. The audience was so seized by the spirit of adventure that with every missed cue and gabbled line they seemed to appreciate the play even more. The good people of Ray were enchanted.

At the end of the second intermission, Alfred took his place in a small chair on stage. Beside him was a flat painted to be a fireplace with licking flames.

Curtain up.

Marchbanks is discovered reading poetry to Candida. She sits opposite, as if in a waking dream, miles from the surroundings, oblivious of Marchbanks. He finishes his poem — one of his own — and senses her distance. He pouts. She sees her error and invites him to sit at her feet on the hearthrug and “talk moonshine” to her.

He throws himself onto the rug and cries out, “Oh, I’ve been so miserable all the evening because I was doing right. Now I’m doing wrong and I’m happy.”

He begs to say “wicked” things to her and she answers that he may, provided it’s his “real self that speaks, not a mere attitude.” This stalls him. Is he capable of any words that *aren’t* merely an attitude? There’s only one.

“Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida.”

It’s all he wants to say.

On the pretense that the fire needs tending, Candida stands up, takes the andiron in one hand, and nudges the glowing logs. She pumps the bellows, and tongues of flame lick at the blackened chimney bricks.

Impossible, of course. Because there is no fire. There is no fireplace. There is no andiron.

But there are.

And not only them. Everything else in the room is also real. The black japanned coal scuttle used to hold wood. The varnished wood mantelpiece with neatly molded shelves and tiny bits of mirror let into the panelling. On the mantle, the traveling clock in its leather case. Hanging overhead the black-and-white auto-type of a figure in Titian’s ‘Assumption of the Virgin’.

On Marchbanks’ own back is an old blue serge jacket with trousers to match, a woolen lawn tennis shirt, a silk cravat, and brown canvas shoes. Across the room, James’ round-backed revolving desk chair, his table littered with pamphlets, journals, letters, nests of drawers, an office diary, postage scales. Through the front window, the streetlamp’s dull yellow glare, and pedestrians passing by, and sometimes a carriage clattering down the street. Across the street lies Victoria Park, shrouded in darkness, the dark, barren limbs of autumnal trees traced against the moonlit sky.

And yet, where the south wall ought to be, is the audience. The good people of Ray, watching and waiting. On this side of the proscenium, the complete world of *Candida*. On that side, Ray, North Dakota.

It all feels like a strange dream, like the opium cigarette he once smoked behind the dormitories at boarding school. One of the other boys had stolen it from his father, a theatre manager in London, and shared with him out in the woods behind the playing fields.

But Alfred didn't go to boarding school. He went to Milwaukee public schools.

It's Marchbanks who went to boarding school. Harrow, in fact, come to think.

His feelings are Marchbanks', and his thoughts are Marchbanks', and he looks at the world through Marchbanks' eyes, and hears with Marchbanks' ears, and feels the warmth of the crackling fire and the rough wool of the hearthrug on Marchbanks' skin.

Candida turns from the fire and hangs the andiron on its iron hook.

"Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida," Marchbanks says again. "I never think or feel Mrs. Morell: it is always Candida."

"What have you to say to Candida?" she asks.

"Nothing but to repeat your name. Don't you feel that every time is a prayer to you?"

"Doesn't it make you happy to be able to pray?"

"Yes, very happy."

"Well, that happiness is the answer to your prayer," she says. "Do you want anything more?"

"No," he says, the upper half of his body sprawled across her lap, "I have come into Heaven where want is unknown."

It's true. There's no more wanting. Marchbanks has spent an agonizing month — it felt somehow more like six — wondering, waiting, hoping that Candida would allow his abject adoration. His head is in her lap, and her acceptance is total. He knows her in a way that he has never known a person before, and she knows him as well. It isn't so much love, really, at least not the way that Alfred remembered it. Candida and Marchbanks have found communion, and somewhere deep inside them, so have Alfred and Laura.

The study door opens and James enters, home from his speech. He's brought up short at the scene before him.

"I hope I don't disturb you," he says, unable to mask his shock.

But Candida stands and greets him without the slightest embarrassment. She asks about his speech.

"It went well tonight," he says, and she goes upstairs to dismiss the maid for the night. When she's gone, James demands to know of Marchbanks just how far they got.

"I approached the gate of Heaven but never went in," Marchbanks replies. "I loved her so exquisitely that I wanted nothing more than the happiness of being in such love."

James is unsatisfied by this to say the least. And Marchbanks now sees, to his surprise, that James genuinely loves Candida. He's always assumed that James is incapable of love. Passionate love, that is. True love. The sort of love Marchbanks feels. This is a revelation and it changes everything. Marchbanks declares that he must be the friend of any man who loves Candida, and he insists that James return the sentiment — while noting of course that when the time arrives, Candida will, beyond any possible doubt, choose him. Marchbanks.

Candida returns and James insists she must choose between them immediately. She agrees. But first she has two things to say. One: James is master of the house and his will must be

done. Two: between James and Marchbanks she will be forced to choose “the weaker of the two.”

James is stricken. Obviously he’s the stronger. But Marchbanks, who perceives Candida’s every thought and shares her every emotion, knows that she’s hidden her answer in a riddle. Marchbanks’ life of emotional abuse and neglect from his family has taught him to fend for himself, she says, while James is a tower of strength only because he’s been cosseted his entire life — first by doting parents and now by her. He’s master of the house only because she makes him so. He is in fact the weaker of the two, she says, and she must remain with him.

Marchbanks, who has seen this coming, has prepared an exit cue.

“I no longer desire Happiness; life is nobler than that,” he says, and goes.

He closes the door to the study behind him and stands alone in the front hallway. He feels liberated, yet has nowhere to go. He will sleep on the Embankment again tonight. Tomorrow, somehow, he’ll make his way back to the family estate in Devonshire. For the first time, he sees himself as a man, no longer adolescent. Maybe this is all he’d ever really wanted of Candida — that she use her power to make him a man.

With his back pressed up against the door of the study, he hears Candida breathe a sigh of relief and love. “Ah, James!” she says. Silence follows.

Alfred, stirring as if from a sleep of vivid dreams, recognized this as the cue for the final curtain. With the sound of applause, the front hall of the vicarage melted away, replaced by the stage-right wing of the Ray Opera House. Marchbanks’ blue serge suit with woolen shirt and silk handkerchief reconstituted itself into Alfred’s costume for *Ghosts*. And Alfred’s thoughts were, once again, exclusively his own. He had bobbed to the surface and Marchbanks had, for now anyway, sunk to the depths.

The rest of the cast gathered on stage for the curtain call. They made a line with Miss Crews at its center and clasped hands. The curtain rang up and the audience cheered lustily. Miss Crews led the bow, accepted the applause for a few moments, then took a step back to signal the stage manager to bring it down. He did.

The company broke into an unruly mob of handshakes and hugs, and nervous laughter over gabbled lines and missed cues. They gave no sign that they had been with him inside the play. Was it possible they hadn't? Could he have been the only one? What about Miss Crews? She must have been there, he was sure of it. Yet she carried on with the all the others — hugging, kissing, showering praise, accepting tributes — as if nothing unusual had happened.

Everyone agreed to gather next door at the tavern, except Miss Crews, who, as always, said she was going home. Alfred appointed himself to walk her to the Mayor's home. The night had turned cold again, he said, and the sidewalks were slick with ice. He promised the others he'd return to the tavern soon.

They tottered down the glazed sidewalk together, Miss Crews leaning on his arm. He waited until they were just around the corner from the theatre and out of earshot from any eavesdroppers.

"Miss Crews," Alfred said, "whatever that was tonight — you were there too, I know you were."

"Of course I was," she said blandly. "Did you think it was my understudy?"

"You don't have an understudy."

She stopped and let go of his arm to face him. "Then what's the question?"

