The Voysey Inheritance

by

Harley Granville Barker

Michael Dufault
3408 Willow Court
White Bear Lake, MN 55110
651-393-5199
michael_dufault@msn.com

Cast of Characters

Mr. Trenchard Voysey	A successful and respected London solicitor
Mrs. Voysey	His wife of more than forty years
Trenchard Voysey, Jr.	The eldest son, a successful barrister, estranged from his father
Honor Voysey	The elder daughter, an old maid
Major Booth Voysey	The second son, a career military man
Edward Voysey	The younger son, partner in the firm of his father
Ethel Voysey	The youngest daughter, spoiled by her father
Beatrice Voysey	Wife of Major Booth Voysey
Alice Maitland	A beloved family relation
Denis Tregoning	Fiancé of Ethel, a struggling artist
Mr. George Booth	A long time friend of the family
Peacey	The head clerk of the Voysey firm

Time: 1903 - 1905

Place: A drawing room in the Voysey home of Chislehurst outside of London, England

Act I

Scene 1: An evening in October, 1903

Scene 2: An afternoon in August, 1904

Act II

Scene 1: Afternoon of December 23rd, 1905

Scene 2: Christmas Eve, 1905

Act I, Scene 1

A drawing room in the Voysey home of Chislehurst. There is a fireplace, sofas and comfortable chairs surrounding a table on which is piled after dinner refreshment: fruits, nuts, desserts, cordials, wines, etc. Across the room, backed by doors exiting to the outside garden, sits a desk and a few comfortable chairs. The room is well furnished with books and art work, including an1870's portrait of the late Grandfather Voysey.

At rise, MR. VOYSEY, MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY, MR. GEORGE BOOTH and DENIS TREGONING enjoy their cigars and conversation. EDWARD VOYSEY participates half-heartedly, preoccupied by his thoughts.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Of course I'm hot and strong for conscription.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. My dear boy, the country'd never stand for a draft.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. I beg your pardon. If we, the Army, say to the country, "Upon our honor, conscription is necessary for your safety", what answer has the country? What? There you are, none!

DENIS. Booth will imagine because one doesn't argue that one has nothing to say. You ask the country.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Perhaps I will. Perhaps I'll chuck the Service and go into the House. I'm not a conceited man, but I believe that if I speak out upon a subject I understand, and only upon that subject, the House will listen.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Do you think the gentlemen of England will allow themselves to be herded with a lot of low fellows and made to carry guns?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Just one moment; have you thought of the physical improvement which conscription would bring about in the manhood of this country? What England wants is Chest! Chest and discipline. I don't care how it's obtained. Why, we suffer from a lack of it in our homes -

MR. VOYSEY. Your godson talks a good deal, don't he? You know, when Booth gets into a club he gets on a committee. Gets on any committee to enquire into anything, and then goes on at 'em just like this. Don't you, Booth?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Well, sir, people tell me I'm a useful man on committees.

MR. VOYSEY. I don't doubt it. Your voice must drown out all discussion.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. You can't say I don't listen to you, sir.

MR. VOYSEY. I don't; but I must say I often think what a devil of a time the family will have with you when I'm gone. Fortunately for your poor mother, she's deaf.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. And wouldn't you wish me, sir, as eldest son, Trenchard not counting…

MR. VOYSEY. Trenchard not counting. By all means, bully them. Get up your best parade voice and bully them. I don't manage things that way myself, but I think it's your best chance. If there weren't other people present I'd say your only chance, Booth.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Ha! If I were a conceited man, sir, I could trust you to take it out of me.

MR. VOYSEY. Drink to your godson's health, George. Long may he keep his chest notes!

DENIS. I notice military men must display themselves. That's why Booth acts as a fire screen.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. If you want a bit of fire, say so, you would be Michelangelo. Because I mean to allow you to be my brother-in-law you think you can be impertinent.

DENIS moves to the fire and that changes the conversation.

MR. VOYSEY. By the bye, George, you were at Lady Mary's yesterday with the Vicar. Is she giving us anything towards that window?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Five pounds more; she has promised five pounds.

MR. VOYSEY. Then how will the debt stand?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Thirty-three… No, thirty-two pounds.

MR. VOYSEY. We're a long time clearing it off.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Yes, now that the window is up, people don't seem so ready to contribute as they were.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. What does that say about your handiwork, Denis?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Not that the work is not universally admired. I have heard Denis' design praised by quite competent judges. But certainly I feel now it might have been wiser to have delayed the unveiling until the money was forthcoming.

DENIS. Never deliver goods to the Church on credit.

MR. VOYSEY. Well, as it was my wish that my future son in law should do the design, I suppose in the end I shall have to send a cheque.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Anonymously.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. You remember that meeting we had of the parents and friends to decide on the positions of the names of the poor fellows and the regiments and coats of arms and so on? When Denis said so violently that he disapproved of the war and said he thought of putting in a figure of Britannia blushing for shame or something? I'm beginning to fear that may have created a bad impression.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Why should they mind? What on earth does Denis know about war? He couldn't tell a battery horse from a bandsman. I don't pretend to criticize art. I think the window'd be very pretty if it wasn't so broken up into bits.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. These young men are so ready with their disapproval. Criticism starts in the cradle nowadays. When I was young, people weren't always questioning this and questioning that.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Lack of discipline.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. The way a man now even stops to think on what he's eating and drinking. And in religious matters, there's no uniformity at all.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. I try to keep myself free from the disturbing influences of modern thought.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Young men must be forming their own opinions about this and their opinions about that. You know, Edward, you're worse even than Denis is.

EDWARD. What have I done, Mr. Booth?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Well, aren't you one of those young men who go about the world making difficulties?

EDWARD. What sort of difficulties?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Just so, I never can make any out. But you are always going about looking for them. I look back over a fairly long life and, by Heaven's help, I find nothing that I can honestly reproach myself with. And yet I don't think I ever took more than five minutes to come to a decision upon any important point. Yet Edward is forever pondering for answers, forever brooding. I say, my cigar is out.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Do you want another?

MR GEORGE BOOTH. No, thank you.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. I do.

Denis takes a cigar box from the mantle and offers it to Major.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. No, not those. I've got some new Cubans.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I should be taking my departure.

MR. VOYSEY. Already?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Where are the Ramon Allones? What on earth has Honor done with them?

MR. VOYSEY. Spare time for a chat with Mrs. Voysey before you go.

MR. COLPUS. Certainly I will.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. My goodness! One can never find anything in this house.

MR. VOYSEY. I say, it's cold again tonight! An ass of an architect who built this place; such a draught between these two doors.

He gets up to draw the curtain. ETHEL VOYSEY enters, followed by ALICE MAITLAND.

ETHEL. We think you've stayed in here quite long enough.

MR. VOYSEY. That's to say, Ethel thinks Denis has been kept out of her pocket much too long.

ETHEL. Ethel wants billiards. Not proper billiards, snooker or something. Oh, Papa, what a dessert you've eaten. Greedy pig!

ALICE is standing behind Edward.

ALICE. Crack me a filbert, please, Edward, I had none.

EDWARD. *(Jumping to his feet)* I beg your pardon, Alice. Won't you sit down?

ALICE. No.

MR. VOYSEY. *(Taking Ethel on his knee.)* Come here, puss. Have you made up your mind yet what you want for a wedding present?

ETHEL. After mature consideration, I decide on a cheque.

MR. VOYSEY. Do you !

ETHEL. Yes, I think that a cheque will give most scope to your generosity. Of course, if you desire to add any trimmings in the shape of a piano or a Turkey carpet you may, and Denis and I will be very grateful. But I think I'd let yourself go over a cheque.

MR. VOYSEY. You're a minx.

ETHEL. What is the use of having money if you don't spend it on me?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Here, who's going to play?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Well, if my wrist will hold out.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. *(To Denis)* No, don't you bother to look for them. *(He strides from the room)* Honor, where are those Ramon Allones?

ALICE. *(Calling after)* She's in the parlour with Auntie.

MR. VOYSEY. Now I should suggest that you and Denis go and take off the billiard table cover. You'll find folding it up is a very excellent amusement.

He illustrates his meaning with his table napkin and by putting together the tips of his forefingers, roguishly.

ETHEL. I am not going to blush. I do kiss Denis occasionally; when he asks me.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. You are blushing.

ETHEL. I am not. If you think we're ashamed of being in love, we're not, we're very proud of it. We will go and take off the billiard table cover and fold it up, and then you can come in and play. Denis, my dear, come along solemnly, and if you flinch I'll never forgive you.

She marches off and reaches the door before her defiant dignity breaks down; then suddenly —

ETHEL. Denis, I'll race you.

She tears from the room, followed by Denis.

DENIS. Ethel, I can't after dinner.

MR. VOYSEY. Women play that game better than men. A man shuffles through courtship with one eye on her relations.

The Major comes stalking back, followed by his elder sister, HONOR.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Honor, they are not in the drawing- room.

HONOR. But they must be! Where else can they be?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. That's what you ought to know.

MR. VOYSEY. Well, will you have a game?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I'll play you fifty up, not more. I'm getting old.

HONOR. Here you are, Booth.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Oh, Honor, don't be such a fool. These are what we've been smoking. I want the Ramon Allones.

HONOR. I don't know the difference.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. No, you don't; but you might learn.

MR. VOYSEY. Booth!

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. What is it, sir?

MR. VOYSEY. Look for your cigars yourself. Honor, go back to your reading or your sewing, or whatever you were fiddling at, and fiddle in peace.

Mr. Voysey departs, leaving the room rather hushed. Mr. George Booth follows.

ALICE. Have you looked in the Library?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Where's Beatrice?

HONOR. Upstairs with little Henry; he woke up and cried.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Letting her wear herself to rags over the child!

HONOR. Well, she won't let me go.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Why don't you stop looking for those cigars?

HONOR. If you don't mind, I want a reel of blue silk now I'm here.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. I daresay they are in the Library. What a house!

He departs.

HONOR. Booth is so trying.

ALICE. Honor, why do you put up with it?

HONOR. Someone has to.

ALICE. I'm afraid I think Master Major Booth ought to have been taken in hand early - with a cane.

HONOR. Papa did. But it's never prevented him booming at us; oh, ever since he was a baby. Now he's flustered me so I simply can't think where this blue silk is.

Honor exits. Alice sits down by Edward.

ALICE. It doesn't seem three months since I was here, does it?

EDWARD. I'm down so very little.

ALICE. I'm here a disgraceful deal.

EDWARD. You know they're always pleased.

ALICE. Well, being a homeless person! Are you staying?

EDWARD. No. I must get a word with my father.

ALICE. A business life is not healthy for you, Edward. You look more like half-baked pie-crust than usual.

EDWARD. You're very well.

ALICE. I'm always well, and nearly always happy.

Major Booth returns. He has the right sort of cigar in his mouth, and is considerably mollified.

ALICE. You found them?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Of course, they were there. Thank you, Alice. Now I must take one of the candles. Something's gone wrong with the library ventilator and you never can see a thing in that room.

ALICE. Is Beatrice down?

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. She is there writing letters. Things are neglected, Edward, unless one is constantly on the lookout. The Pater only cares for his garden. I must speak seriously to Honor.

He exits.

ALICE. Honor has the patience of a… of an old maid.

EDWARD. Her mission in life isn't a pleasant one. *(He gives her another nut.)* Here; 'scuse fingers.

ALICE. Thank you. Edward, why have you given up proposing to me?

EDWARD. One can't go on proposing forever.

ALICE. Why not? Have you seen anyone you like better?

EDWARD. No.

ALICE. Well, I miss it.

EDWARD. What satisfaction did you find in refusing me?

ALICE. I find satisfaction in feeling that I'm wanted.

EDWARD. Without any intention of giving yourself… throwing yourself away?

ALICE. Ah, now you come from mere vanity to serious questions.

EDWARD. Mine were always serious questions to you.

ALICE. That's a fault I find in you, Edward; all questions are serious to you. I call you a perfect little pocket guide to life. All questions and answers: what to eat, drink and avoid; what to believe and what to say. All in the same type, the same importance attached to each.

EDWARD. Well, everything matters.

ALICE. Do you plan out every detail of your life, every step you take, every mouthful?

EDWARD. That would be waste of thought. One must lay down principles.

ALICE. I prefer my plan: I always do what I know I want to do. Crack me another nut.

EDWARD. Haven't you had enough?

ALICE. I know I want one more.

He sighs and cracks her another nut.

EDWARD. Well, if you've never had to decide anything very serious…

ALICE. I've answered serious questions. I knew that I didn't want to marry you… each time.

EDWARD. Oh, then you didn't just make a rule of saying no.

ALICE. As you proposed, on principle? No, I always gave you a fair chance. I'll give you one now if you like.

EDWARD. I'm not to be caught.

ALICE. Edward, how rude you are.

She eats her nut.

EDWARD. Do other men propose to you?

ALICE. Such a thing may have happened, when I was young. Perhaps it might even now if I were to allow it.

EDWARD. You encourage me shamelessly.

ALICE. It isn't everyone who proposes on principle. As a rule a man does it because he can't help himself, and then to be refused hurts.

They are interrupted by the sudden appearance of MRS. BEATRICE VOYSEY.

BEATRICE. I believe I could write important business letters upon an island in the middle of Fleet Street. But while my husband is poking at a ventilator with a billiard cue, no, I cannot.

ALICE. Is little Henry all right?

BEATRICE. Right as rain. He just likes to bluster, same as his father. Now if you listen, Booth doesn't enjoy making a fuss by himself. You'll hear him rout out Honor.

They listen, but what happens is that Booth appears at the door, billiard cue in hand.

MAJOR BOOTH VOYSEY. Edward, I wish you'd come and have a look at this ventilator, like a good fellow.

He turns and goes again. Edward gets up and follows him.

ALICE. If I belonged to this family…

BEATRICE. You should hate my husband.

ALICE: I did not say that.

BEATRICE. So I said it for you. A good day's shopping?

ALICE. 'M. The baby bride and I bought clothes all the morning. Then we had lunch with Denis and bought furniture.

BEATRICE. Nice furniture?

ALICE. It'll be very good and very new. They neither of them know what they want. They're two little birds building their nest and it's all ideal. They'll soon forget they've ever been apart.

Now HONOR flutters into the room.

HONOR. Mother wants last week's Notes and Queries. Have you seen it?

BEATRICE. No.

HONOR. It ought not to be in here. She's having a long argument with Mr. George Booth over Oliver Cromwell's relations.

ALICE. I thought Auntie didn't approve of Oliver Cromwell.

HONOR. She doesn't, and she's trying to prove that he was a brewer or something. I suppose someone has taken it away.

So she gives up the search and flutters out again.

ALICE. This is a most unrestful house.

BEATRICE. I once thought of putting the Voyseys into a book of mine. Then I concluded they'd be as dull there as they are anywhere else.

ALICE. They're not duller than most other people.

BEATRICE. But how very dull that is!

ALICE. They're a little noisier and perhaps not quite so well mannered, but I love them.

BEATRICE. I should have thought love was just what they couldn't inspire.

ALICE. Beatrice, you shouldn't say that.

BEATRICE. It sounds affected, doesn't it? Never mind; when the major dies I'll wear mourning. But not weeds; I bargained against that when we were engaged.

ALICE. Beatrice, I'm going to ask questions. You were in love with Booth when you married him?

BEATRICE. Well, I married him for his money.

ALICE. He hadn't much.

BEATRICE. I had none; and I wanted to write books.

ALICE. And you thought you'd be happy?

BEATRICE. No, I didn't. I hoped he'd be happy.

ALICE. Did you think your writing books would make him so?

BEATRICE. The Major? Heavens no, but I should not let that stop me. My dear Alice, wouldn't you feel it a very degrading thing to have your happiness depend upon somebody else?

ALICE. There's a joy of service.

BEATRICE. I forgot, you've four hundred a year.

ALICE. What has that to do with it?

BEATRICE. I've had to earn my own living, consequently there isn't one thing in my life that I have ever done quite genuinely for its own sake, but always with an eye towards bread and butter; pandering to the people who were to give me that. Happiness has been my only independence.

The conservatory door opens, and through it come Mr. Voysey and Mr. George Booth in the midst of a discussion.

MR. VOYSEY. Very well, man, stick to the shares and risk it.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. No, of course, if you seriously advise me

MR. VOYSEY. I never advise greedy children. I let 'em overeat themselves and take the consequences

ALICE. Uncle Trench, you've been in the garden without a hat, after playing billiards in that hot room.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. We had to give up; my wrist was bad. They've started pool.

BEATRICE. Is Booth going to play?

MR. VOYSEY. We left him instructing Ethel how to hold a cue.

BEATRICE. Perhaps I can finish my letter.

Off she goes. Alice is idly following with a little paper her hand has fallen on behind the clock.

MR. VOYSEY. Don't run away, my dear.

ALICE. I'm taking this to Auntie, Notes and Queries, she wants it.

Alice exits.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Damn, this gravel's stuck to my shoe.

MR. VOYSEY. That's a new made path.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Now don't you think it's too early to have put in those plants?

MR. VOYSEY. No. We're getting frost at night already.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I should have kept that bed a good ten feet further from the tree.

MR. VOYSEY. Nonsense. The tree's to the north of it. This room's cold. Why don't they keep the fire up?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. You were too hot in that billiard room. I'll be glad to spend this winter in Egypt. And if you think seriously that I ought to sell those stocks before I go… Why can't you take them in charge? I'll give you a power of attorney or whatever it is and you can sell out if things look bad.

MR. VOYSEY. What do you want with high interest at all; you never spend half your income?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I like to feel that my money is doing some good in the world. These mines are very useful things, and forty-two percent is pleasing.

MR. VOYSEY. You're an old gambler.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Ah, but then I've you to advise me. I always do as you tell me in the end, now you can't deny that.

MR. VOYSEY. The man who don't know must trust in the man who does.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. There's five thousand in Alguazils. What else could we put it into?

MR. VOYSEY. I can get you something at four and a half.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Oh, Lord, that's nothing.

MR. VOYSEY. I wish, my dear George, you'd invest more on your own account You know, what with one thing and the other, I've got control of practically all you have in the world. I might be playing old Harry with it for all you know.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. My dear fellow, if I'm satisfied? Ah, my friend, what'll happen to your firm when you depart this life? Not before my time, I hope.

MR. VOYSEY. What do you mean?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Edward's no use.

MR. VOYSEY. I beg your pardon, very sound in business.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Maybe, but I tell you, he's no use. Too many principles, as I said just now. Men have confidence in a personality, not in principles. Where would you be without the confidence of your clients?

MR. VOYSEY. True!

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. He'll never gain that.

MR. VOYSEY. I fear you dislike Edward.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Yes, I do.

MR. VOYSEY. That's a pity.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Well, he's not his father and never will be. What's the time?

MR. VOYSEY. Twenty to ten.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I must be trotting.

MR. VOYSEY. It's very early.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Oh, and I've not said goodbye to Mrs. Voysey.

Edward appears at the door, catching his father's eye.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Will you stroll round home with me?

MR. VOYSEY. I can't.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Well, good night. Good night, Edward.

He trots away. Edward closes the door after him.

MR. VOYSEY. Well, Edward?

Edward crosses to the desk, unlocks a drawer and withdraws files.

MR. VOYSEY. I see you've the papers there.

EDWARD. Yes. Mrs. Murberry's account and young Hatherley's

MR. VOYSEY. You've been through them?

EDWARD. As you wished me.

MR. VOYSEY. And what did you find?

EDWARD. I went through all the papers twice. I wanted to make quite sure.

MR. VOYSEY. Make sure of what?

EDWARD. I didn't leave my rooms all day yesterday.

MR. VOYSEY. A pleasant Sunday! You must learn, whatever the business may be, to leave it behind you at the office. Why, life's not worth living else.

EDWARD. Oh, Father… How long has this been going on? Why didn't you tell me before? Oh, I know you thought you'd pull through; but I'm your partner, I'm responsible, too. I don't want to shirk that; don't think I mean to shirk that, Father. Perhaps I ought to have discovered, but those affairs were always in your hands. I trusted, I beg your pardon; it's us, not you. Everyone has trusted us.

MR. VOYSEY. You don't seem to notice that I'm not breaking my heart like this.

EDWARD. What's the extent of the mischief? When did it begin, Father? What made you begin it?

MR. VOYSEY. I didn't begin it.

EDWARD. You didn't. Who, then?

MR. VOYSEY. My father before me.

EDWARD. Do you mean to tell me that this sort of thing has been going on for years? For more than thirty years!

MR. VOYSEY. My inheritance, Edward. I had hoped it wasn't to be yours.

EDWARD. That's a little difficult to understand just at first, sir.

MR. VOYSEY. We do what we must in this world, Edward. I have done what I've had to do.

EDWARD. Perhaps I'd better just listen quietly while you explain.

MR. VOYSEY. You know that I'm heavily into Northern Electrics.

EDWARD. Yes.

MR. VOYSEY. But you don't know how heavily. When I discovered the Municipalities were organizing the purchase, I thought, of course, the stock would be up a hundred and forty — a hundred and fifty in no time. But now that Leeds won't make up her quarrel with the other place there'll be no bill brought in for ten years. I bought at ninety- five. What are they now?

EDWARD. Eighty-eight.

MR. VOYSEY. Eighty-seven and a half. In ten years I may be… That's why you've had to be told.

EDWARD. With whose money are you so heavily into Northern Electrics?

MR. VOYSEY. The firm's money.

EDWARD. Clients' money?

MR. VOYSEY. Yes.

EDWARD. Father…

MR. VOYSEY. There's no immediate danger. I should think anyone could see that from the state of these accounts. There's no actual danger at all.

EDWARD. No danger?

MR. VOYSEY. Where's the deficiency in Mrs. Murberry's income? Has she ever gone without a shilling? What has young Hatherley lost?

EDWARD. He stands to lose…

MR. VOYSEY. He stands to lose nothing if I'm spared for a little, and you will only bring a little common sense to bear, and try to understand the difficulties of my position.

EDWARD. Father, I'm not thinking ill of you. That is, I'm trying not to; but won't you explain how you're justified — ?

MR. VOYSEY. In putting our affairs in order.

EDWARD. Are you doing that?

MR. VOYSEY. What else?

EDWARD. But how does it happen, sir, that such a comparatively recent trust as young Hatherley's has been broken into?

MR. VOYSEY. Well, what could be safer than to use that money? There's a Consol investment, and not a sight wanted of either capital or interest for five years.

EDWARD. Father, are you mad?

MR. VOYSEY. Certainly not. My practice is to reinvest my clients' money when it is entirely under my control. The difference between the income this money has to bring to them and the income it is actually bringing to me I utilize in my endeavour to fill up the deficit in the firm's accounts.

EDWARD. But Hatherley should have the benefit.

MR. VOYSEY. He has the amount of his consol interest.

EDWARD. Are the mortgages in his name?

MR. VOYSEY. Some of them, yes, but that's a technical matter.

EDWARD. But, my dear father…

MR. VOYSEY. Well?

EDWARD. It's not right.

MR. VOYSEY. Oh, why is it so hard for a man to see clearly beyond the letter of the law? Will you consider a moment, Edward, the position in which I found myself? Was I to see my father ruined and disgraced without lifting a finger to help him? Not to mention the interest of the clients. I paid back to the man who would have lost most by my father's mistakes every penny of his money. He never knew the danger he'd been in, never passed an uneasy moment about it. It was I who lay awake at night. I have somewhere a letter from that man to my father thanking him effusively for the way in which he'd conducted some matter. It comforted my poor father. Well, Edward, I stepped outside the letter of the law to do that. Was that right or wrong?

EDWARD. In its result, sir, right.

MR. VOYSEY. Judge me by the result. I took the risk of failure, I should have suffered, I could have kept clear of the danger if I'd liked.

EDWARD. But that's all past. The thing that concerns me is what you are doing now.

MR. VOYSEY. My boy, you must trust me a little. It's all very well for you to come in at the end of the day and criticize. But I, who have done the day's work, know how that work had to be done. And here's our firm: prosperous, respected, and without a stain on its honour. That's the main point, isn't it?

EDWARD. Why, it seems as if you were satisfied with this state of things.

MR. VOYSEY. Edward, you really are most unsympathetic and unreasonable. Do you suppose that if I could establish every one of these people with a separate and consistent bank balance to-morrow that I shouldn't do it? Do you suppose that it's a pleasure, that it's relaxation to have these matters continually on one's mind? Do you suppose — ?

EDWARD. I find it impossible to believe that you couldn't somehow have put things right by now.

MR. VOYSEY. Oh, do you? Somehow!

EDWARD. In thirty years the whole system must either have come hopelessly to grief, or during that time there must have been opportunities.

MR. VOYSEY. Well, if you're so sure, I hope that when I'm underground you may find them.

EDWARD. I!

MR. VOYSEY. And put everything right with a stroke of the pen, if it's so easy!

EDWARD. I!

MR. VOYSEY. You're my partner and my son. You will inherit the business.

EDWARD. Oh, no, father.

MR. VOYSEY. Why else have I had to tell you all this?

EDWARD. Father, I can't. I can't possibly. I don't think you've any right to ask me.

MR. VOYSEY. Why not, pray?

EDWARD. It's perpetuating the dishonesty.

MR. VOYSEY. You don't believe that I've told you the truth.

EDWARD. I wish to believe it.

MR. VOYSEY. It's no proof that I've earned these twenty or thirty people their incomes for the last… how many years?

EDWARD. Whether what you have done and are doing is right or wrong, I can't meddle in it.

MR. VOYSEY. Very well; forget all I've said. Go back to your room. Get back to your own mean drudgery. My dear Edward, you've lived a quiet, humdrum life up to now, with your books and your philosophy and your ethics of this and your ethics of that. You've never before been brought face to face with any really vital question. Now don't make a fool of yourself just through inexperience. Try and give your mind freely and unprejudicedly to the consideration of this very serious matter.

EDWARD. You should have told me before you took me into partnership.

MR. VOYSEY. Should I be telling you at all if I could possibly help it? Don't I know that you're about as fit for this job as a babe unborn? Haven't I been worrying over that for these last three years? But I'm in a corner, and I won't see all this work of mine come to smash simply because of your scruples. If you're a son of mine you'll do as I tell you. Hadn't I the same choice to make? And this is a safer game for you than it was for me then. Do you suppose I didn't have scruples? If you run away from this, Edward, you're a coward. My father was a coward, and he suffered for it to the end of his days. I was sick nurse to him more than partner. Good Lord, of course it's pleasant and comfortable to keep within the law, and then the law will look after you. Otherwise you have to look pretty sharp after yourself. You have to cultivate your own sense of right and wrong; deal your own justice. But that makes a bigger man of you, let me tell you. How easily… how easily could I have walked out of my father's office and left him to his fate; no one would have blamed me! But I didn't. I thought it my better duty to stay and, I say it with all reverence, to take up my cross. Well, I've carried that cross pretty successfully. And what's more, it's made a happy man of me; a better, stronger man than skulking about in shame and in fear of his life ever made of my poor dear father.