"It was all real. Everything. The room, the clothing, the fireplace, even the street and the park outside the window. It was all true. It was actual. You were Candida, I was Marchbanks."

The night was dark, moonless, and the streets empty. The modest homes of Ray, North Dakota, stood hunched in the cold air.

“You must never, ever talk about it,” she said.

“Why not?”

“It’s bad luck.”

“What about the others?” he asked.

“What about them?”

“Were they there too? Inside the play?”

She shrugged evasively. “They were on stage, yes.”

“You know what I mean. Were they *there*? With us?”

“It’s not for everyone, Alfred. Does that not occur to you? That this might be reserved only for the select few?”

In fact, it hadn’t even occurred to Alfred that he had anything to do with it. “But you’re the one who made it happen,” he said.

“No, no, my dear, it was both of us.”

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“You did plenty, as I knew you would the moment you auditioned. It was only a question of leading you to it. Letting you discover it.”

“Making me want it.”

“Always make them wait for it, my dear,” she said, aphoristically, “Surely you’ve heard that. Do you hate me for it?”

“What if I did?”

“I shouldn’t like it at all. But if I knew you hated me, I wouldn’t do this.” She leaned towards him and tilted her face upwards to meet his lips. He was startled for a moment but his lips met hers in a lingering but chaste kiss.

“I love you,” he said.

He wasn’t sure where the words came from but they appeared on his lips just as Marchbanks’ words, far more brilliant than his own, had appeared on those same lips earlier in the evening.

“Oh, you dear boy, don’t say such things.”

“Will it happen again?”

“Of course. Now that you know the way in.” He didn’t have the presence of mind to note that he didn’t, in fact, *know the way in*, but she was stamping her feet to keep warm. “I’m frozen solid, my dear. Do you mind? I’d love to be home in bed.”

“With me?” he asked, not remotely joking.

She laughed. “Oh yes, dear boy, indeed I would. But not tonight, and not in the mayor’s spare bedroom.”



Whenever the curtain fell on *Candida*, the tide that bore him into the play was mercifully slow in receding. Alfred and Laura were sustained for a time, perhaps a few hours, by the remnants of what they’d felt onstage. Their affair was conducted, to all intents and purposes, between the curtain call and the small hours of the morning. It was as though they had been far, far away in some exotic tropical paradise and, though they were home now, their clothes and hair and bodies still smelled of a faraway perfumed south sea isle.

After a performance, the company repaired to the local hotel if they played the town more than one night, and the railroad station if they didn't. Most nights it was the railroad station. As the other players found their berths, Alfred slipped inconspicuously, or so he hoped, into Laura's private compartment, and they made love as the night train lurched and swayed and howled its way across the prairie.

Afterwards, they lay in her narrow bunk, his long, gangly limbs around her magnificently thick torso, one of them half on top of the other. It was difficult sometimes to know what to say. Their own words seemed empty, as though they were performing roles not yet properly rehearsed. By the small hours, their connection began to slip away into the night, like smoke from the locomotive's stack. They had faced the dawn together a few times early on in the affair, but the results were awkward at best. He put on his pants and shoes and shirt and excused himself to go for a cigarette in the vestibule, and it was understood that he would not be back. He'd go three cars down to the double berth he shared with Sidney Bash, the stage manager, and he would not see Laura again until just before curtain time the next night.



On nights when they perform *Candida*, the canvas flats blossom into bookshelves, flames lap at the hearth, a ceiling with crown moldings fills in overhead, the street outside the window is crowded with traffic, both foot and carriage. Food is more savory, wine more intoxicating, the birdsong outside the window a chromatic fantasy. But it's more than that.

The smoke of James' pipe tobacco is not just heady, it harbors a profound lesson written in ancient code. The tiny brass bell tinkling at the front door of the vicarage rings in his ears with a sense of intention, as though it too has something to urgent convey, though what exactly is impossible to say. The sun streaming through the windowpanes casts a crosshatch pattern onto

the carpet like a skewed Cartesian grid on which could be plotted the contours of a life. At night the primal essence of the fire asks questions of the night and the stars turning in the heavens answer with their silent song.

Even feelings, those metaphysical vapors known as emotions, are somehow freighted with hidden meaning and purpose. The agonies of Marchbanks' unrequited love can not be counted among the common throes of adolescent infatuation. Alfred himself had suffered those all too painfully, and remembered them as cramped, murky feelings without any use. But Marchbanks' sufferings are not petty, ugly things; they're drawn to the dimensions of drama, etched by pencils sharpened to an infinite point, and drafted with a compass that measures the human psyche in all its degrees and magnitudes.

Life paled in comparison.



It happened slowly at first, almost imperceptibly.

It would be two days before they played *Candida* again. That's all he knew and all he cared about.

When they crossed the Rocky Mountains, Alfred was gazing out the window of the dining car late one morning, watching the front of the train, a quarter mile ahead of him, snake its way across a trestle that seemed to be made of a thousand criss-crossed matchsticks. Below a gushing stream overflowed with melt. Above, stone peaks remained powdered with snow, and forests of evergreen shrouded the mountain sides. Beams of sunlight emerged between spring clouds and illuminated the scene as if it were a vast stage set. It was, by any measure, a vision of the sublime.

But not for Alfred. It was a bridge, a train, a river, a mountain, the same sun he'd seen many times before. People, too, left less an impression. In Boise, Alfred played poker with a desk clerk and two porters one night, and didn't recognize them the next day when the company checked out. After breakfast one morning in Billings — he remembered it quite clearly — he sat in the lobby of the hotel enjoying a cup of coffee and reading in Collier's magazine about a man who had built an open air office for himself to ward off tuberculosis and now had to buy an overcoat for his secretary. Alfred was not quite done with the article when a man approached and asked if he wanted to join him for the cocktail hour. An entire day had somehow passed while Alfred read half a magazine article, and now a stranger, who seemed to know his name and his brand of scotch, wanted to buy him a drink.

Should he be worried?

The tour ended in Los Angeles in June and he saw no reason not to book a berth back to New York in advance. But when he mentioned this to Laura late one night in her San Francisco hotel room, she said, "Darling, didn't I tell you? I'm not going to New York." She was standing at the window, holding back the curtain and peering out into the night. "I'm going to stay in Los Angeles and make motion pictures until September. They say it's easy money and quite painless."

"What about me?"

"You just said you're going to New York."

"I meant what about *us*?"

"Well, you can't play opposite me the rest of your life," she said, stroking one finger down his nose.

"Why can't I?"

She abandoned the window and came to sit next to him on the bed. “It’s a beautiful thing that happens sometimes when the right people get on stage together. But for me, I can’t let it become permanent. It’s me, my dear, it’s not you.”

He was stupefied, and found himself shaking his head in bewilderment. “I’m in love with you.”

“You’ll find someone else.”

“But I’ve got you.”

“Nobody has me, Alfred. I thought that was obvious. You’ll find someone. You’ll teach her the way in, now that you’re in the know. Or maybe you won’t have to. Maybe she’ll already know.”

# 1919

Lynn waited at the Playhouse Theatre stage door while the doorman talked into a horn on the wall, one index finger aloft to beg her patience. She had a clear view through the wings and onto the stage. Some of the actors were already at work. A tall, slender man was far downstage talking to someone out in the house, presumably Mr. Hawlings, the director. The tall man's script flopped awkwardly in one hand while the other kept running over and over through his thick, black hair.

"No, no, that's not right," the tall man was saying, his voice a clarion trumpet that filled the cavernous theatre. "I wouldn't be thinking about that now, would I? Diana's going to be here any minute. I'd be thinking about *her*, wouldn't I?"

He must be playing David Phelps, her husband in the play. Lynn liked an actor who talked about what a character was thinking. Some actors paid almost no attention to that but you had to know what your character was thinking, otherwise how could you know why she was talking? It seemed obvious.