EDWARD. Are we a disappointment to you, Father?

MR. VOYSEY. No, no.

EDWARD. You should have brought one of the others into the firm: Trenchard or Booth.

MR. VOYSEY. *(Hardening)* Trenchard! *(He dismisses that)* Well, you're a better man than Booth. Edward, you mustn't imagine that the whole world is standing on its head merely because you've had an unpleasant piece of news. Look around you. You'll find the household as if nothing had happened. Then you'll remember that nothing really has happened. And presently you'll get to see that nothing need happen, if you keep your head.

EDWARD. If I keep my head. I look around here and I see that for some time, ever since, I suppose, you recovered from the first shock and got used to the double dealing, you've used your clients' capital to produce your own income; to bring us up and endow us with. Booth's ten thousand pounds, what you are giving Ethel on her marriage, my own pocket money as a boy was probably withdrawn from some client's account. You've been very generous to us all, Father. I suppose about half the sum you've spent on us would have put things right.

MR. VOYSEY. No, it would not.

EDWARD. Oh, at some time or other!

MR. VOYSEY. Well, if there have been good times there have been bad times. At present the three hundred a year I'm to allow your sister is going to be rather a pull.

EDWARD. Three hundred a year! And yet you've never attempted to put a single account straight. Since it isn't lunacy, sir, I can only conclude that you enjoy being in this position.

MR. VOYSEY. I have put accounts absolutely straight. At the winding up of a trust, for instance. At great inconvenience, too. And to all appearances they've been above suspicion. What's the object of all this rodomontade, Edward?

EDWARD. If I'm to remain in the firm, it had better be with a very clear understanding of things as they are.

MR. VOYSEY. Then you do remain?

EDWARD. I am not yet sure. But I want to make one condition. And I want some information.

MR. VOYSEY. Well?

EDWARD. Of course no one has ever discovered, and no one suspects this state of things?

MR. VOYSEY. Peacey knows.

EDWARD. Peacey! Our head clerk?

MR. VOYSEY. Yes. His father found out.

EDWARD. Oh, of course. Does he draw hush money?

MR. VOYSEY. It is my custom to make a little present every Christmas. Not a cheque, notes in an envelope. I don't grudge the money, Peacey's a devoted fellow.

EDWARD. Devoted to maintaining his position and its special benefits. The condition I wish to make is that we should really do what we have pretended to be doing and try to put the accounts straight.

MR. VOYSEY. I've no doubt you'll prove an abler man of business than I.

EDWARD. One by one.

MR. VOYSEY. Which one will you begin with?

EDWARD. I shall begin, Father, by halving the salary I draw from the firm.

MR. VOYSEY. I see, Retrenchment and Reform.

EDWARD. And I think you cannot give Ethel this five thousand pounds dowry.

MR. VOYSEY. I have given my word to Denis.

EDWARD. The money isn't yours to give.

MR. VOYSEY. I should not dream of depriving Ethel of what, as my daughter, she has every right to expect. I am surprised at your suggesting such a thing.

EDWARD. I'm set on this, Father.

MR. VOYSEY. Don't be such a fool, Edward. What would it look like, suddenly to refuse it without rhyme or reason? What would people think?

EDWARD. You could give them a reason.

MR. VOYSEY. My dear boy, you evidently haven't begun to grasp the A B C of my position. What has carried me to victory? The confidence of my clients. What has earned that confidence? A decent life, my integrity, my brains? No, my reputation for wealth. That, and nothing else. Business now-a-days is run on the lines of the confidence trick. What makes old George Booth so glad to trust me with every penny he possesses? Not affection, he's never cared for anything in his life but his collection of prints. No; he imagines that I have as big a stake in the country, as he calls it, as he has, and he's perfectly happy.

EDWARD. So he's involved!

MR. VOYSEY. Of course he's involved, and he's always after high interest, too, it's little one makes out of him. But there's a further question here, Edward. Should I have had confidence in myself if I'd remained a poor man? No, I should not. You must either be the master of money or its servant. And if one is not opulent in one's daily life one loses that wonderful financier's touch. One must be confident oneself. And I saw from the first that I must inspire confidence. My whole public and private life has tended to that. All my surroundings, you and your brothers and sisters that I have brought into, and up, and put out in the world so worthily, you in your turn inspire confidence.

EDWARD. Not our worth, not our abilities, nor our virtues, but the fact that we travel first class and ride in hansoms?

MR. VOYSEY. Well, I haven't organized Society upon a basis of wealth.

EDWARD. Have you given a moment's thought to the sort of legacy you'll be leaving us?

MR. VOYSEY. Ah! That is a question you have every right to ask.

EDWARD. If you died tomorrow, could we pay eight shillings in the pound… or seventeen… or five? Do you know?

MR. VOYSEY. And my answer is, that by your help I have every intention, when I die, of leaving a will behind me of property running into six figures. Do you think I've given my life and my talents to this money making for a less result than that? I'm fond of you all, and I want you to be proud of me, and I mean the name of Voysey to be carried high in the world by my children and grandchildren.

MRS. VOYSEY enters.

MR. VOYSEY. Don't you be afraid, Edward. Hullo, Mother!

MRS. VOYSEY. Oh, there you are, Trench. I've been deserted.

MR. VOYSEY. George Booth gone?

MRS. VOYSEY. Are you talking business? Perhaps you don't want me.

MR. VOYSEY. No, no… no business.

MRS. VOYSEY. I suppose the others are in the billiard room.

MR. VOYSEY. We're not talking business, old lady.

EDWARD. I'll be off, sir.

MR. VOYSEY. Why don't you stay? I'll come up with you in the morning.

EDWARD. No, thank you, sir.

MR. VOYSEY. Then I shall be up about noon tomorrow.

EDWARD. Good-night, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. You look tired.

EDWARD. No, I'm not.

MRS. VOYSEY. What did you say?

EDWARD. Nothing, Mother dear.

He kisses her cheek, while she kisses the air.

MR. VOYSEY. Good-night, my boy.

Edward exits.

MRS. VOYSEY. George Booth went some time ago. He said he thought you'd taken a chill walking round the garden.

MR. VOYSEY. I'm all right.

MRS. VOYSEY. Do you think you have?

MR. VOYSEY. No.

MRS. VOYSEY. You should be careful, Trench. What did you put on?

MR. VOYSEY. Nothing.

MRS. VOYSEY. How very foolish! Let me feel your hand. You are quite feverish.

MR. VOYSEY. You're a fuss-box, old lady.

MRS. VOYSEY. Don't be rude, Trench.

Honor descends upon them.

HONOR. Mother, you left your shawl in the drawing room.

MRS. VOYSEY. Thank you, Honor. You'd better look after your Father; he's been walking round the garden without his cape.

HONOR. Papa!

MR. VOYSEY. Honor, you get that little kettle and boil it, and brew me some hot whiskey and water. I shall be all right.

HONOR. I'll get it. Where's the whiskey? Here it is. Papa, you do deserve to be ill.

Clamping the whiskey decanter, she is off again. MRS. VOYSEY sits and adjusts her spectacles. She returns to Notes and Queries.

MRS. VOYSEY. This is a very perplexing correspondence about the Cromwell family. One can't deny the man had good blood in him: his grandfather Sir Henry, his uncle Sir Oliver… It's difficult to discover where the taint crept in.

MR. VOYSEY. There's a pain in my back. I believe I strained myself putting in all those strawberry plants.

MRS. VOYSEY. Yes, but then how was it he came to disgrace himself so? I believe the family disappeared. Regicide is a root and branch curse. You must read this letter signed C. W. A., it's quite interesting. There's a misprint in mine about the first umbrella maker. Now where was it…?

Lights fade on the old women's ramblings.

Act I, Scene 2

The drawing room appears very bare and tidy. Mr. George Booth enters with Mrs. Voysey on his arm. She is in mourning.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Will you come in here?

MRS. VOYSEY. Thank you.

With great solicitude he puts her in a chair; then takes her hand.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Now I'll intrude no longer.

MRS. VOYSEY. You'll take some lunch?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. No.

MRS. VOYSEY. Not a glass of wine?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. If there's anything I can do just send round.

MRS. VOYSEY. Thank you.

He reaches the door, only to be met by the Major and Beatrice. He shakes hands with them both.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. My dear Beatrice! My dear Booth!

BOOTH. I think it all went off as he would have wished.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Great credit… great credit.

He makes another attempt to escape and is stopped this time by TRENCHARD VOYSEY, JR.

TRENCHARD. Have you the right time?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I think so. I make it fourteen minutes to one. Trenchard, as a very old and dear friend of your father's, you won't mind me saying how glad I was that you were present today. Death closes all. Indeed, it must be a great regret to you that you did not see him before… before…

TRENCHARD. I don't think he asked for me.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. No? No! Well… well.

He attempts to leave again and bumps into Denis.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. My dear Denis! I won't intrude.

He shakes hands and finally manages to escape.

TRENCHARD. Oh, Denis, did you bring Honor back?

DENIS. Yes.

BOOTH. A glass of wine, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. What?

BOOTH. Have a glass of wine?

MRS. VOYSEY. Sherry, please.

Edward enters, thoughtful as ever.

TRENCHARD. Give my love to Ethel. Is she ill that -

DENIS. Not exactly, but she couldn't very well be with us. I thought perhaps you might have heard. We're expecting.

TRENCHARD. Indeed. I congratulate you. I hope all will be well. Please give my love, my best love, to Ethel.

EDWARD. How is Ethel, Denis?

DENIS. A little smashed, of course, but no harm done.

Alice enters.

ALICE. Edward, Honor has gone to her room. I want to take her some food and make her eat it. She's very upset.

EDWARD. Make her drink a glass of wine, and say it is necessary she should come down here; and do you mind not coming back yourself, Alice?

ALICE. Certainly, if you wish.

BOOTH. What's this? What's this?

Alice gets her glass of wine, and goes.

BOOTH. What is this, Edward?

EDWARD. I have something to say to you all.

BOOTH. What ?

EDWARD. Well, Booth, you'll hear when I say it.

BOOTH. Is it business? Because I think this is scarcely the time for business.

EDWARD. Why?

BOOTH. Do you find it easy and reverent to descend from your natural grief to the consideration of money? I do not. I hope you are getting some lunch, Trenchard.

EDWARD. This is business, and more than business, Booth. I choose now, because it is something I wish to say to the family, not write to each individually, and it will be difficult to get us all together again.

BOOTH. Well, Trenchard, as Edward is in the position of trustee…executor… I don't know your terms; I suppose there's nothing more to be said.

TRENCHARD. I don't see what your objection is.

BOOTH. Don't you? I should not have called myself a sentimental man, but…

EDWARD. You had better stay, Denis; you represent Ethel.

DENIS. Why?

HONOR enters, much shaken.

EDWARD. My dear Honor, I am sorry to be so merciless. There! there! *(He helps her to a seat.)* I think you might all sit down. Mother, we're all going to have a little necessary talk over matters; now, because it's most convenient. I hope it won't… I hope you don't mind. Will you come to the table?

MRS. VOYSEY. No Edward, I don't mind.

EDWARD. Thank you, Mother.

One by one the others sit down. Denis has lost himself in a corner of the room and is gazing into vacancy.

EDWARD. Denis, would you mind attending?

DENIS. What is it?

EDWARD. There's a chair.

Denis takes it. For a minute there is silence, broken only by Honor's tears.

BOOTH. Honor, control yourself. Well, Edward?

EDWARD. I'll come straight to the point which concerns you. Our father's will gives certain sums to you all; the gross amount something over a hundred thousand pounds. There will be no money.

MRS. VOYSEY. I didn't hear.

BEATRICE. Edward says there's no money.

TRENCHARD. I think you said, "'will be."

BOOTH. Why will there be no money?

EDWARD. Because every penny by right belongs to those clients whom our father spent his life in defrauding. When I say defrauding, I mean it in its worst sense: swindling… thieving. I have been in the swim of it for the past year, oh, you don't know the sink of iniquity, and therefore I mean to collect every penny, any money that you can give me, put the firm into bankruptcy, and pay back all these people what we can. I'll stand my trial, it'll come to that with me, and as soon as possible. Are none of you going to speak? Quite right, what is there to be said? I'm sorry to hurt you, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. I can't hear quite all you say, but I guess what it is. You don't hurt me, Edward; I have known of this for a long time.

EDWARD. Oh, mother, did he know you knew?

MRS. VOYSEY. What do you say?

TRENCHARD. I may as well tell you, Edward, I suspected everything wasn't right about the time of my last quarrel with Father. Of course, I took care not to pursue my suspicions. Was Father aware that you knew, Mother?

MRS. VOYSEY. We never discussed it. There was once a great danger, when you were all younger, of his being found out; but we never discussed it.

EDWARD. I'm glad it isn't such a shock to all of you.

DENIS. My God… before the earth has settled on his grave!

EDWARD. I thought it wrong to postpone telling you.

HONOR. Oh, poor Papa… poor Papa!

EDWARD. Honor, we shall want your help and advice.

BOOTH. I think, Beatrice, there was no need for you to have been present at this exposure, and that now you had better retire.

BEATRICE. Very well, Booth.

She exits.

BOOTH. I have said nothing as yet, Edward. I am thinking.

TRENCHARD. That's the worst of these family practices: a lot of money knocking around and no audit ever required. The wonder to me is to find an honest solicitor at all.

BOOTH. Really, Trenchard!

TRENCHARD. Well, the more able a man is the less the word Honesty bothers him; and the Pater was an able man.