The tall man was still arguing with the director. "But that can't be right because he's afraid, don't you think? Scared to death about Diana meeting his mother?"

In the play, David and Diana met in Europe after the Great War, fell in love, and were wed in Paris. Now David has brought her home to Connecticut to meet the mater. But Mrs. Phelps the elder turns out to be the maternal half of the Oedipal complex, and Diana soon realizes that she is not so much daughter-in-law as she is rival. Drama ensues. But it was a good play, at least compared to the ones Lynn had auditioned for recently. Threadbare comedies, dreary melodramas, tepid musicals. Lynn was lucky to be in this and she knew it.

Mr. Hawlings' voice could be heard from the house. "But he doesn't *know* how his mother will react to Diana. That's all in the future."

"He doesn't know that he knows, but he knows," said the tall man with gnomonic certitude.

Meanwhile, the doorman hung the earpiece on its hook, saying, "We got a telephone at home now and my wife can't stay off it. She calls me just to talk."

"I'm here for the *The Silver Cord* rehearsal," Lynn said.

"And you are?"

"Lynn Fontanne."

"You're early."

Due to a recurring nightmare in which a younger, prettier girl got to rehearsal first and took her part, Lynn was always early to rehearsal.

The doorman offered a leathery hand. "John Howard. If you call me Stage Door Johnny we can't be friends."

Lynn agreed never to do that.

Behind Mr. Howard was a wall covered with notices to cast and crew, calendars marked in pencil, photographs of actors signed with best wishes, warnings about safety and fire, handwritten advertisements for anything from used tap shoes to elocution lessons, and a clipboard. This last item he removed from its nail, scanning it up and down.

Lynn pointed a long, very straight index finger at the upside down list of names. "There I am, near the middle. Miss Lynn Fontanne."

"Go ahead, have a seat in the wings, Miss Fontanne, they're running late. Artistic differences," he added, eyebrows philosophically raised. "Mr. Hawlings'll call you when he wants you."

Lynn crept into the stage right wing and stood beside the enormous levers of the dimmer board long enough to unpin her hat. She could see a second actor now and recognized him as Sterling someone. He must be playing David's brother, Andrew. She'd played with Sterling once before and didn't much like his acting.

The two actors had moved on from the debate over what David knew and didn't know, and what he knew but didn't know that he knew, and were now walking through the scene to rough in the blocking. It was like molding a rough clay model. You started with the big things first — torso, two arms, two legs, a head here, feet there. Later you got to the details.

Hawlings interrupted from the house. "I think cross *on* the line, don't you, Alfred?"

His name. Alfred. It put her in mind of ancient kings and golden crowns.

Lynn sat down on a lone cane chair beside a bank of massive cleats, knotted to which were cabled hemp ropes that disappeared up into the twilight of the fly. She cheated the chair's angle for a better view of the stage. She liked to watch good actors work. You could always learn something. Alfred had crossed far upstage, on the line, and was at a window (a chalk mark on the floor for now) where he would look out to see his bride Diana coming up the flagstone path.

"That's going to leave me downstage of him for the rest of the scene, you realize," said Sterling. No one liked to be downstage with their back to the audience.

Hawlings was smoothly reassuring. "I don't want you looking at him, Sterling. I want you facing out. Let us see you thinking."

Sterling was the kind of actor who liked to be seen thinking. He tried it for a few seconds, peering into the middle distance as though something troubled him.

Dunwoody. His name was Sterling Dunwoody. He really was second rate.

"All right," Hawlings said, "let's try it."

Alfred peered out the 'window', looking for Diana. She's expected to arrive in a taxicab from the train station at any moment. Lynn in her chair was, as it happened, at the same angle Diana would have been had she been stepping out of the taxi and onto the flagstone path leading to the front door. Her eyes met Alfred's in the same way that Diana's met David's.

"She's here," David says to Andrew, his eyes never leaving Diana's. "She must have caught the early train after all."

"We'd better tell mother there's one more for lunch," Andrew says, then looks briefly into the middle distance as if something might be troubling him.

"You tell her," says David. "I'll help Diana with the bags."

Still David looks through the window, and still the warm gaze of his beautifully hooded eyes is on Diana. Diana returns it. It's madly erotic.

Andrew joins David, who asks, "I put it to you, is she not more beautiful than any other woman?"

"I confess a preference for my own dear Ruth," Andrew says, referring to his girlfriend, "but I do see your point."

"I'm the luckiest man in the world, Andrew. I would do anything for her."

All this without once looking away.

What is Diana to do with that? Your husband looks into your eyes and talks this way? She married the right man, that's all Diana knows.

Then Alfred and Sterling broke character and Hawlings spoke up from the house. "Very nice, very nice," he said.

And Lynn dropped to earth with a thump.

This happened sometimes. Not often. Not as much as she would have liked, certainly. Twice in *Milestones*, her first really good part. Then a few times when she played with Laurette, but Laurette was always incandescent, and Lynn attributed the phenomenon to her. In any case, it was always fleeting, and only happened after she'd worked long and hard on the role, rehearsed it, and played it for weeks or even months. Today, she hadn't even walked onstage.

It was a heady feeling. Before the war she'd gone climbing in the Vosges with Teddy, her fiancé at the time. The thin air had made her dizzy, but also clearer in a way, or at least more attuned to the sublime, which the Vosges had to offer in spades. It was a little like that. Or like the opium a doctor had given her for a case of neuralgia. The opium had opened her third eye, and she could see things that had once been invisible, and know things that had once been unfathomable. If what happened to her onstage once in a great while was like anything at all, it was like that.

Meanwhile, the star of their show, Mrs. Robert Delacourt, had arrived. Mrs. Delacourt played David's mother, and was one of the most admired actresses of her day, even if that day was somewhat in the past. She'd come up at a time when a married actress used her husband's name to ward off not just the gossip of matinee ladies but the overtures of stage door johnnies. She was highly regarded in the business, but had never risen to the first rank of fame. What had held her back was hard to say. Perhaps her choice of roles, or her reluctance to tour. Or maybe it was just bad luck. There was a lot of luck in the theatre, after all, and not all of it was good.

In this show, she was the star and no doubt about it. Tyler and Hawlings needed her much more than she needed them, so they were accommodating with her schedule. Now that she was here, Hawlings would block her scenes. Everything else had to wait.

Mrs. Delacourt worked quickly. She didn't care where Hawlings wanted her to stand, when he wanted her to cross, or which way he wanted her to face. She wrote down all his directions in pencil in her script and executed each one with military precision. Hawlings changed his mind regularly, but Mrs. Delacourt took every reversal in stride, rubbing out one notation and replacing it with another.

"Don't worry," she said to Hawlings, "I'll make it work."

After an hour, Hawlings called 15 minutes. Normally Lynn would have gone into the house to say hello to him, and introduce herself to the other actors, but for reasons not entirely clear even to herself, she wasn't ready to meet this Alfred, this ancient king. She gathered her hat and purse straps, smoothed her pleated wool dress, and made a snappy cross to the stage door where she intended to ask Mr. Howard where her dressing room was. She never got the chance. She was intercepted near the top of the trap stairwell.

"Alfred Lunt," he said. "What a great pleasure to meet you."

He put one leg behind him and swooped into a low, theatrical bow in the Elizabethan fashion, but his posterior foot found itself in the stairwell with nothing under it but empty air. He fell backwards with a shriek, came to rest with a sickening thud on the first landing. He lay there, as Lynn said in years to come, like Caesar butchered in the forum. At the time, though, she too shrieked and rushed down the steps, gripping his hand, shaking his crumpled body, and begging him to respond.

He made her wait for it, then opened his eyes. "You can never say I didn't fall for you."

For a moment she couldn't breathe she was so mad. "Oh, you bastard," she said. "You did that deliberately."