EDWARD. I thought that a year ago, Trenchard. I thought that at the worst he was a splendid criminal.

BOOTH. Really… Really, Edward!

EDWARD. And everything was to come right in the end: we were all to be in reality as wealthy and as prosperous as we have seemed to be all these years. But when he fell ill, towards the last, he couldn't keep the facts from me any longer.

TRENCHARD. And these are?

EDWARD. Laughable. You wouldn’t believe there were such fools in the world as some of these wretched clients have been. I tell you the firm's funds were just a lucky bag into which he dipped. Now sometimes their money doesn't even exist.

BOOTH. Where's it gone?

EDWARD. You’ve been living on it.

BOOTH. Good God!

TRENCHARD. What can you pay in the pound?

EDWARD. Without help? Six or seven shillings, I daresay. But we must do better than that.

BOOTH. All this is very dreadful. Does it mean beggary for the whole family?

EDWARD. Yes, it should.

TRENCHARD. Nonsense!

EDWARD. What right have we to a thing we possess?

TRENCHARD. He didn't make you an allowance, Booth; your capital's your own, isn't it?

BOOTH. Really… I - I suppose so.

TRENCHARD. Then that's all right.

EDWARD. It's stolen money.

TRENCHARD. Booth took it in good faith.

BOOTH. I should hope so.

EDWARD. It's stolen money.

BOOTH. I say, what ought I to do?

TRENCHARD. Do, my dear Booth? Nothing.

EDWARD. Trenchard, we owe reparation.

TRENCHARD. To whom? From which account was Booth's money taken?

EDWARD. I don't know. I daresay from none directly.

TRENCHARD. Very well, then.

EDWARD. Trenchard, you argue as he did.

TRENCHARD. Nonsense, my dear Edward. The law will take anything it has a right to, and all it can get; you needn't be afraid. There's no obligation, legal or moral, for us to throw our pounds into the wreck that they may become pence.

EDWARD. I can hear him.

TRENCHARD. But what about your own position? Can we get you clear?

EDWARD. That doesn't matter.

BOOTH. But I say, you know, this is awful! Will this have to be made public?

TRENCHARD. No help for it.

MRS. VOYSEY. What is all this?

TRENCHARD. Edward wishes us to completely beggar ourselves in order to pay back to every client to whom father owed a pound perhaps ten shillings instead of seven.

MRS. VOYSEY. He will find that my estate has been kept quite separate.

TRENCHARD. I'm very glad to hear it, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. When Mr. Barnes died, your father agreed to appointing another trustee.

DENIS. I suppose, Edward, I'm involved?

EDWARD. Denis, I hope not. I didn't know that anything of yours -

DENIS. Yes, all that I got under my aunt's will.

EDWARD. You see how things are? I've discovered no trace of that. We'll hope for the best.

DENIS. It can't be helped.

BOOTH. Let me advise you to say nothing of this to Ethel at such a critical time.

DENIS. Thank you, Booth, naturally I shall not.

HONOR. Oh, poor Papa… poor Papa!

MRS. VOYSEY. I think I'll go to my room. I can't hear what any of you are saying. Edward can tell me afterwards.

EDWARD. Would you like to go, too, Honor?

HONOR. Yes, please, I would.

The men watch the ladies exit.

TRENCHARD. How long have things been wrong?

EDWARD. He told me the trouble began in his father's time, and that he'd been battling with it ever since.

TRENCHARD. Oh, come now, that's impossible.

EDWARD. But I believed him! Now I look through his papers, I can find only one irregularity that's more than ten years old, and that's only to do with old George Booth's business.

BOOTH. But the Pater never touched his money; why, he was a personal friend.

EDWARD. Did you hear what Denis said?

TRENCHARD. Very curious his evolving that fiction about his father. I wonder why? I remember the old man. He was as honest as the day.

EDWARD. To gain sympathy, I suppose.

TRENCHARD. I think one can trace the psychology of it deeper than that. It would add a fitness to the situation; his handing on to you an inheritance he had received. You know every criminal has a touch of the artist in him.

DENIS. That's true.

TRENCHARD. What position did you take upon the matter when he told you?

EDWARD. You know what the Pater was as well as I.

TRENCHARD. Well, what did you attempt to do?

EDWARD. I urged him to start by making some of the smaller accounts right. He said that would be penny wise and pound foolish. So I did what I could myself.

TRENCHARD. With your own money?

EDWARD. The little I had.

TRENCHARD. Can you prove that you did that?

EDWARD. I suppose I could.

TRENCHARD. It's a good point.

BOOTH. Yes, I must say

TRENCHARD. You ought to have written him a letter and left the firm the moment you found out. Even then, legally… But as he was your father… What was his object in telling you? What did he expect you to do?

EDWARD. I've thought of every reason, and now I really believe it was that he might have someone to boast to of his financial exploits.

TRENCHARD. I daresay.

BOOTH. Scarcely matters to boast of.

TRENCHARD. Oh, you try playing the fool with other people's money, and keeping your neck out of the noose for over a decade. It's not so easy.

EDWARD. Then, of course, he always protested that things would come right; that he'd clear the firm and have a fortune to the good. Or that if he were not spared, I might do it. But he must have known that was impossible.

TRENCHARD. But there's the gambler all over.

EDWARD. Why, he actually took the trouble to draw up this will!

TRENCHARD. That was childish.

EDWARD. I'm the sole executor.

TRENCHARD. So I should think. Was I down for anything?

EDWARD. No.

TRENCHARD. How he did hate me!

EDWARD. You're safe from the results of his affection, anyway.

TRENCHARD. What on earth made you stay in the firm, once you knew?

EDWARD. I thought I might prevent things from getting any worse. I think I did; well, I should have done that if he'd lived.

TRENCHARD. You knew the risk you were running?

EDWARD. Yes.

Trenchard looks to Edward with a measure of admiration. Then suddenly…

TRENCHARD. I must be off. Business waiting. End of term, you know.

BOOTH. Shall I walk to the station with you?

TRENCHARD. I'll spend a few minutes with Mother. *(at the door)* You'll count on my professional assistance, please, Edward.

EDWARD. Thank you, Trenchard.

Trenchard goes.

BOOTH. No heart, y'know. Great brain! If it hadn't been for that distressing quarrel he might have saved our poor father. Don't you think so, Edward?

EDWARD. Perhaps.

DENIS. The more I think this out, the more devilishly humorous it gets: Old George Booth breaking down by the grave… Reverend Colpus reading the service…

EDWARD. Yes, the Vicar's badly hit.

DENIS. He says your father had managed his business for years.

BOOTH. Good God, how shall we ever look old George Booth in the face again?

EDWARD. I don't worry about him; he can die quite comfortably enough on six shillings in the pound. It's one or two of the smaller fry who will suffer.

BOOTH. Now, just explain to me, I didn't interrupt while Trenchard was talking, of what exactly did this defrauding consist?

EDWARD. Speculating with a client's capital, pocketing the gains and cutting the losses; meanwhile paying the client his ordinary income.

BOOTH. So that the client didn't find it out?

EDWARD. Quite so.

BOOTH. In point of fact, he doesn't suffer?

EDWARD. He doesn't suffer till he finds it out.

BOOTH. And all that's wrong now is that some of their capital is missing.

EDWARD. Yes, that's all that's wrong.

BOOTH. What is the, ah… deficit?

EDWARD. Anything between two and three hundred thousand pounds.

BOOTH. Dear me, this is a big affair!

DENIS. Quite apart from the rights and wrongs of this, only a very able man could have kept a straight face to the world all these years, as the governor did.

BOOTH. I suppose he sometimes made money by these speculations.

EDWARD. Very often. His own expenditure was heavy, as you know.

BOOTH. He was a very generous man.

DENIS. Did nobody ever suspect him?

EDWARD. You see, Denis, when there was any danger, when a trust had to be wound up, he'd make a great effort and put those accounts straight.

BOOTH. Then he did put some accounts straight?

EDWARD. Yes, when he couldn't help himself.

BOOTH. Now look here, Edward. You told us that he told you that it was the object of his life to put these accounts straight. Then you laughed at that. Now you tell me that he did put some accounts straight.

EDWARD. My dear Booth, you don't understand.

BOOTH. Well, let me understand. I am anxious to understand.

EDWARD. We can't pay ten shillings in the pound.

BOOTH. That's very dreadful. But do you know that there wasn't a time when we couldn't have paid five?

EDWARD. I don't know.

BOOTH. Very well, then! If what he said was true about his father and all that, and why shouldn't we believe him if we can, and he did effect an improvement, that's all to his credit. Let us at least be just, Edward.

EDWARD. I am very sorry to appear unjust. He has left me in a rather unfortunate position.

BOOTH. Yes, his death was a tragedy. It seems to me that if he had been spared he might have succeeded at length in this tremendous task, and restored to us our family honour.

EDWARD. Yes, Booth, he spoke very feelingly of that.

BOOTH. I can well believe it. And I can tell you that now, I may be right or I may be wrong, I am feeling far less concerned about the clients' money than I am at the terrible blow to the Family which this exposure will strike. Money, after all, can to a certain extent be done without, but Honour…

EDWARD. Our honour! Do you mean to give me a single penny towards undoing all the wrong that has been done?

BOOTH. I take Trenchard's word for it that that would be illegal.

EDWARD. Well, don't talk to me of honour.

BOOTH. I am speaking of the public exposure. Edward, can't that be prevented?

EDWARD. How?

BOOTH. Well, how was it being prevented before he died? Before we knew anything about it?

EDWARD. Oh, listen to this! First Trenchard, and now you! You've the poison in your blood, every one of you. Who am I to talk? I daresay so have I.

BOOTH. I am beginning to think that you have worked yourself into rather an hysterical state over this unhappy business.

EDWARD. Perhaps you'd have been glad if I'd held my tongue and gone on lying and cheating? And married and begotten a son to go on lying and cheating after me? One to pay you your interest; your interest in the lie and the cheat.

BOOTH. Look here, Edward, this rhetoric is exceedingly out of place. The simple question before us is what is the best course to pursue?

EDWARD. There is no question before us. There's only one course to pursue.

BOOTH. You will let me speak, please. In so far as our poor father was dishonest to his clients, I pray that he may be forgiven. In so far as he spent his life honestly endeavouring to right a wrong which he had found already committed, I forgive him. I admire him, Edward. And I feel it my duty to – er - reprobate most strongly the - er - gusto with which you have been holding him up in memory to us, ten minutes after we have stood round his grave, as a monster of wickedness. And now if all these clients can be kept receiving their natural income, and if Father's plan could be carried out of gradually replacing the capital -

EDWARD. You're appealing to me to carry on this… Oh, you don't know what you're talking about!

BOOTH. Well, I'm not a conceited man, but I do think that I can understand a simple financial problem when it has been explained to me.

EDWARD. You don't know the nerve, the unscrupulous daring it requires to -

BOOTH. Of course, if you're going to argue round your own incompetence…

EDWARD. Do you want your legacy?

BOOTH. In one moment I shall get very angry. Here am I doing my best to help you and your clients, and there you sit imputing to me the most sordid motives. Do you suppose I should touch, or allow to be touched, the money which father has left us till every client's claim was satisfied?

EDWARD. My dear Booth, I'm sure you mean well-

BOOTH. I'll come down to your office and work with you.

EDWARD. Why, you'd be found out at once.

BOOTH. Well, of course the Pater never consulted me. I only know what I feel ought to be possible. I can but make the suggestion.

Trenchard appears in the doorway.

TRENCHARD. Are you coming, Booth?

BOOTH. Yes, certainly. I'll talk this over with Trenchard. I say, we've been speaking very loud. You must do nothing rash. I've no doubt I can devise something which will obviate… and then I'm sure I shall convince you… *(glancing into the hall)* All right, Trenchard, you've eight minutes.

Booth departs.

DENIS. What an experience for you, Edward.

EDWARD. And I feared what the shock might be to you all. Booth has made a good recovery.

DENIS. You wouldn't have him miss such a chance of booming at us all?

EDWARD. It's strange the number of people who believe you can do right by means which they know to be wrong.

DENIS. Come, what do we know about right and wrong? Let's say legal and illegal. You're so down on the governor because he has trespassed against the etiquette of your own profession. But now he's dead, and if there weren't the disgrace to think of, it's no use the rest of us pretending to feel him a criminal, because we don't. Which just shows that money and property -

Denis now sees that Alice has entered.

DENIS. Do you want to speak to Edward?

ALICE. Please, Denis.

DENIS. I'll go.

He leaves them.

ALICE. Auntie has told me.

EDWARD. He was fond of you. Don't think worse of him than you can help.

ALICE. I'm thinking of you.

EDWARD. I may just escape.

ALICE. So Trenchard says.

EDWARD. My hands are clean, Alice.

ALICE. I know that.

EDWARD. Mother's not very upset.

ALICE. She had expected a smash in his life time.

EDWARD. I'm glad that didn't happen.

ALICE. Yes. As the fault was his it won't hurt you so much to stand up to the blame.

EDWARD. I'm hurt enough now.

ALICE. Why, what have the boys done? It was a mercy to tell Honor just at this time. She can grieve for his death and his disgrace at the same time; and the one grief lessens the other perhaps.

EDWARD. Oh, they're all shocked enough at the disgrace but will they open their purses to lessen it?

ALICE. Will it seem less disgraceful to have stolen ten thousand pounds than twenty?

EDWARD. I should think so.

ALICE. I should think so, but I wonder if that’s the law. If it isn't, Trenchard wouldn't consider the point. I’m sure Public Opinion doesn't say so, and that's what Booth is considering.

EDWARD. Yes.

ALICE. Well, he's in the Army, he's almost in Society, and he has to get on in both; one mustn't blame him.

EDWARD. But when one thinks how the money was obtained!

ALICE. When one thinks how most money is obtained!

EDWARD. They've not earned it.

ALICE. If they had, they might have given it you and earned more. Did I ever tell you what my guardian said to me when I came of age?

EDWARD. I'm thankful your money's not been in danger.

ALICE. It might have been, but I was made to look after it myself; much against my will. My guardian was a person of great character and no principles, the best and most lovable man I've ever met. I'm sorry you never knew him, Edward. He said once to me, "You've no right to your money. You've not earned it or deserved it in any way. Therefore, don't be surprised or annoyed if any enterprising person tries to get it from you. He has at least as much right to it as you have. If he can use it better, he has more right." Shocking sentiments, aren't they? No respectable man of business could own to them. But I'm not so sorry for some of these clients as you are, Edward.

EDWARD. Alice, one or two of them will be beggared.

ALICE. Yes, that is serious. What's to be done?

EDWARD. There's old nurse, with her poor little savings gone!

ALICE. Surely those can be spared her?

EDWARD. The Law's no respecter of persons; that's its boast. Old George Booth, with more than he wants, will keep enough. My old nurse, with just enough, may starve. But it'll be a relief to clear out this nest of lies, even though one suffers one's self. I've been ashamed to walk into that office, Alice. I'll hold my head high in prison, though.

ALICE. Edward, I'm afraid you're feeling heroic.

EDWARD. I!

ALICE. Don't be so proud of your misfortune. You looked quite like Booth for the moment. It will be very stupid to send you to prison, and you must do your best to keep out. We were discussing if anything could be done for these one or two people who'll be beggared.

EDWARD. Yes, Alice. I'm sorry nothing can be done for them.

ALICE. It's a pity.

EDWARD. I suppose I was feeling heroic. I didn't mean to.

ALICE. That's the worst of acting on principle: one begins thinking of one's attitude instead of the use of what one is doing.

EDWARD. I'm exposing this fraud on principle?

ALICE. Perhaps; that's what's wrong.

EDWARD. Wrong!

ALICE. My dear Edward, if people are to be ruined…

EDWARD. What else is there to be done?

ALICE. Well, have you thought?

EDWARD. There's nothing else to be done.

ALICE. On principle.

Edward ponders what could be done.

EDWARD. It had occurred to Booth…

ALICE. Oh, anything may occur to Booth.

EDWARD. …In his grave concern for the family honour that I might quietly cheat the firm back into credit again.

ALICE. How stupid of Booth.

EDWARD. Well, like my father, Booth believes in himself.

ALICE: Yes, he's rather a credulous man.

EDWARD. He might have been lucky, and have done some good. I'm a weak sort of creature; just a collection of principles, as you say. All I've been able to do in this business, at the cost of my whole life perhaps, has been to sit senselessly by my father's side and prevent things going from bad to worse.

ALICE. That was worth doing. The cost is your own affair.

Edward ponders some more, then turns to Alice.

EDWARD. Alice, there's something else I could do.

ALICE. What?

EDWARD. It's illegal.

ALICE. So much the better, perhaps. Oh, I'm lawless by birthright, being a woman.

EDWARD. I could take the money that's in my father's name, and use it only to put right the smaller accounts. It'd take a few months to do it well, and cover the tracks. That'd be necessary.

ALICE. Then you'd give yourself up as you'd meant to do now?

EDWARD. Yes, practically.

ALICE. It'd be worse for you then at the trial?

EDWARD. You said that was my affair.

ALICE. Oh, Edward!

EDWARD. Shall I do this?

ALICE. Why must you ask me?

EDWARD. You mocked at my principles, didn't you? You've taken them from me. The least you can do is to give me advice in exchange.

ALICE. No, you must decide for yourself.

EDWARD. Good Lord, it means lying and shuffling!

ALICE. In a good cause.

EDWARD. Ah, but lying and shuffling takes the fine edge off one's soul.

ALICE. Edward, are you one of God's dandies?

EDWARD. And, Alice, it wouldn't be easy work. It wants qualities I haven't got. I should fail.

ALICE. Would you?

EDWARD. Well, I might not.

ALICE. And you don't need success for a lure. That's like a common man.

EDWARD. You want me to try to do this?

For an answer she dares only put out her hand, and he takes it.

ALICE. Oh, my dear… cousin!

EDWARD. My people will have to hold their tongues. I needn't have told them all this today.

ALICE. Don't tell them the rest; they won't understand. I shall be jealous if you tell them.

EDWARD. Well, you've the right to be. This deed, not done yet, is your property.

ALICE. Thank you. I've always wanted to have something useful to my credit, and I'd almost given up hoping.

EDWARD. Alice, if my father's story were true, he must have begun like this: trying to do the right thing in the wrong way, then doing the wrong thing, then bringing himself to what he was, and so me to this. *(He breaks away from her.)* No, Alice, I won't do it. I daren't take that first step down. It's a worse risk than any failure. Think; I might succeed.

ALICE. It's a big risk. Well, I'll take it.

EDWARD. You?

ALICE. I'll risk your becoming a bad man. That's a big risk for me.

EDWARD. Then there is no more to be said, is there?

ALICE. Not now. *(They stand facing each other for a moment. There is the sound of the front door closing.)* Here's Booth back again.

EDWARD. He'll be so glad he's convinced me.

ALICE. I must go back to Honor, poor girl. I wonder she has a tear left.

She leaves him briskly and the lights fade.

Act II, Scene 1

Two significant changes have occurred in the drawing room of the Voysey home. One is that the portrait of Grandfather Voysey has been replaced with one of the late Trenchard Voysey. The other is that the room has been decorated for Christmas. Edward sits at the desk working. There is a knock at the door.

EDWARD. Come in.

PEACEY enters.

PEACEY. Good afternoon, sir.

EDWARD. Peacey! What on Earth are you doing here?

PEACEY. Some correspondence arrived last night after you had left the office, Sir. I thought I'd take the liberty of running it down to you here at the estate.

EDWARD It couldn't wait until Monday?

PEACEY. Monday is Christmas, sir.

EDWARD: Oh, yes. Tuesday, then?

PEACEY: Perhaps it could wait, sir, but there was another matter that I wished to discuss with you which is of a somewhat confidential nature.

EDWARD. I see, away from the sharp ears of the junior clerks.

PEACEY. Precisely, sir. Would now be a good time?

EDWARD. Certainly.

Peacey closes the door.

PEACEY. Bills are beginning to come in upon me as is usual at this season, sir. My son's allowance at Cambridge is now rather a heavy item of my expenditure. I hope that the custom of the firm isn't to be neglected now that you are the head of it, Mr. Edward. Two hundred your father always made it at Christmas. In notes, if you please.

EDWARD. Oh, to be sure, your hush money.

PEACEY. That's not a very pleasant word.

EDWARD. This is a very unpleasant subject.

PEACEY. I'm sure it isn't my wish to bring out in cold conversation what I know of the firm's position. Your father always gave me the notes in an envelope when he shook hands with me at Christmas.

EDWARD. And I've been waiting for you to ask me.

PEACEY. Well, we'll say no more about it. There's always a bit of friction in coming to an understanding about anything, isn't there, sir?

EDWARD. Why didn't you speak to me about this last Christmas?

PEACEY. I knew you were upset at your father's death.

EDWARD. No, no. My father died the August before that.

PEACEY. Well, truthfully, Mr. Edward?

EDWARD. As truthfully as you think suitable.

PEACEY. Well, I couldn't make you out last Christmas. I'd always thought there must be a smash when your father died, but it didn't come. But then again at Christmas you seemed all on edge, and I didn't know what might happen; so I thought I'd better keep quiet and say nothing.

EDWARD. I see. This little pull of yours over the firm is an inheritance from your father, isn't it?

PEACEY. When he retired, sir, he said to me, "I've told the Governor you know what I know." And Mr. Voysey said to me, "I treat you as I did your father, Peacey." I never had another word on the subject with him.

EDWARD. A very decent arrangement. Your son's at Cambridge, you say, Peacey?

PEACEY. Yes.

EDWARD. I wonder you didn't bring him into the firm.

PEACEY. Thank you, sir, I thought of it. But then I thought that two generations going in for this sort of thing was enough.

EDWARD. That's a matter of taste.

PEACEY. And then, sir, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but things simply cannot go on forever. The marvel to me is that the game has been kept up as it has. So now, if he does well at Cambridge, I hope he'll go to the bar. He has a distinct talent for patiently applying himself to the details of a thing.

EDWARD. I hope he'll do well. I'm glad to have had this talk with you, Peacey. I'm sorry you can't have the money you want.

PEACEY. Oh, any time will do, sir.

EDWARD. You can't have the money at all.

PEACEY. Can't I?

EDWARD. No. I made up my mind about that eighteen months ago. Since my father's death the trust business of the firm has not been conducted as it was formerly. We no longer make illicit profits out of our clients. There are none for you to share

PEACEY. Look here, Mr. Edward, I'm sorry I began this discussion. You'll give me my two hundred as usual, please, and we'll drop the subject.

EDWARD. By all means drop the subject.

PEACEY. I want the money. I think it is not gentlemanly in you, Mr. Edward, to make these excuses to try to get out of paying it me. Your father would never have made such an excuse.

EDWARD. Do you think I'm lying to you?

PEACEY. I don't wish to criticize your statements or your actions at all, sir. It was no concern of mine how your father treated his clients.

EDWARD. I understand. And now it's no concern of yours how honest I am. You want your money just the same.

PEACEY. Well, don't be sarcastic. A man does get used to a state of affairs whatever it may be.

EDWARD. My friend, if I drop sarcasm, I shall have to tell you very candidly what I think of you.

PEACEY. That I'm a thief because I've taken money from a thief!

EDWARD. Worse than a thief; you are content that others should steal for you.

PEACEY. And who isn't?

EDWARD. Ah, Peacey, I perceive that you study sociology. Well, that's too big a question to enter into now. The application of the present portion of it is that I have for the moment, at some inconvenience to myself, ceased to receive stolen goods and therefore am in a position to throw a stone at you. I have thrown it.

PEACEY. And now I'm to leave the firm, I suppose?

EDWARD. Not unless you wish.

PEACEY. I happen to think the secret's worth its price.

EDWARD. Perhaps someone will pay it you.

PEACEY. You're presuming upon its not being worth my while to make use of what I know.

EDWARD. My good Peacey, it happens to be the truth I told you just now. Well, how on earth do you suppose you can successfully blackmail a man, who has so much to gain by exposure and so little to lose as I?

PEACEY. I don't want to ruin you, sir, and I have a great regard for the firm, but you must see that I can't have my income reduced in this way without a struggle.

EDWARD. Very well, my friend, struggle away.

PEACEY. For one thing, sir, I don't think it fair dealing on your part to dock the money suddenly. I have been counting on it most of the year, and I have been led into heavy expenses. Why couldn't you have warned me?

EDWARD. That's true, Peacey, it was stupid of me. I apologize for the mistake.

PEACEY. Perhaps things may be easier for you by next Christmas.

EDWARD. I hope so.

PEACEY. Then perhaps you won't be so particular.

EDWARD. So you don't believe what I told you?

PEACEY. Yes, I do.

EDWARD. Then you think that the fascination of swindling one's clients will ultimately prove irresistible?

PEACEY. It's what happened to your father, I suppose you know.

EDWARD. I didn't.

PEACEY. He got things as right as rain once.

EDWARD. Did he?

PEACEY. My father told me. Then he started again.

EDWARD. But how did you find that out?

PEACEY. Well, being so long in his service, I grew to understand your father. But when I first came into the firm, I simply hated him. He was that sour; so snappy with everyone, as if he had a grievance against the whole world.

EDWARD. It seems he had in those days.

PEACEY. Well, as I said, his dealings with his clients were no business of mine. And I speak as I find. He was very kind to me, always thoughtful and considerate. He grew to be so pleasant and generous to everyone

EDWARD. That you have great hopes of me yet?

PEACEY. No, Mr. Edward, no. You're different from your father; one must make up one's mind to that. And you may believe me or not but I should be very glad to know that the firm was solvent and going straight. There have been times when I have sincerely regretted my connection with it. If you'll let me say so, I think it's very noble of you to have undertaken the work you have. And Mr. Edward, if you'll give me enough to cover this year's extra expense I think I may promise you that I shan't expect money again.

EDWARD. No, Peacey, no!

Edward begins sorting the correspondence that Peacey has given him.

PEACEY. Well, sir, you make things very difficult for me.

EDWARD. Here's a letter from Mr. Cartwright which you might attend to. If he wants an appointment with me, don't make one till the New Year. His case can't come on before February.

PEACEY. I am anxious to meet you in every way…

EDWARD. "Perceval Building Estate", that's yours, too.

PEACEY. …but I refuse to be ignored. I must consider my whole position. I hope I may not be tempted to make use of the power I possess. But if I am driven to proceed to extremities -

EDWARD. My dear Peacey, don't talk nonsense. You couldn't proceed to an extremity to save your life. You've taken this money irresponsibly for all these years. You'll find you're no longer capable even of such a responsible act as tripping up your neighbour.

PEACEY. Really, Mr. Edward, I am a considerably older man than you, and I think that whatever our positions -

EDWARD. Don't let us argue, Peacey. You're quite at liberty to do whatever you think worthwhile.

PEACEY. It isn't that, sir. But these personalities -

EDWARD. Oh, I apologize.

There is a knock on the door. The two men fall silent. Peacey goes and opens it.