"I most certainly did not."

“You rehearsed that.”

“I did *not* rehearse it,” he said, sitting upright with great dignity. “I can stage a fall at a second’s notice. I can stage a fall after I’ve already started falling.”

She stood up, irritated. “Well, you don’t seem hurt anyway.”

“Only my pride,” he said, also rising to his feet. “But if you kissed me, you might make that better.”

She hesitated for a single beat, then obliged him with a wet, fulsome kiss on his mouth. He looked at her wide-eyed, as though no woman had ever made such a response, and no doubt they hadn’t.

“Don’t look so surprised, Mr. Lunt. If you’re going to be alarmed every time I grant a simple request, we’ll never get along.”



It was hell being poor. Lynn had done 2 plays since she arrived in New York a year ago, not a bad record, but even so an actor’s pay was barely a living wage and in any case salaries didn’t kick in until the show began performances. Between shows it was worse. Lynn refused to take secretarial jobs. Friends had done that, insisting they weren’t giving up acting, but of course they were. You could never get away from the office long enough to go for an audition, much less make the rounds, which an actor had to do everyday. It was the only way directors and producers might remember you out of all the hundreds of other girls.

Friends of hers got married, thinking it would be easier with a husband to support them. But the new husband, who had liked having an actress girlfriend, didn’t like having an actress wife. How was he to explain to the fellows at work what she did all day? *Oh, she walks the streets hoping to find some man who will hire her.* And when she did manage to get a part, she

came home after midnight and slept until noon, and he hated that even more. And now he wanted children. And if she had children, it was over. She'd never act again. Everyone knew that.

Shortly after 5:00, the stage manager, Eddie, who looked barely older than a schoolboy, appeared at her dressing room door to say they'd be breaking for dinner in 10 minutes but she was free to go now if she wanted.

"Hawlings says we'll be here all night if it takes that long," Eddie said. "It was supposed to be a warning for Mr. Lunt but I don't think he noticed." There was no union to object to working all night, just as there was no union to demand paid rehearsals, and therefore no point in complaining about it. There were dozens of other actors who would happily take the part of anyone who didn't like it.

Lynn went downstairs and told Mr. Howard she was going to the Horn and Hardart for something to eat. This was an overstatement. If she wanted to have the bus fare to get home tonight, she'd have a cup of coffee, full stop.

The 38th Street Horn and Hardart was less popular than the Times Square location and it was so much nicer to starve in peace and quiet. She paid her nickel at the cash register, filled her cup from a 10 gallon stainless steel urn, and found a small table across from the revolving front door that every now and then disgorged a new customer. She clinked her spoon against the cup's edge and consoled herself that it was only a little more than 2 weeks until first night. Then she could start eating again. And what was two weeks without eating? They said cavemen did it all the time.

She thought about her run-in with the sublime, the miniature opium dream. She realized Mr. Lunt must have been involved somehow, which explained, she supposed, why, although she

was trying to avoid him, she had also agreed without a moment's hesitation to kiss him. The sublime was a great aphrodisiac.

Through the front window she saw his lanky frame ankling down Broadway. She had the instinct to flee but where did one flee in a Horn and Hardart? Anyway, he was probably just walking by and wouldn't come in, and if he did come in she'd keep her hat brim down and he'd never see her. But he pushed on the revolving door and alighted in front of her as if he'd known to find her in this exact spot.

"Miss Fontanne," he said, with a trim nod.

The hat brim tilted upwards. "How did you know where I was?"

"I asked Mr. Howard, of course."

"I didn't say *this* Horn and Hardart."

"I pegged you as the peace-and-quiet type — correctly, I might add. May I?" He gestured to the empty seat across from her.

"Did no one ever teach you that it's impolite to invite yourself to dine with a woman?"

"I only ask because, unless I'm mistaken, you've been sitting here having a cup of coffee and thinking about me." That he was right of course made him all the more insufferable. "Also," he added, "I'm hungry."

She started to protest, but he held up his hand.

"No, no. My treat. I insist." He held one hand sideways against his mouth for confidentiality, and lowered his eyelids. "I know the chef."

He went to the hot water urn and filled a cup with hot water (no charge), added two tablespoons of sugar (no charge), a shot of cream and a slice of butter from the sidebar (no charge), pocketed a handful of oyster crackers from a communal bowl (no charge), dug a spoon

out of the silverware tray, and returned to the table, whereupon he emptied a third of the ketchup bottle into his hot water, stirred it, and added salt and pepper and a dash of Worcestershire to taste, all of it done, despite his long limbs and big hands, with a remarkable balletic grace. He slid the cup across the table to her followed by the spoon and a napkin.

“Soup d’Alfred.”

She dipped in. “Oh, it’s ghastly.”

“Takes some getting used to, but it fills you right up. Here, crackers kill the taste.” He crumbled a handful of oyster crackers into her cup. “And now,” he said, standing up, “the chef prepares his own repast.”

He repeated the foraging trip and returned to mix his own vile brew at the table. Eyeballing drops of Worcestershire sauce as they plunked into the liquified tomato, he said, “You realize, Miss Fontanne, that I know your work. I saw you in *Someone in the House* on your second night. Standing room only.”

“You’re a member of a very exclusive club,” she said. “Not many people saw that.”

Last September Lynn had appeared as the endearingly madcap Westchester doyenne, Dulcinea, or Dulcy for short, and had stolen the show. Even before they opened it was obvious she would walk away with it. George Kaufman, the playwright, was bowled over. He wanted to build up the part of Dulcy, which was really only supporting, but found he couldn’t tamper with the architecture of the piece without bringing the whole thing crashing down. Except for a few extended bits, the part remained unchanged.

But the play was a hit and Lynn a sensation. She got raves in the dailies. The weekly critics swooned. Her name appeared in all the columns, word of mouth was giddy, and Alexander Wolcott noted her with pleasure. Houses were standing room only and ovations went from sitting

to standing. Kaufman gushed that he would write an entirely new play for her next season. She was made. Everyone said so.

Then, while no one was looking people started dropping dead from the Spanish Flu. It struck quickly. You could be healthy one day and dead the next. People collapsed on the street, bled from the mouth, drowned in their own phlegm. Autopsies revealed that their internal organs had been completely destroyed. Rumor had it that a man boarded the subway in Coney Island and was dead by the time he reached the Bronx. The mayor declared a state of emergency. People were told to stay home and avoid crowds. Times Square became a wasteland. Theatre ticket sales plummeted. Dozens of shows put up closing notices. Even shows with advance sales played to empty houses. On its final matinee of *Someone in the House* 14 brave souls sat in the house. But who could blame the ones who stayed away? Even if they had come, no one knew what was funny and what wasn't. Except George Kaufman, of course. He told the producer to take out a newspaper ad: "Avoid crowds! Come see *Someone in the House!*"

The show that had been the hottest ticket in town the first week of September closed the first week of October, a flop. A *succés d'estime*? Yes. But by the measure that mattered, it was a flop, and the problem with flops was that nobody had seen them. Her star-making role crumbled to dust, soon forgotten.

But not by Mr. Lunt.

She took a sip of her soup. It *was* filling, and with a mouth full of crackers it didn't trigger the gag reflex. "You saw me in it. You don't say that you *liked* me."

"You never tell an actor you like her."

"Oh really? Why's that?"

“It’s general, meaningless, so she instinctively distrusts you. What you say is, ‘I noticed your cross to the bookshelf in the first act.’”

“*Did* you notice my cross to the bookshelf in the third act?”

“I did,” he said, “and the way you handled the clock.”