PEACEY. Here's Mr. Denis, waiting.

EDWARD. Come in, Denis, please.

Denis enters.

EDWARD. How are you, Denis?

DENIS. Good Lord!

He throws himself into the chair by the fire. Edward, used to this sort of thing, grins while Peacey raises an eyebrow.

EDWARD: Well, Peacey, thank you for coming down. I hope you have a pleasant Christmas.

PEACEY. Thank you, sir. Happy Christmas to you.

He starts to go.

EDWARD. Don't forget the letters, Peacey.

PEACEY. I will not, sir.

Peacey crosses to the desk with great dignity, picks up letters, and exits. Edward looks to Denis, who is studying his boots.

EDWARD. How's Ethel?

DENIS. She's very busy spending money. Yuletide season and all…

Edward waits for him to say more, but he does not.

EDWARD. Is there something you want?

DENIS. I want a machine gun planted in Regent Street, and one in the Haymarket, and one in Leicester Square and one in the Strand, and a dozen in the City. An earthquake would be simpler; or why not a nice clean tidal wave? Don't you feel, even in your calmer moments, that this whole country is simply hideous? I'm patriotic; I only ask that we be destroyed that we can begin afresh.

EDWARD. It has been promised.

DENIS. I'm sick of waiting. I walked about the city this morning. I started to curse because the streets were dirty. You'd think that an Empire could keep its streets clean! But then I saw that the children were dirty, too.

EDWARD. That's because of the streets.

DENIS. Yes, and it's holiday time. A governing race, assuming responsibilities, might care for its children, especially this time of year. Instead, those that can cross a road safely are doing some work now; earning some money.

EDWARD. Come, we educate them now. And I don't think many work in holiday time.

DENIS. We educate them so they can grow to join the great conspiracy which we call our civilization. We need them to become staunchly middle class. Teach them to believe in the Laws and the Money-market and Respectability. I'm glad I don't make the laws, and that I haven't any money, and that I hate respectability, or I should be so ashamed. By the bye, that's what I've come for.

EDWARD. What? I thought you'd only come to talk.

DENIS. You must take that money of mine for your clients. Of course you ought to have had it when you asked for it. It has never belonged to me. Well, it has never done me any good. I have never made any use of it, and so it has been just a clog to my life.

EDWARD. My dear Denis, this is very generous of you.

DENIS. Not a bit. I only want to start fresh and free.

EDWARD. Denis, do you really think that money has carried a curse with it?

DENIS. Think! I'm the proof of it, and look at me. My aunt left me a legacy generating a hundred and fifty a year. Perfect for the young artist: enough to cover the rent of a studio and the price of a velvet coat. Then my respectable training got me engaged and married, and your father gave Ethel three hundred a year. Now the Governor is gone, and with him that allowance and much of my aunt's legacy; and I'm left with a wife and a child and what have I to do with Art? Nothing! Nothing I've done yet but reflects our drawing-room at Chislehurst.

EDWARD. Yes, what do you earn in a year? I doubt if you can afford to give up what's left of your legacy.

DENIS. Oh, that word, "Afford"! I want to be free from my advantages. Don't you see I must find out what worth I have in myself? I cannot be a mere pretence of a man animated by an income.

EDWARD. But you can't return to nature on the London pavements.

DENIS. No. Nor in England at all; it's nothing but a big back garden. There must be a place on this earth where a man can prove his right to live by some other means than robbing his neighbour.

EDWARD. And what does Ethel say to your emigrating to the backwoods, if that is exactly what you mean?

DENIS. She will have none of it. That is why we're separating.

EDWARD. What?

DENIS. We mean to separate.

EDWARD. This is the first I've heard of it.

DENIS. Ethel cannot exist outside the social structure of London; I cannot exist within it. She insists upon living extravagantly off other people's money; I want to discover my individual worth. We have reached an impasse.

EDWARD. Have you told anyone yet?

DENIS. We mean to now. I think a thing comes to pass quicker in public.

EDWARD. Say nothing at home until after Christmas.

DENIS. Oh, Lord, no…They'll discuss it solemnly.

EDWARD. I shan't accept this money from you; there's no need. All the good has been done that I wanted to do. No one will be beggared now, so why should you be?

DENIS. We've taken a fine lot of interest in your labours, haven't we, Hercules?

EDWARD. You hold your tongue about the office affairs, don't you? It's not safe.

DENIS. When will you be quit of the beastly business?

EDWARD. I'm in no hurry.

DENIS. What do you gain by hanging on now?

EDWARD. Occupation.

DENIS. But, Edward, it must be an awfully wearying state of things. Any moment a policeman may knock at the door.

EDWARD. At first I listened for him, day by day. Then I said to myself, "next week". But a year has gone by and more. I've ceased expecting to hear the knock at all.

DENIS. But look here, is all this worthwhile?

EDWARD. My dear Denis, what a silly question!

DENIS. Have you the right to make a mean thing of your life like this?

EDWARD. Does my life matter?

DENIS. Well, of course!

EDWARD. I find no evidence to convince me of it. And why should I fit myself for better work than Fate has given me to do: nursing fool's money?

DENIS. Edward we must turn this world upside down. It's her stupidity that drives me mad. Why should your real happiness be sacrificed to the sham happiness which people have invested in the firm?

There is a knock at the door.

EDWARD. Yes? Come in.

Honor pokes her head into the room.

HONOR. Excuse me, boys. Sorry to disturb… Eddy, Mr. George Booth is here to see you.

EDWARD. Oh, thank you, Honor. Please send him in. *(Honor exits.)* You'll have to go now, Denis.

DENIS. You're one of the few people I can talk to, Edward.

EDWARD. I like listening.

DENIS. Do you! I suppose I talk a lot of rot, but -

There is a knock at the door. Denis opens it to reveal Mr. George Booth.

MR. BOOTH. Hello, Denis! I thought I should find you, Edward.

EDWARD. Good afternoon, Mr. Booth.

DENIS. Well, Ethel and I will be here for dinner to-morrow.

EDWARD. Good-bye, ‘til then.

DENIS. How are you?

He launches this enquiry at Mr. Booth with great suddenness just as he leaves the room. The old gentleman jumps; then jumps again at the slam of the door.

EDWARD. Will you come here, or will you sit by the fire?

MR. BOOTH. This'll do. I shan’t detain you long.

He takes the chair by the table and occupies the next minute or two carefully disposing of his hat and gloves.

EDWARD. Are you feeling all right again?

MR. BOOTH. A bit dyspeptic. How are you?

EDWARD. Quite well, thanks.

MR. BOOTH. I'm glad… I'm glad. I'm afraid this isn't very pleasant business I've come upon.

EDWARD. Do you want to go to Law with anyone?

MR. BOOTH. No, oh no, I'm getting too old to quarrel.

EDWARD. A pleasant symptom.

MR. BOOTH. I mean to withdraw my securities from the custody of your firm; with the usual notice, of course.

EDWARD. Thank you. May one ask why?

MR. BOOTH. Certainly, certainly; my reason is straightforward and simple and well considered. I think you must know, Edward, I have never been able to feel that implicit confidence in your ability which I had in your father's. Well, it is hardly to be expected, is it?

EDWARD. No.

MR. BOOTH. I can say that without unduly depreciating you. Men like your father are few and far between. As far as I know, things proceed at this office as they have always done, but since his death I have not been happy about my affairs.

EDWARD. I think you need be under no apprehension...

MR. BOOTH. I daresay not, but that isn't the point. Now, for the first time in my long life, I am worried about money affairs; and I don't like the feeling. The possession of money has always been a pleasure to me; and for what are perhaps my last years I don't wish that to be otherwise. You must remember you have practically my entire property unreservedly in your control.

EDWARD. Perhaps we can arrange to hand you over the reins to an extent which will ease your mind, and at the same time not -

MR. BOOTH. I thought of that. Believe me; I have every wish not to slight unduly your father's son. I have not moved in the matter for eighteen months. I have not been able to make up my mind to. Really, one feels a little helpless… and the transaction of business requires more energy than… But I saw my doctor yesterday, Edward, and he told me… well, it was a warning. And so I felt it my duty at once to… especially as I made up my mind to it some time ago. In point of fact, Edward, more than a year before your father died I had quite decided that my affairs could never be with you as they were with him.

EDWARD. Did he know that?

MR. BOOTH. I think I never said it in so many words, but he may easily have guessed.

EDWARD. No… no, he never guessed. I hope you won't do this, Mr. Booth.

MR. BOOTH. I have quite made up my mind.

EDWARD. You must let me persuade you.

MR. BOOTH. I shall make a point of informing your family that you are in no way to blame in the matter. And in the event of any personal legal difficulties I shall always be delighted to come to you. My idea is for the future to employ merely a financial agent.

EDWARD. If you had made up your mind before my father died to do this, you ought to have told him.

MR. BOOTH. Please allow me to know my own business best. I did not choose to distress him by -

EDWARD. Well… well, this is one way out. And It's not my fault.

MR. BOOTH. You're making a fearful fuss about a very simple matter, Edward. The loss of one client, however important he may be… Why, this is one of the best family practices in London. I am surprised at your lack of dignity.

EDWARD. True, I have no dignity. Will you walk off with your papers now?

MR. BOOTH. What notice is usual?

EDWARD. To a good solicitor, five minutes. Ten to a poor one.

MR. BOOTH. You'll have to explain matters a bit to me.

EDWARD. Yes, I had better. Well, Mr. Booth, how much do you think you're worth?

MR. BOOTH. I couldn't say off hand.

EDWARD. But you've a rough idea?

MR. BOOTH. To be sure.

EDWARD. You'll get not quite half that out of us.

MR. BOOTH. I think I said I had made up my mind to withdraw the whole amount.

EDWARD. You should have made up your mind sooner.

MR. BOOTH. I don't in the least understand you, Edward.

EDWARD. A great part of your capital doesn't exist.

MR. BOOTH. Nonsense! It must exist. You mean that it won't be prudent to realize? You can hand over the securities. I don't want to reinvest simply because -

EDWARD. I can't hand over what I haven't got.

This sentence falls on the old man's ears like a knell.

MR. BOOTH. Is anything… wrong?

EDWARD. How many more times am I to say that we have robbed you of nearly half your property?

MR. BOOTH. Say that again.

EDWARD. It's quite true.

MR. BOOTH. My money… gone?

EDWARD. Yes.

MR. BOOTH. You've been the thief… you… you…?

EDWARD. I wouldn't tell you if I could help it: my father.

MR. BOOTH. I'll make you prove that.

EDWARD. Oh, you've fired a mine!

MR. BOOTH. Slandering your dead father… and lying to me… revenging yourself by frightening me… because I detest you.

EDWARD. Why, haven't I thanked you for putting an end to all my troubles? I do, I promise you I do.

MR. BOOTH. Prove this! Prove it to me! I'm not to be frightened so easily. One can't lose half of all one has and then be told of it in two minutes… sitting at a table.

EDWARD. If my father had told you this in plain words you'd have believed him.

MR. BOOTH. Yes.

EDWARD. What on earth did you want to withdraw your account for? You need never have known. You could have died happy. Settling with all those charities in your will would certainly have smashed us up, but proving your will is many years off yet, we'll hope.

MR. BOOTH. I don't understand. No, I don't understand… because your father… But I must understand, Edward.

EDWARD. Don't shock yourself trying to understand my father, for you never will. Pull yourself together, Mr. Booth. After all, this isn't a vital matter to you. It's not even as if you had a family to consider like some of the others.

MR. BOOTH. What others?

EDWARD. Don't imagine your money has been specially selected for pilfering.

MR. BOOTH. One has read of this sort of thing, but I thought people always got found out.

EDWARD. Well, we are found out. You've found us out.

MR. BOOTH. Oh… I've been foully cheated!

EDWARD. Yes, you have.

MR. BOOTH. But by you, Edward… say it's by you.

EDWARD. I've not the ability or the personality for such work, Mr. Booth… nothing but principles, which forbid me even to lie to you.

MR. BOOTH. I think your father is in Hell. I'd have gone there myself to save him from it. I loved him very truly. How he could have had the heart! We were friends for nearly fifty years. Am I to think now he only cared for me to cheat me?

EDWARD. No, he didn't value money as you do.

MR. BOOTH. But he took it. What do you mean by that?

Edward leans back in his chair and changes the tenor of their talk.

EDWARD. Well, you're master of the situation now. What are you going to do?

MR. BOOTH. To get my money back?

EDWARD. No, that's gone.

MR. BOOTH. Then give me what's left, and -

EDWARD. Are you going to prosecute?

MR. BOOTH. Oh, dear, is that necessary? Can't somebody else do that? I thought the Law -

EDWARD. You need not prosecute, you know.

MR. BOOTH. What'll happen if I don't?

EDWARD. What do you suppose I'm doing here now?

MR. BOOTH. I don't know.

EDWARD. I'm trying to straighten things a little. I'm trying to undo what my father did…to do again what he undid. It's a poor, dull sort of work now: throwing penny after penny, hardly earned, into the pit of our deficit. But I've been doing that for what it's worth, in the time that was left to me… till this should happen. I never thought you'd bring it to pass. I can continue to do that, if you choose, until the next smash comes. I'm pleased to call this my duty. *(Looking at Mr. Booth's disbelieving face.)* Oh, why won't you believe me? It can't hurt you to believe it.

MR. BOOTH. You must admit, Edward, It isn't easy to believe anything in this matter, just for the moment.

EDWARD. I suppose not. I can prove it to you. I'll take you through the books; you won't understand them, but I could prove it.

MR. BOOTH. I think I'd rather not. Do you think I ought to hold any further communication with you at all?