Dulcy had picked up a clock on the shelf to wind it and, while giving the side-eye to a society lady who threatens to ruin her house party, held on to it a moment longer than necessary, as if weighing its heft and calculating the damage it might do to said lady’s head. At least that’s what Lynn had intended, though no one seemed to notice. She had decided the gesture was too small, though she couldn’t make it bigger. She was afraid it would be too broad, and she only went broad when she was nervous, and she wasn’t the least bit nervous as Dulcy.

Lynn let her shoulders sink, disarmed by this. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“You see? I’ve been specific. I’ve given a nod to your craft. Not some vague platitudes or fatuous blather about your looks. Your skill.”

“What’s wrong with my looks?”

“Well, I’ve been watching you all afternoon and I can’t find a thing.”

“You’re lying. My neck is too long.”

“Who told you that?”

“No one told me. I just know.” Actually her mother had told her, many times.

“The swan also has a long neck,” he said. “You’re a swan.”

“Mr. Lunt, let me be perfectly honest. Sometimes you behave just the way a masher would.”

“Oh, I’m not a masher,” he said in a tone that suggested he might be something else just as bad. “I just think the way to a woman’s heart is to look into her heart. And to let her look into mine.”

He looked at her calmly but probingly, very much the way he’d looked at her as David when he was peering out the living room window at his newlywed wife.

“And I think you know what I’m talking about,” he said. It wasn’t a question, but neither was it quite an assertion.

“Do I?”

“When you were sitting in the chair. In the wings. I was onstage, at the ‘window’. You thought you were in the shadows, but I could see you.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she lied.

“Miss Fontanne if we’re going to get anywhere at all in this love affair — and it’s early still, I understand that — but still, you’re going to have to be honest with me.”

“This is what I mean. That’s exactly what a masher would say.”

“Maybe so, but honesty really is the best policy.”

She shrugged a little, as if discounting as trivial what she was about to admit. “Yes, well, I had the feeling I was already in character. It happens sometimes. I don’t know why. But there it was. I was Diana — for a moment, possibly two. Then it passed. I do come well prepared, Mr. Lunt. I’ve got all my lines and most of yours. I’ve thought about Diana a great deal and I’ve a pretty good idea where I’m going with her. And you were — well, convincing I suppose. I went along. It’s called acting.”

And there she left it, noting that their half hour dinner break had expired.

They returned to the Playhouse to spend the evening blocking group scenes. It was tedious and technical, but it prompted only a few questions from Mr. Lunt and they were free to go at what was considered, in the non-unionized theatre anyway, a reasonable hour.

He proposed to walk her home. Eighth Avenue at 10:30 pm was not to be trifled with, and she accepted. They headed north to Columbus Circle where, without a word spoken, they veered into the park. The night air was cooler under the trees and the April foliage was just thick enough that it formed a canopy overhead. Through it could be seen the feeble light of a half moon.

They talked shop mostly. Mrs. Delacourt: so clearly from another era, but formidable in her talents. Hawlings: to give him his due he could stage a scene, but was otherwise hopelessly uninspired. Tyler: ruthless, but no more so than other producers whose taste was not nearly as good. And the other actors, including Sterling Dunwoody, about whom the less said the better. Lynn shook her head. "One wonders why someone like Sterling decides to be an actor in the first place."

"Why do any of us?" Mr. Lunt asked. "I don't tell anyone the real reason I act. I tell them I like to make believe. I say the sound of applause is like a drug to me. Any cliché to shut them up. But the real reason is — well, you obviously know."

"Do I? Remind me."

They had arrived at the Mall, that cathedral of elm trees, their twisted limbs reaching up and across to form the nave of a vast natural church. They walked up the its center aisle.

"If you know what I'm talking about then you know I can't talk about it."

"That's going to make the conversation challenging, isn't it," she said. "Let me guess. You're talking about this morning, about our — you know — our *moment*."

"You do realize, Miss Fontanne, that kind of thing doesn't happen to every actor."

“It doesn’t happen to me very often, to be honest.”

“But it happens. That’s all that matters. The rest will follow, don’t worry about that. I know potential when I see it, and I saw it this morning.”

They were at the steps overlooking Bethesda Terrace. The half moon, freed of the trees, illuminated the red brick of the terrace. The Bethesda angel’s beneficent hand was outstretched as if to bestow her blessings. It seemed to give him courage. He turned to face her, with several strands of his dark hair, which until now had been combed up and off of his forehead, falling into a beguiling curl over one eye.

“Let me put it to you this way, Miss Fontanne. I’ve already fallen in love with you twice now. Once on stage, and once off. The question is, will you fall in love with me?”

She might have guessed. Everything from the Elizabethan bow to following her to the Horn and Hardart — why did men insist on being tiresome clichés? Could they think of nothing but getting between a woman’s legs?

“Oh Mr. Lunt, I’m quite certain that, sooner or later, you must say that very thing to every lady of the company. I’m particularly galled that I should be pursued like this on the very first day. I suspect you must wait at least two or three days with some of the more worldly girls, just to throw them off the scent. So put me down as the worldly type and better luck next time, Mr Lunt. Thank you for a lovely walk. I can find my way own home.”

She shook his hand and said good night before plunging back into the darkened park where she became hopelessly lost for more than an hour and finally had to ask a mounted policeman how to get back to the west side.

Two weeks later, Lynn arrived for the last day of rehearsal. The next day the company would travel to Atlantic City for a week of previews. But at the stage door, Mr. Howard bore the same bad news he'd born many times before: they could be here all night. Mr. Lunt was asking his questions again and wanted to run scenes until everybody was dead tired. He was on stage right now running a scene with Mrs. Robert Delacourt, who was not happy.

Eddie chimed in from his perch on the staircase. "Everybody's fed up with him."

"Mr. Lunt is not the problem," Lynn said firmly. "He's doing his job."

"Now, Miss Fontanne," Eddie complained, "we've all been bending over backwards for 2 weeks already ..."

"I didn't say *you* were the problem. The problem is that we actors — and stage managers too, don't forget, Eddie, you're one of us — we need a proper union. If we had a union we could demand a proper rehearsal schedule, and get paid for it, and make a better show into the bargain."

Eddie eyes were widening into saucers, but Lynn was too slow in realizing that he was trying to warn her. Tyler emerged from the wings and stabbed an index finger at Lynn's nose.

"Miss Fontanne, *if* there were a union that you and all the others belonged to, and *if* you set your own rehearsals, and *if* you demanded to be paid for them, I couldn't afford to do this play at *all*. And *then* where would *any* of us be? Did you ever consider that I myself didn't make one thin *dime* in the last two weeks? And I've spent *thousands!*" (Of his investors' money, Lynn thought to herself.) "Why should I pay *you* when nobody's paying *me?!?*"

Tyler's line readings were as predictable as his attitude. His point, however, was made. Lynn would keep her mouth shut and go right on rehearsing her little heart out, thank you very much. Which was, of course, exactly why actors needed a union so badly. They were the only

labor that would stay on a job 12 hours a day, for two weeks, with no pay, just to make a better product. And for a very good reason. They were the product. And they knew it.

Tyler stalked away, followed by Eddie clutching his clipboard. Mr. Lunt, meanwhile, was having his own contretemps with Hawlings. Hawlings thought David's devotion to his mother ought to be more apparent and was suggesting, possibly, a tilt of the head, or a furrowed brow, perhaps an open palm extended to her.

"Or should I perhaps saw the air thusly?" Mr. Lunt asked, sawing the air thusly.

Hawlings answered with barely suppressed pique. "I want you to be clear. I want it to *read*."

"If it's not reading, Mr Hawlings, tell me it's not reading. But do not, I beg of you, tell me which way to tilt my head!"

Tyler, still settling into a seat in the fifth row, took control of the situation. He called over his shoulder. "Eddie, is it reading?"

Eddie had just arrived in the mezzanine and hadn't seen a thing, but was keenly aware of who cut the checks. "It's not reading," he said.

Hawlings turned back to front. "It's not reading, Mr. Lunt."

"It will read, Mr. Hawlings," Mr. Lunt said, wagging an index finger straight up. "I can assure you it will read. Give it time."

Hawlings seethed. "We haven't got time."

"We've got until tomorrow night at 8:30."

Lynn heard Hawlings mutter between his teeth, "Yes, but I may lose my mind by then."

Mr. Lunt turned upstage and saw Lynn in the wings, threw open his arms, and went to embrace her.

“He’s a miserable hack,” he murmured into her ear.

“You gave as good as you got.”

“More, I hope.” He held her at arms length and gave her the once over. “Haven’t changed a bit. Still the most beautiful woman in the world.” He’d been saying things like this to Lynn for 2 weeks now. “May I?” He puckered for a kiss.

“You may.” She’d been permitting things like this in the last few days.

He pecked her lightly on the cheek. “Now back to work.”

Everyone else may have been fed up with him, but Lynn wasn’t. He fought with her the way he did with everyone, but with her it wasn’t really fighting. More like wrestling. With each other, yes, but also with the play. Their exchanges did sometimes get heated. Mr. Lunt’s voice rose in frustration, she dug in her heels. Mr. Lunt threw props around the stage; she threw them back at him. They got into shouting matches and called each other terrible names until, at some point, one of them said, “Wait. Shut up. You just gave me an idea. Let’s try it this way.”

And then they tried it that way, and it was either better, in which case everyone was happy, or it wasn’t, in which case it was back to the wrestling match.

She’d never had so much fun in her life.

After rehearsals, Mr. Lunt always disappeared. He had plans, he had friends to see, someone’s cat to feed, family in town, a bunion needed soaking, he was tired, had a headache. If this was a love affair it was an odd way to conduct it. The next morning, though, he always arrived first thing, all smiles and kisses and before you knew it — the wrestling matches.

The company decamped to Atlantic City for a week of tryouts just as a nor-easter came barreling in from the Atlantic, soaking the boardwalks black with rain and tearing the lettering off the marquee of the Fulton Theatre. The actors navigated the two blocks from the train station

to the Hotel Morrison on foot and arrived drenched, several hats and umbrellas having been lost to the tempest.

The performance that night was as good as could be expected considering the house was all but empty. Tyler refused to cancel the show because, he explained, he'd have to offer refunds to people who had no intention of showing up anyway. So the actors treated it like another dress rehearsal, which they needed anyway. After the show they repaired to the hotel where, aside from desperate forays to obtain cigarettes, liquor, and ice, they remained for the night.

Mr. Lunt attended a poker game in Hawlings' room (as always, he had plans) and Lynn spent the night lounging about her room in her dressing gown, sipping bourbon from a glass and feeling terribly American. She wrote letters to family in London and to the only man she could really trust.

*Dearest Noël,*

*You haven't lived until you've played a neurotic melodrama to 10% capacity on a cold rainy night in Atlantic City. The house manager warns that the roof of the Fulton Theatre tends to leak and I'm just waiting for the buckets to appear. They should put them in the seats, maybe the house won't look so empty.*

*I have met a man. His name is Mr. Alfred Lunt. He plays my husband. We're newlyweds but he (David) has Mummy problems and even worse Mummy has David problems (I said it was neurotic) — anyway, it's all a tug of war between Mummy and me — but it's really quite good.*

*Anyway, Mr. Lunt made love to me, I think, but now he's playing hard to get, or maybe he's just a rotten lover. But he's a good actor, and if he ever really makes a go of it I suspect I may succumb to his charms. Do you consider this wise? I accept advice from you and you alone, my dear. Please inform.*

*Your truest love no matter what you say,*

*Lynn*

*P.S. When do you come to America? Everyone asks and I don't know what to tell them.*



Thursday morning broke with a clear sky and warm ocean breezes. Tourists stumbled out of their rooms onto the sun-drenched boardwalk by the hundreds. Atlantic City, it turned out, was full of people. It was sure to be a full house tonight.

Mr. Lunt and his fellow poker players had made a very late night of it. As of early afternoon they had not yet emerged from their rooms. Lynn joined the other ladies of the company to see the town. She bought a parasol and soon went for a long walk on the boardwalk by herself, and bought salt water taffy, and attempted to sort out the Mr. Lunt situation in her mind. He was certainly the most attractive man she'd seen since she was in America, no question. He was the best actor she'd ever worked with, demonically hard-working, which she liked in men generally and actors in particular. And then there was, of course, the sublime. Could she fall in love with him? The real question was, when would she admit she already had?

But what were his feelings about her?

He wasn't a bounder, as she'd first suspected. He was nothing but courtly in rehearsal, and otherwise impossible to locate. The truth was she no longer had any idea what his intentions were. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe he didn't have any. She stopped dead in her tracks and furled the parasol.

Maybe he had some intentions at first and then he saw what kind of actress she was. Maybe he was disappointed in her. Maybe he had been working like the devil with her in rehearsal only because he didn't want her to flop and drag him down with her. Maybe he didn't spend time with her outside rehearsal because he didn't find her worthwhile.

Actually, she could live with that last. But if he didn't like her acting — that was a disaster. That she had to do something about.

At half-hour before curtain she was in her dressing room when she heard Mr. Lunt and Eddie in the stairwell outside her door. She opened the door and stumbled upon them as if by accident, feigning surprise at finding Mr. Lunt there. She greeted him like a long lost friend and gushed over how excited she was to finally be playing in front of an audience.

“I was beginning to think this was *Someone in the House* all over again,” she said. Her gay demeanor was meant to demonstrate she was not in the least concerned about anything at all. She gripped his two big paddle-hands in hers, shaking them up and down vigorously. “I know it’s going to go beautifully. I can just feel it.”

“Don’t say that,” Mr. Lunt said, his hands recoiling, “that’s bad luck.”

“Sorry,” she said, frowning soberly. “It’s going to be awful. When the curtain comes down we’ll all go into the street and beg the nearest policeman to shoot us dead.”

“That’s more like it,” he said without irony, and continued up the stairs to his room.

“Do break a leg!” she shouted after him.

He didn’t respond.

She threw herself into the play, working with all the energy and focus she could muster, but at the interval there was a knock at her dressing room door.

“Please enter,” she sang out, “whoever you may be!”

Mr. Lunt stepped into the tiny room and closed the door behind him with his back pressed up against it. His voice was low and deadly. “What are you doing out there?”

“What a question! I’m acting in a play. What are *you* doing?”

“You’re ruining the show. You’re hamming it.”

Another knock at the dressing room door. “Oh it’s a party!” she said brightly and clapped her hands. “Do come in!”

Hawlings opened the door. Mr. Lunt tried to get out of the way but he was slow and the door banged him on the knee. He howled in pain.

“Sorry, Lunt,” said Hawlings. “You okay?”

“I am *not* okay. My knee will be fine.”

“A little big tonight,” Hawlings said.

“Did you think so?” Lynn inquired innocently. “That’s just what Mr. Lunt was saying. We’re getting our sea legs I’m afraid. The second act will be better, won’t it Mr. Lunt?” She started to redo a bit of eyeliner that had gone all zigzag on her.

Eddie put his head through the door and said, “Clear as a bell tonight, folks. It’s reading in the balcony.”

“There, you see?” Lynn said. “It’s reading in the balcony. What could be wrong?”

Mr. Lunt approached her, which in the closet-sized room required one small step. “So help me God if you fuck up this show I’ll break your neck.”

She looked calmly up at him from her seat at the vanity. “Mr. Lunt, if you break my neck, for one thing I’ll never forgive you, and for another I’ll never finish the second act. And then where will we be?”

He murdered her with his eyes and left.

Lynn smiled and shrugged at Hawlings. “Actor’s nerves.”