EDWARD. Certainly not. Prosecute… prosecute!

MR. BOOTH. Don't lose your temper. You know it's my place to be angry with you.

EDWARD. I beg your pardon. I shall be grateful if you'll prosecute.

MR. BOOTH. There's something in this which I don't understand.

EDWARD. Think it over.

MR. BOOTH. But surely I oughtn't to have to make up my mind! There must be a right or wrong thing to do. Edward, can't you tell me?

EDWARD. I'm prejudiced.

MR. BOOTH. What do you mean by placing me in a dilemma? I believe you're simply trying to practice upon my goodness of heart. Certainly I ought to prosecute at once… Oughtn't I? Can't I consult another solicitor?

EDWARD. Write to the Times about it!

MR. BOOTH. Edward, how can you be so cool and heartless?

EDWARD. Do you think I shan't be glad to sleep at nights?

MR. BOOTH. Perhaps you'll be put in prison?

EDWARD. I am in prison… a less pleasant one than Wormwood Scrubbs. But we're all prisoners, Mr. Booth.

MR. BOOTH. Yes, this is what comes of your philosophy. Why aren't you on your knees?

EDWARD. To you?

MR. BOOTH. And why should you expect me to shrink from vindicating the law?

EDWARD. I don't. I've explained you'll be doing me a kindness. When I'm wanted you'll find me at my desk. If you take long to decide, don't alter your behavior to my family in the meantime. They know the main points of the business, and -

MR. BOOTH. Do they? Good God! I'm invited to dinner tomorrow… that's Christmas Eve. The hypocrites!

EDWARD. I shall be there. That will have given you a day to think on it. Will you tell me then?

MR. BOOTH. I can't go to dinner! I can't eat with them! I must be ill!

EDWARD. I remember I came to dinner to tell my father of my decision.

MR. BOOTH. What decision?

EDWARD. To remain in the firm when I first knew of the difficulties.

MR. BOOTH. Was I present?

EDWARD. I daresay.

MR. BOOTH. Yes, how often I dined with him! Oh, it was monstrous! Do you know, I still can hardly believe all this? I wish I hadn't found it out. If he hadn't died I should never have found it out. I hate to have to be vindictive; it's not my nature. Indeed, I'm sure I'm more grieved than angry. But it isn't as if it were a small sum. And I don't see that one is called upon to forgive crimes, or why does the Law exist? I feel that this will go near to killing me. I'm too old to have such troubles. It isn't right; and now if I have to prosecute -

EDWARD. You need not.

MR. BOOTH. Don't you attempt to influence me, sir!

Mr. Booth flings open the door.

EDWARD. With the money you have left…

MR. BOOTH. Make out a cheque for that at once and send it me.

EDWARD. You could…

MR. BOOTH. I shall do the right thing, sir, never fear.

He marches out.

EDWARD. "Save your soul." I'm afraid I was going to say.

Act II, Scene 2

Honor escorts Mr. George Booth into the drawing room.

HONOR. This room is empty, Mr. Booth. I'll tell Edward you are here.

She leaves him to pace about by the fireplace, not removing his comforter or his coat. In a very short time Edward comes in, shutting the door, and taking stock of the visitor before he speaks.

EDWARD. Well?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I hope my excuse for not coming to dinner was acceptable. I did have… I have a very bad headache.

EDWARD. I daresay they believed it.

MR. GEORGE EOOTH. I have come immediately to tell you of my decision; perhaps this trouble will then be a little more off my mind.

EDWARD. What is it?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I couldn't think the matter out alone. I went this afternoon to talk it all over with my old friend Reverend Colpus. What a terrible shock to him.

EDWARD. Oh, nearly three of his four thousand pounds are quite safe.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. That you and your father… you, whom he baptized… should have robbed him! I never saw a man so utterly prostrate with grief. That it should have been your father! And his poor wife… though she never got on with your father.

EDWARD. Oh, Mrs. Colpus knows, too, does she?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Of course he told Mrs. Colpus. This is an unfortunate time for the storm to break on him. What with Sunday and Christmas Day following so close, they're as busy as can be. He has resolved that during this season of peace and goodwill he must put the matter from him if he can. But once Christmas is over…!

EDWARD. So I conclude you mean to prosecute. For if you don't, you've given the Colpuses a lot of unnecessary pain and inflicted a certain amount of loss by telling them.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I never thought of that. No, Edward, I have decided not to prosecute.

EDWARD. And I've been hoping to escape! Well, it can't be helped.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I think I could not bear to see the family I have loved brought to such disgrace.

EDWARD. So you'll compound my felony?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. That's only your joke!

EDWARD. You'll come to no harm.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. On the contrary; and I want to ask your pardon, Edward, for some of the hard thoughts I have had of you. I consider this effort of yours to restore to the firm the credit which your father lost a very striking one. What improvements have you effected so far?

EDWARD. I took the money that my father left -

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. And I suppose you take the ordinary profits of the firm?

EDWARD. Yes. It costs me very little to live.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Do you restore to the clients all round, in proportion to the amount they have lost?

EDWARD. That's the law.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Do you think that's quite fair?

EDWARD. No, I don't.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. No, I consider the treachery to have been blacker in some cases than in others.

EDWARD. Are you going to help me in this work of mine?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Surely, by consenting not to prosecute I am doing so.

EDWARD. Will you do no more?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Well, as far as my own money is concerned, this is my proposal. Considering how absolutely I trusted your father, and believed in him, I think you should at once return me the balance of my capital that there is left.

EDWARD. That is being done.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Good. That you should continue to pay me a fair interest upon the rest of that capital, which ought to exist and does not; and that you should, year by year, pay me back by degrees out of the earnings of the firm as much of that capital as you can afford. We will agree upon the sum: say a thousand a year. I doubt if you can ever restore me all that I have lost, but do your best and I shan't complain. There, I think that is fair dealing!

Edward begins to laugh.

EDWARD. How funny! How very funny!

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Edward, don't laugh.

EDWARD. I never heard anything quite so funny!

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Edward, stop laughing!

EDWARD. What will Colpus, and all the other Christian gentlemen demand? Pounds of flesh!

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Don't be hysterical. I demand what is mine, in such quantities as you can afford.

EDWARD. I'm giving my soul and body to restoring you and the rest of you to your precious money bags and you'll wring me dry. Won't you? Won't you?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Now be reasonable. Argue the point quietly.

EDWARD. Go to the devil, sir!

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Don't be rude.

EDWARD. I beg your pardon.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. You're excited. Take time to think of it. I'm reasonable.

EDWARD. Most! Most! *(There is a knock at the door)* Come in!

Honor intrudes an apologetic head.

HONOR. Am I interrupting business? I'm so sorry.

EDWARD. No! Business is over… quite over. Come in, Honor.

Honor puts on the table a market basket bulging with little paper parcels.

HONOR. I thought, dear Mr. Booth, perhaps you wouldn't mind carrying round this basket of things yourself. It's so very damp underfoot that I don't want to send one of the maids out to-night if I can possibly avoid it. And if one doesn't get Christmas presents the very first thing on Christmas morning quite half the pleasure in them is lost, don't you think ?

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Yes… yes.

HONOR. This is a bell for Mrs. Williams; something she said she wanted so that you can ring that for her, which saves the maids. Cap and apron for Mary. Cap and apron for Ellen. Shawl for Davis, when she goes out to the larder. All useful presents. And that's something for you, but you're not to look at it till the morning.

Having shaken each of these at the old gentleman, she proceeds to re-pack them.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Thank you… thank you! I hope my lot has arrived. I left instructions.

HONOR. Quite safely, and I have hidden them. Presents are put on the breakfast table to-morrow.

EDWARD. When we were all children our Christmas breakfast was mostly made off chocolates.

Mrs. Voysey sails slowly into the room accompanied by Beatrice.

MRS. VOYSEY. Are you feeling better, George Booth?

HONOR. Oh, Mother, you have forgotten your shawl.

Honor exits.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. No. *(elevates his voice)* No, thank you, I can't say I am.

MRS. VOYSEY. You don't look better.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I still have my headache. *(touching his temple)* Headache.

MRS. VOYSEY. Bilious, perhaps! I quite understand you didn't care to dine. But why not have taken your coat off? How foolish, in this warm room!

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Thank you. I'm just going.

He seizes the market basket. At that moment Alice appears.

ALICE. Your shawl, Auntie.

MRS. VOYSEY. Thank you, Alice. I thought I had it on. *(to Mr. Booth)* A merry Christmas to you.

ALICE. Good evening, Mr. Booth.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. I beg your pardon. Good evening, Miss Alice.

BEATRICE. Why shouldn't I sew in here? The fire's cozy.

MR. GEORGE BOOTH. Will you see me out, Edward?

EDWARD. Yes.

He follows after the old man and his basket. The others distribute themselves about the room.

BEATRICE. Where's Honor?

ALICE. Well, Beatrice, she remained in the library, talking to Booth.

BEATRICE. Talking to my husband; good Heavens! I know she has taken my scissors.

ALICE. I think she's telling him about Ethel.

BEATRICE. What about Ethel?

ALICE. Ethel and Denis.

BEATRICE. It was carefully arranged he was not to be told till after Christmas.

ALICE. Ethel told me… and Edward knows… and Auntie knows…

BEATRICE. Everyone knows but the Major.

ALICE. So Honor thought he'd better be told. She considers it her duty.

At this moment Honor comes in, looking rather trodden upon.

BEATRICE. Honor… *(Honor looks alarmed at Beatrice)* have you taken my best scissors?

HONOR. No, Beatrice.

ALICE. Oh, here they are! I must have taken them. I do apologize!

HONOR. I'm afraid Booth's rather cross… he's gone to look for Denis.

BEATRICE. Honor, I've a good mind to make you sew on these buttons for me.

The Major strides in.

BOOTH. Beatrice, what on earth is this Honor has been telling me?

BEATRICE. Honor, what have you been telling Booth?

BOOTH. Please… please do not prevaricate. Where is Denis?

MRS. VOYSEY. What did you say, Booth?

BOOTH. I want Denis, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. I thought you were playing billiards together.

Edward strolls back from despatching Mr. Booth, his face thoughtful.

BOOTH. Edward, where is Denis?

EDWARD. I don't know.

BOOTH. Honor, will you oblige me by finding Denis, and saying I wish to speak to him, here, immediately?

Honor, who has leapt at the sound of her name, flies from the room without a word.

BEATRICE. I know quite well what you want to talk about, Booth. Discuss the matter by all means, if it amuses you, but don't shout.

BOOTH. I use the voice Nature has gifted me with, Beatrice.

BEATRICE. Certainly Nature did let herself go over your lungs.

BOOTH. This is a family matter, otherwise I should not feel it my duty to interfere as I do. Any member of the family has a right to express an opinion. I want Mother's. Mother, what do you think?

MRS. VOYSEY. What about?

BOOTH. Denis and Ethel separating.

MRS. VOYSEY. They haven't separated.

BOOTH. But they mean to.

MRS. VOYSEY. Fiddle-de-dee!

BOOTH. I quite agree with you.

BEATRTCE. This reasoning would convert a stone.

BOOTH. Why have I not been told?

BEATRICE. You have just been told.

BOOTH. Before!

BEATRICE. The truth is, dear Booth, we're all so afraid of you.

BOOTH. Ha! I should be glad to think that.

BEATRICE. Don't you?

Denis storms in.

DENIS. Look here, Booth, I will not have you interfering with my private affairs. Is one never to be free from your bullying?

BOOTH. You ought to be grateful.

DENIS. Well, I'm not.

BOOTH. This is a family affair.

DENIS. It is not!

BOOTH. If all you can do is to contradict me, you'd better listen to what I've got to say… quietly.

Denis, quite shouted down, flings himself petulantly into a chair. A hush falls.

ALICE. Would you like me to go, Booth?

BOOTH. No, cousin, you may stay. Unless anything has been going on which cannot be discussed before ladies… And I hope that is not so.

DENIS. Oh, you have the mind of a cheap schoolmaster!

Ethel enters, followed by Honor.

BOOTH. Now that we are all here we may discuss this solemnly. Why do you wish to separate?

DENIS. What's the use of telling you? You won't understand.

ETHEL. We no longer get on well together.

BOOTH. Is that all?

DENIS. Yes, that's all. Can you find a better reason?

BOOTH. I have given up expecting common sense from you. But Ethel -

ETHEL. It doesn't seem to me any sort of sense that people should live together for purposes of mutual irritation.

BOOTH. My dear girl…! That sounds like a quotation from my wife's last book.

BEATRICE. It isn't. I do think. Booth, you might read that book… for the honour of the Family.

BOOTH. I have bought it, Beatrice, and -

BEATRICE. That's the principal thing, of course.

BOOTH. But do let us keep to the subject.

BEATRICE. Certainly, Booth.

ETHEL: Denis and I will be happier apart.

BOOTH. Why?

DENIS. Ethel finds that my opinions distress her.

ETHEL: And I have lost patience with Denis.

MRS. VOYSEY. What does Ethel say?

BOOTH. That she wishes to leave her husband because she has lost patience!

MRS. VOYSEY. Denis has a sweet nature.

ETHEL. Nonsense, mother! I have grown quite tired and angry with him; and now that I am angry, I shall never get pleased again.

BOOTH. How has he failed in his duty? Tell us. I'm not bigoted in his favour. I know your faults, Denis.

DENIS. Why can't you leave them alone… leave us alone? You won't understand. You understand nothing! Ethel is angry with me because I won't prostitute my art to make money.

BOOTH. *(glancing at his mother)* Please don't use metaphors of that sort.