But really she was mortified. She’d done what she always did when she was insecure. She’d overdone it. In the second act she went the other way — subtle as a mouse. It didn’t work. Everything fell flat and the other actors were left baffled. After a lukewarm curtain call, Mr. Lunt disappeared upstairs to his dressing room. By the time Lynn had changed into her street clothes, he had already gone out into the night. No one knew where.

She went down to the boardwalk. It was a cool night, and there were not many people out, but she wore a wrap and the breeze off the Atlantic was fresh and dry. The sky was a star-spangled dome over the ocean and the music of a hurdy-gurdy out on the pier mingled with the gentle rush of a low surf against sand.

In one of the boardwalk hotels a dance band played a lovely, warm melody, as effortless as breathing. Through the window she could see gentlemen in evening jackets piloting their lady partners smoothly around the parquet as if riding on invisible tracks. When she turned back around she saw a lone figure, very tall and slim, a few hundred yards down the boardwalk, looking out to sea. She went to railing just a few feet down from him and looked out to sea too.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lunt. Really I am. I did botch that rather badly.”

He was silent for a very long time, but he spoke, he was calm. “You forgot everything we’ve done for the past two weeks.”

“I know. I panicked. It’s been a very confusing time for me. I felt I wasn’t giving enough, and I thought I should do something. I suppose I was just trying to come up to your level. Please forgive me.”

“Come to my level? My god, woman, I’ve been trying to get to *yours!*” She stared dumbly at him. “Miss Fontanne, don’t you realize? You’re what we all want to be but never are. All that work I do, all that sweating and swearing and carrying on — it’s so I can play at your level, so that we both can ...”

Far away, the hotel band played the plangent melody.

He clearly wasn’t going to finish, so she did it for him. “So that we can do what we don’t talk about doing.”

Mr. Lunt held out his arms, inviting her in. She pressed herself against him, and they danced under the stars.



Even after a week of previews, opening night on Broadway was always treacherous. The set was never right. Backstage crosses were awkward or downright hazardous in the dim light.

Jittery actors were forever tripping over stage weights, and coils of hemp, and each other. And above all kinks in the performances had to be worked out. Pause or overlap? Anger tinged with jealousy or regret tinged with anger? Wait for the laugh or barrel through? But that night, with 6 previews in Atlantic City behind them, they were on fire. Even the fluffs turned out well.

The play builds to the climactic confrontation in which Diana will either wrest David from the grips of his mother or lose him forever. The scene is set in the family living room, at night, a few days after Christmas. Thanks to Eddie, who stood backstage shaking a sifter full of white paper, snow falls outside the window.

Diana says to David in front of his mother, “Don’t you see that she wants to come between us? That she wants to drive us apart? And not because she dislikes me. Oh no! Not that. She *does* dislike me, she detests me in fact. But that’s not why she wishes so desperately to drive me out of this house never to come back. No, it’s because she wants you to herself. She clings to you, and wants you to cling to her. She wants to feel your head against her chest. I shouldn’t be surprised if — some night when you lay your head in her lap as you did just now — she tried to suckle you as when you were a child!”

Here, if all went well, the audience would gasp. They’d been thinking all along that there must be some wholesome explanation for Mrs. Phelps to be so devoted to her son, some innocent misunderstanding that would explain everything. Now the truth was out.

David is blindsided by Diana’s horrific accusation, and though he doesn’t so much as stir, he somehow seems desperate to escape his mother’s hand on his arm.

It read.

Diana waits a moment, giving David a chance to break free of his mother’s grip. But he only stammers a defense of his mother and Diana declares that it’s too late for argument. She’ll

be catching the next train to Boston. She wants him to come with her, but it's up to him. If not, the marriage is over. She reaches for the doorknob, prepared to go out the front door into the frosty Connecticut night air, never to see her husband again.

But when she opens the door and steps through, she's not backstage at the Playhouse Theatre on West 43 Street, but on the front stoop of the Phelps home in rural Connecticut. It's a clear, wintry evening. The stars are bright, the air still. The house stands at the crest of a small hill. At the bottom of it is a frozen pond with holes cut into it by the local iceman. Lynn steps down onto the flagstone path that leads to a gravel drive. A motor taxi waits there, a black Ford sedan jiggling nervously. She walks a little way toward the taxi, but then stops and looks back at the house. Though the bay window she can see David arguing with his mother.

She can't hear a word he's saying but she knows — she doesn't know how — that finally he grasps that she's been right all along. Somehow she can sense that he's about to — yes! The front door opens and he appears, still tugging one arm through his overcoat. He sees her and runs down the flagstone path to her, drawing her into an embrace. Diana closes her eyes and luxuriates in her victory. Her husband is now finally, truly hers.

As for Lynn, however, she found herself pressed up against a stack of stage weights, partly hidden behind a tab curtain, with Mr. Lunt's lips pressed against hers.

"What's happening to us?" she whispered.

"You were with me," Mr. Lunt said. "We were together."

"Yes, but — where? Where were we?"

He whispered, "I knew you had it, I just knew."

"But where did it go?"

"It's fine," he smiled, "it's all fine."

She wanted to strangle him but the curtain was ringing down and they had to join the call. There was polite applause for the company, and a roar of fond, sentimental approval for Mrs. Delacourt. When she stepped forward to take her own bow, Alfred took Lynn by the elbow and murmured into her ear, "We'll do it again tomorrow night. You'll see. You'll get the hang of it."



Behind the bar of the Horseshoe Tavern stood a walrus of a man named Theo. Theo established the Horseshoe Tavern more than twenty years before. He had been here when a man came to this neighborhood for one of three things: to purchase lumber, to slaughter livestock, or to find a whore. Now in the year of our Lord 1919, Theo's saloon was in the lap of the theatre district and had a steady clientele of theatricals. The sawdust remained on the floor (the better to soak up spilled beer) and the gaslight still cast ghastly yellow shadows on the customers, but actors loved him for his low prices and Theo liked actors because, unlike his former clientele of stevedores and slaughterhouse butchers, they were not inclined to start fistfights, at least not without good reason.

Here the company of *The Silver Cord* had gathered to wait for the reviews. With their overeager grins and sweaty foreheads they looked, as only actors could, simultaneously fatalistic and hopeful. Tyler stood the cast and crew to a round of beer, which Theo distributed in glass pitchers drawn from the tap and topped with a head of foam. Tyler did the pouring honors before raising his own glass.

"Ladies and gentlemen of *The Silver Cord*. You've made me proud. Never have I had the pleasure of a more talented cast or more devoted crew."

Mrs. Delacourt studied her glass of beer as though not entirely certain of its purpose, and murmured to Lynn. "That's the speech when he thinks he's got a turkey."

Tyler continued on apace. “It’s been an honor and a privilege to work with such an extraordinary group of theatricals such as yourselves. And now, secure in the firm belief that all theatre critics occupy the lowest circle of hell as described by Dante, I propose a toast to *The Silver Cord*.”

They all drank deeply. Eddie sat at an upright piano in the corner and banged out a song from one of the Princess Theatre shows. The rest of the company sang along. Then Eddie slipped into a ragtime tune, and everyone got up to dance. Lynn wasn’t clear exactly how she’d found herself in Mr. Lunt’s firm but easy grip — the beer was going to her head — but he pulled her into a Castle Walk, pressing their right hips dangerously close to each other with his right leg between her legs and her right leg between his. They went stepping around the saloon to the cheers and hoots of the rest of the cast. The song over, Eddie stood up from the piano and announced that was all the songs he knew. A groan from the company. They sought consolation in beer.

Mr. Lunt said, “Miss Fontanne, may I buy you a proper cocktail? I’ve had enough warm beer.”

“You may,” she said.

“And may I surprise you?”

“I place the matter entirely in your capable hands.”

He nodded toward a booth at the back of the room that remained unoccupied.