ETHEL. Yes, I think Denis ought to earn more money.

BOOTH. Well, why doesn't he?

DENIS. I don't want money.

BOOTH. You can't say you don't want money any more than you can say you don't want bread.

BEATRICE. It's when one has known what it is to be a little short of both…

BOOTH. You know I never considered Art a very good profession for you, Denis. Couldn't you take up something else? You could still do those wood-cuts in your spare time to amuse yourself.

DENIS. Ha! Ha!

BOOTH. Well, it wouldn't much matter if you didn't do them at all!

MRS. VOYSEY. Booth is the only one of you that I can hear at all distinctly. But if you two foolish young people think you want to separate . . try it. You'll soon come back to each other and be glad to. People can't fight against Nature for long. And marriage is a natural state . . once you're married.

BOOTH. Quite right, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. I know.

BOOTH. My own opinion is, Ethel and Denis, that you don't realize the meaning of the word marriage. I don't call myself a religious man, but, dash it all, you were married in church! You then entered upon a sacred compact! Surely, as a woman and a mother, Ethel, the religious aspect of it must appeal to you. And have you considered, Denis, that, whether you're right or whether you're wrong, if you desert Ethel and the child, you cut yourself off from the Family?

DENIS. I wish to Heaven I'd ever be able to cut myself off from the family! Look at Trenchard.

BOOTH. I do not forgive Trenchard for quarreling with and deserting our Father.

DENIS. Trenchard quarreled because that was his only way of escape.

BOOTH. Escape from what?

DENIS. From tyranny!... from hypocrisy!... from boredom!... from his Happy English Home!

BEATRICE. Denis… Denis… It's no use.

DENIS. Why are we all dull, cubbish, uneducated, hopelessly middle-class… hopelessly out of date?

BOOTH. Cubbish!

DENIS. Because it's the middle-class ideal that you should emulate your parents. Live with them, think with them, grow like them. Be penniless except for their good pleasure, be dependent upon them for permission to breathe freely and never expect to form an opinion or thought of your own. You took to the Army, so of course you've never discovered how behind the times you are. I tried to express myself in art and found there was nothing to express, I'd been so well brought up. Do you blame me if I envy Trenchard his escape and wish to wander about in search of a soul of some sort?

ETHEL. Do you see what I must endure?

DENIS. Ethel and I mean to separate. And nothing you may say will prevent us. The only difficulty in the way is money. Can we command enough to live apart comfortably?

BOOTH. Well?

DENIS. Well, we can't.

BOOTH. Well?

DENIS. So we can't separate.

BOOTH. Then what in Heaven's name have we been discussing it for?

DENIS. I haven't discussed it! I don't want to discuss it! Why can't you mind your own business? Now I'll go back to the billiard room and my book.

He is gone before the poor Major can recover his lost breath.

BOOTH. I am not an impatient man… but really…!

ETHEL. Denis is a spoilt child. He refuses to value my wants and wishes. It makes him a most wearisome companion.

BOOTH. You married him with your eyes open, I suppose?

BEATRICE. How few women marry with their eyes open!

BOOTH. You just have to make the best of Denis. I, for one, am very relieved that you can't separate.

ETHEL. If only I could earn a larger income... Edward, you must secure me a larger allowance, and then I shall walk off from him.

BOOTH. You will do nothing of the sort, Ethel.

ETHEL. How will you stop me, Booth?

BOOTH. I am the head of this family, and I will command your allowance be withheld.

ETHEL: You are nothing but a great bully! A great bully!

Ethel storms from the room.

BEATRICE. Ah, the tribulations of the newly married.

BOOTH. Denis must assert himself.

BEATRICE. It was one of the illusions of my girlhood that I should love a man who should master me. Then I met the Major.

BOOTH. Well, I must own to thinking that I am a masterful man… that is the duty of every man to be so. Poor old Denis!

BEATRICE. If I tried to leave you, Booth, you'd have me whipped, wouldn't you?

BOOTH. Ha… well…!

BEATRICE. Do say yes. Think how it'll frighten Honor.

BOOTH. Denis has been a worry to me ever since Ethel secured him. And now as Head of the Family… Well, I suppose I'd better go and give the dear old chap another talking to.

He starts to exit.

BEATRICE. Booth. *(He stops)* Come here.

He crosses to her. She motions for him to come closer. He kneels. She kisses his cheek.

BEATRICE. Why disturb him at his book? It's Christmas Eve. Perhaps you could go check on the children for me?

BOOTH: Yes, Dear.

He gets up to go, but Beatrice holds his arm. He looks at her and she presents her cheek. He bends to kiss her, she releases him and he exits.

ALICE. Do you find Booth difficult to manage, Beatrice?

BEATRICE. No. It's best to allow him to talk himself out. When he's done that he'll often come to me for advice. I let him get his own way as much as possible; or think he's getting it. Otherwise he becomes so depressed. Denis is right about this family, though. It'll never make any new life for itself.

EDWARD. There are your children.

BEATRICE. The little Majors. Poor devils!

ALICE. You are an excellent mother.

BEATRICE. Yes, they'll grow up good men and women. And one will go into the Army and one into the Navy and one into the Church. They'll serve their country, and govern it, and help to keep it like themselves: dull and respectable, hopelessly middle-class. Never let us forget, ladies and gentlemen, that it is the plain, solid middle-class who have made us what we are.

EDWARD. Hear, hear! Bravo!

ALICE. Hail, Britannia!

BEATRICE. Amen, sister. Votes for women!

HONOR. Beatrice!

MRS. VOYSEY. Really, Beatrice… That's enough this sort of talk, children. What I can hear I wish I did not. Is it ten o'clock yet?

EDWARD. Past.

MRS. VOYSEY. Can anyone see the clock?

ALICE. It's past ten, Auntie.

MRS. VOYSEY. Then I think I'll go to my room.

HONOR. Shall I come and look after you, Mother?

MRS. VOYSEY. If you would be so kind as to come and look after me, Honor.

Honor helps her mother gather her things.

MRS. VOYSEY. Good-night, Alice. Good-night, Edward.

EDWARD. Good-night, Mother.

MRS. VOYSEY. I'm not pleased with you, Beatrice.

BEATRICE. I'm sorry, Mother.

Without waiting to be answered, the old lady has sailed out of the room, Honor at her side. As the others resume their activities, Beatrice regards the portrait of Mr. Voysey.

BEATRICE. You know, Edward, without wishing to open up painful wounds, however scandalous it has been, your father left you a man's work to do.

EDWARD. An outlaw's!

BEATRICE. I meant that. You've taken on a tremendous task.

EDWARD. Do you know what I discovered the other day about him?

BEATRICE. Innocence or guilt?

EDWARD. He saved his firm once. That was true. A most capable piece of heroism. Then, fifteen years afterwards, he started again.

BEATRICE. Did he, now?

EDWARD. One can't believe it was merely through weakness.

BEATRICE. Of course not. He was a great financier; a man of imagination. He had to find scope for his abilities, or die. He despised these fat little clients living so snugly on their unearned incomes; and put them and their money to the best use he could.

EDWARD. That's all a fine phrase for robbery.

BEATRICE. My dear Edward, I understand you've been robbing your rich clients for the benefit of the poor ones?

ALICE. That's true.

EDWARD. Well, we're all a bit in debt to the poor, aren't we?

BEATRICE. Quite so. And you don't possess, and your father didn't possess that sense of the sacredness of property which marks a truly honest man. Yet while your father sought wealth and power, you seek to perform charity, and that's all the difference. Robbery…you make it a beautiful word.

EDWARD. I think he might have told me the truth.

BEATRICE. Perhaps he didn't dare.

EDWARD. Perhaps not. But I loved him.

BEATRICE. After as well as before?

EDWARD: Yes. And not from mere force of habit, either.

BEATRICE. That should silence a bench of judges. Well… well…

Beatrice gathers up her things and goes, leaving Edward and Alice in chairs by the fire like an old domestic couple.

EDWARD. Stay and speak to me.

ALICE. I want to. Something more serious has happened since dinner.

EDWARD. I'm glad you can see that.

ALICE. What is it?

EDWARD. The smash has come, and not by my fault. Old George Booth.

ALICE. I saw that he was here.

EDWARD. Can you imagine it? That old man forced me into telling him the truth. I told him to take what money of his there was, and prosecute. He won't prosecute, but he bargains to take the money; and further to bleed us, sovereign by sovereign, as I earn sovereign by sovereign with the sweat of my soul. I'll see him in Heaven first!

ALICE. You can't reason with him?

EDWARD. He thinks he has the whip hand, and he means to use it. Also the Vicar has been told, who has told his wife. She knows how not to keep a secret. The smash has come at last.

ALICE. So you're glad?

EDWARD. Thankful. My conscience is clear. I've done my best. And oh, Alice, has it been worth doing?

ALICE. Half a dozen people pulled out of the fire.

EDWARD. I've bungled this job, Alice. I feared all along I should. It was work for a strong man, not for me.

ALICE. Work for a patient man.

EDWARD. You use kind words. But I've never shirked the truth about myself. My father said mine was a weak nature. He knew.

ALICE. No, not weak; compassionate. Although, truthfully Edward, once upon a time you were a bit of a prig.

EDWARD. Was I?

ALICE. I'm afraid so. But the prig fell ill when your father died and had to be buried in his grave. Don't you see what a blessing this cursed work has been to you? Why must you stand stiff against it?

EDWARD. But lately, Alice, I've hardly known myself. Once or twice I've lost my temper; I've been brutal.

ALICE. That's the best news in the world. There's your own wicked nature coming out. That's what we've been waiting for; that's what we want. That's you.

EDWARD. I'm sorry for it.

ALICE. Oh, Edward, be a little proud of poor humanity. Take your own share in it gladly. It so discourages the rest of us if you don't.

EDWARD. You're scolding me?

ALICE. Yes. You are deliberately letting yourself be unhappy.

EDWARD. Is happiness under one's control?

ALICE. My friend, you shouldn't neglect your happiness any more than you neglect to wash your face. For the last eighteen months, Edward, you've not had a smile to throw to a friend, or a good opinion upon any subject. You've dropped out of your clubs and I don't believe you even voted last November.

EDWARD. That was wrong of me.

ALICE. Yes, I expect a man to be a good citizen. There's something else I want to scold you for: you've still given up proposing to me. Certainly that shows a lack of courage and of perseverance. Or is it the loss of what I always considered a very laudable ambition?

EDWARD. Will you marry me?

ALICE. Yes, Edward.

EDWARD. No! no! no! We mustn't be stupid. I'm sorry I asked for that.

ALICE. I'm glad that you want me.

EDWARD. No, it's too late. If you'd said yes before I came into my inheritance, perhaps I shouldn't have given myself to the work. So be glad that it's too late. I am.

ALICE. There was never any chance of my marrying you when you were only a well-principled prig. I didn't want you; and I don't believe you really wanted me. Now you do. And you must always take what you want.

EDWARD. My dear, what have we to start life upon; to build our house upon? Poverty… and prison for me.

ALICE. Edward, you seem to think that all the money in the world was invested in your precious firm. I have four hundred a year of my own. At least let that tempt you.

EDWARD. You're tempting me.

ALICE. Am I? Good. Shall I help you in your life and work? If you don't think me your equal as woman to man, we'll never speak of this again. But if you do, look at me and make your choice: either refuse me my work and joy in life and cripple your own happiness, or take my hand.

She offers her hand. He takes it. They sit down side by side.

ALICE. Now, referring to the subject of Mr. George Booth: what will he do?

EDWARD. He'll do nothing. I shall be before him.

ALICE. What about his proposal?

EDWARD. That needs no answer.

ALICE. Yes, it does. He's a silly old man, and he doesn't know what he's talking about. I think we can bargain with him to keep the firm going somehow, and if we can we must.

EDWARD. No, Alice, no; let it end here. It has done for me; I'm broken. And of course we can't be married, that's absurd.

ALICE. We shall be married. And nothing's broken except our pride and righteousness, and several other things we're better without. And now we must break our dignity into bargaining.

EDWARD. But it'll be so useless. Colpus will be round in a day or two to make his conditions. He'll tell some intimate friend; they'll all come after their money like wasps after honey. And if they know I won't lift a finger in my own defense, what sort of mercy will they have?

ALICE. No, Edward, if you surrender yourself entirely, you'll find them powerless against you. You see, you had something to hope or fear from Mr. Booth; you hoped in your heart he'd end your trouble. But when you've conquered that last little atom of selfishness which gets in the way, I think you'll find you can do what you wish with these selfish men.

EDWARD. Will nothing ever happen to set me free? Shall I never be able to rest for a moment; turn round and say I've succeeded or I've failed?

ALICE. That isn't what matters.

EDWARD. If they all meet, and agree, they might keep me at it for life.

ALICE. What more could you wish for?

EDWARD. Than that dreary round!

ALICE. My dear, the world must be put tidy. That's the work which splendid criminals leave for us poor commonplace people to do.

EDWARD. And I don't believe in Heaven, either.

ALICE. But there's to be our life. What's wrong with that?

EDWARD. My dear, when they put me in prison for swindling…

ALICE. I think they won't. But if they are so stupid, I must be very careful.

EDWARD. Of what?

ALICE. To avoid false pride. I shall be foolishly proud of you.

EDWARD. It's good to be praised sometimes… by you.

ALICE. My heart praises you. Goodnight.

EDWARD. Goodnight.

They kiss for the first time.

ALICE. Till tomorrow.

EDWARD. Till tomorrow.

She leaves him to sit there by the table for a few moments longer, looking into his future, streaked as it is to be with trouble and joy.