“Commandeer the venue, if you would, while I get us the good stuff.”

He went to the bar and had a talk with Theo, who set about tossing shots of various liquors into a shaker full of ice and sloshing it all together with a long spoon. Mr. Lunt repaired to the booth bearing aloft, as one would a sacred offering, two slender glasses full of icy, dark

amber booze topped with bright red cherries. They made a toast to *The Silver Cord* and another to their own fate and, while getting pleasantly tight, proceeded to talk about the sort of play they'd like to do next.

"I'd love to be in a comedy," Lynn said. "I like comedy."

"Oh god, yes," he said, "Give me comedy any day." That single curl had fallen over his eye again. She wondered if he arranged that, or if just happened at a particular time of night.

"It's more work but it's worth it," she said.

"It's *so* much work," he agreed. "It's a crime what happened to you last fall."

He meant the *Someone in the House* debacle.

"Oh, let's not talk about it."

"Well, it was criminal."

"Let me ask you something," she said. "Are we really going to wait for the reviews?"

"Is there someplace you need to be?"

"Other than home in bed, you mean?" she replied. "So I can get up early? And look for work?"

The rest of the cast were laughing and singing songs *a cappella* to dispel their nerves.

Alfred said, "We can't leave. Sacred code. Thespian solidarity."

She lifted her glass. "I dare you to say that 3 times quickly."

"To solidarity."

"To the *union*."

"To the *union*," he answered.

They both drank.

"Be a shame if we had to close," he said.

“Do you think it’s hopeless?”

“Is the public hungry to see a play about a pathologically jealous mother and her somewhat confused son? I sometimes wonder. We are getting good at it, though. We might bring it off.”

“Do you really think so?” She meant to sound midway between coy and cynical.

“Are you joking? We’re the best thing about that show.”

“Oh you mean *us*.” She thought he’d meant to the entire company.

“Don’t get me wrong. I think they’re all quite talented.”

“Not Sterling, I hope.”

“No, not Sterling I’m afraid. But Mrs. Delacourt never misses, you know. She’s the real thing. Solid as a rock.” Lynn looked around the tavern for Mrs. Delacourt but the sensible old lady had already gone home. Alfred continued, “But you and I have something rather special, don’t we.”

“Quite possibly, but it’s bad luck to boast.”

“I don’t believe in bad luck.”

“That’s funny, earlier tonight you said you did.”

Just before midnight, Morrie Lewis, Tyler’s assistant, returned from the newsstands in Times Square with half a dozen newspapers under his arm and fanned them out on the bar. Pick your poison. Tyler took the Tribune, Hawlings the Post, Morrie the Times, Eddie the News. The remainder went to the cast who atomized into smaller groups, each one huddled over a crinkling broadsheet.

The critics were in general agreement. The play could be somewhat “unsavory”, or “unpleasant”, or “disturbing”, but it was a genuine drama, intelligently written, and the

supporting cast was, for the most part, perfectly adequate. They unanimously loved Mrs. Robert Delacourt. “Her finest work.” “The empress of the stage.” “She holds the stage with pathos and humor.” “A treasure to cherish.”

When no one was looking the old lady had upstaged them all.

Tyler called out, “Where is she? Where is Mrs. Delacourt?”

Somebody shouted, “She went home to bed!”

“Morrie, run these papers over to her,” Tyler said to him. “She won’t mind being woken up for this!”

Lynn and Mr. Lunt looked at each other and started laughing. Mrs. Delacourt had made fools of them, or maybe they’d made fools of themselves. But they’d have a run and they’d play together and really, what else mattered?

Without asking, Mr. Lunt went to the bar and ordered another round of the same wicked brew while Tyler ordered another round of beer on the house. Mr. Howard sat down at the piano and divulged a hitherto unknown talent for the keyboard. It was all old-fashioned waltzes and two-steps, but it was music and it suited the celebrants fine. They just wanted to dance. Mrs. Delacourt, roused from her bed, made an appearance to acknowledge the company’s cheering and stamping. She drank another beer and went home.

Finally Lynn announced her firm, nay absolute, intention to go directly home to bed. She was plastered. Everybody was plastered.

“I don’t see why,” Mr. Lunt said, red-faced and a little loud. “You don’t need to look for a job in the morning, now do you.”

She insisted.

The night had turned cool and misty. The low clouds blotted out the stars and threatened rain. When they got to Columbus Circle he touched her arm just above the elbow and asked if she didn't want to stop for pie and coffee at Child's. She did, actually. Actually, she wanted a sandwich. She hadn't had a proper meal all day.

They sat at the big pane glass window and stared out into the night at Christopher Columbus who, atop his elongated pedestal, contemplated the indignity of spending an eternity at the hub of a traffic circle. They talked about the restaurants they would eat at now that they had money. They made lists of things they would buy and laughed like children over them. New stockings, new shirts with new collars, a new purse, a pair of leather shoes, a silk tie, another purse, cufflinks from Brooks Brothers, earrings from Tiffany. Books and furniture for him, gowns and paintings for her. He made her list her favorite painters. She made him list his authors. He told her where to find the best antique stores. She told him of the finest couturiers. They would live like royalty!

His fingertips rested on hers. Outside the window, the damp air had turned to a light, drizzling rain. The pavement was slick and shining. Blurry automobile headlights swirled around Columbus like drunken planets whizzing out of orbit, careening down 59th Street, shooting up Broadway and Central Park West. They were both starting to sober up.

"You know about the celestial order of things, I hope," said Alfred.

"Remind me."

"The hierarchy of angels," he said, ticking them off on his fingers. "Angels, Archangels, Powers, Thrones ... Virtues ... something else. I can't remember them all. But you go up and up and up — metaphysically speaking — and then you get to Seraphim. Seraphim are the closest to

God. They are in the actual presence of God. You can't get any closer to God than the Seraphim. And you and I are Seraphim. Or we can be anyway. If that's what you want."

"You're drunk."

"I'm pickled," he said. "but that doesn't make it any less true."

*If that's what she wanted.* To want or not to want, that was the question. What happened to her tonight, stepping out into that Connecticut night, was the most profoundly spiritual and sensual experience she'd ever known. There was something dark about it, though, something foreboding. It seemed dangerous somehow, like a forbidden potion or elixir. Her little glimmers with Laurette, and in *Milestones*, and with Mr. Lunt that first day, they were each just a tiny fragment, like a single thread pulled from a vast tapestry. This promised the whole tapestry. But is that what she wanted?

He waited for her to say something, then gave up. "Please, do me two favors."

"What are they?"

"Call me Alfred, and let me walk you home."

"All right. And you must call me Lynn. But I must warn you, Mr. Lunt — Alfred — Mrs. Mayhew runs a very strict boarding house. I shan't be able to ask you in."

"Of course not, much too late, anyway" he said. "And we need our sleep. Anyway, it's bad luck."

"What's bad luck?"

"Too many good things happening all at once."

"Mr. Lunt, do you — ?"

"Alfred."

"Alfred, do you believe in bad luck or don't you?"

“Of course I do. It’s bad luck not to believe in bad luck.”

They pulled up their collars and walked out into the damp night. When they reached her street, it was empty. The light, misty rain beaded on the rim of his hat. At her front door, they stopped and kissed for some good long time.

When she opened the door to her room, she found a letter lay halfway under her door, left there by the landlady. It was from Noël in London.

*Dearest Linnie,*

*Alfred Lunt is a notorious seducer of women and you are a siren, the likes of whom made Ulysses strap himself to a mast. I beg you to run as fast as you can straight into his arms before he either ruins a dozen more women or, worse, the tension affects your health.*

*Yours,*

*Noël*

*P.S. Funny you should ask. Arriving New York mid-summer subject to my ability to persuade Rene Charlot to come to his senses and put my song in his next show. Will keep you informed.*