

BLOOD IN THE SUMMERTIME

by

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CHARACTERS

MONTY

Montgomery "Monty" Chippentater, our earnest, good-natured protagonist. An upper class Englishman in his mid-twenties, Monty has never been subjected to a real day's work in his life. Instead, thanks to the support and welfare of his wealthy, more industrious ancestors, he spends his time drinking and dancing at the best clubs in London or holidaying in the manors and country homes of various friends of his family. This life of comfort has not made Monty a bad person; an irrepressible spirit and a stalwart friend, Monty is the living epitome of the British stiff upper lip. Unfortunately, it has left him as something of a relic, a conservative prude and a virgin. Though his personal combination of charming good humor and boyish naivete is unaccountably attractive for many young women, he never has any idea what to do with their oft-unwelcome advances – the idea of doing anything at all improper is horrifying to his traditional sensibilities. Like most men, though, he is not totally immune to the excitement of the immodest and the risque, and he secretly relishes SMITHSON's tales of sexual conquest and misadventure.

SMITHSON

Douglas "Smitty" Smithson. The local curate of Batterlea-on-Dyke and one of MONTY's oldest friends, although the two have not seen each other for several years. Like MONTY, Smithson comes from a rich family and has lived a life of enviable luxury, but, unlike his friend, he was a renowned merrymaker and playboy until he joined the clergy. Back then he would spend his days drinking cocktails in London gentlemen's clubs and telling tales of whatever excitement he had got up to the previous night. While the

church has not entirely cured him of this behavior, he is making an earnest effort to find a more meaningful life and a wife to share it with him. He currently hopes that ELOISE will agree to be that wife, although she has shown no interest in his advances so far. Although he can seem prickly and uncouth, SMITHSON is really a tender and emotional romantic at heart.

AURELIA

Aurelia Pennymoor, Lady Blackbier. A retired aristocrat, collector of foreign ritual antiquities, and mistress of Blackbier Hall. Despite her blue blood, Aurelia is a pariah among the noblesse; she rejected the stuffy principles of the upper class at a young age and has since become an blunt, crude, and almost alcoholic older woman. She had a wild and rebellious youth that spanned the reaches of the globe and the arms of many lovers, and it was only when she was the last surviving claim to the Blackbier title that she was compelled to return to England to take charge of the family land and holdings. She has barely devoted a thought to the family's estate since, preferring instead to focus on building miniature models of England's military, much to the chagrin of ELOISE. Although Aurelia loves her daughter, she resents the implication that there are more important things for her to think about than good gin and modeling glue.

ELOISE

Eloise Pennymoor. The calculating, eighteen to twenty-something year-old daughter of AURELIA and the target of SMITHSON's affections. She has little interest in marriage and instead concerns herself primarily with trying to improve the family's standing and holdings. She tends to see herself as better than those around her and sees nothing wrong with manipulating others to get what she wants.

MILLICENT

Millicent Haversley. The maid of Blackbier Hall. She is young, flirty, independent, and absolutely besotted with SMITHSON, to his displeasure.

SMETHWICK

Blackbier Hall's austere butler. He has been serving at the Hall for over two decades, and is devoted to ELOISE, having raised her from birth.

SETTING

The sleepy northern English town of Batterlea-on-Dyke in the Lake District and the local manor home, Blackbier House.

TIME

A single English summer day in the mid-1920s.

ACT I

Scene 1	The undercroft.	Night.
Scene 2	Outside the train station.	Noon.
Scene 3	The smoking room.	Early afternoon.
Scene 4	The drawing room.	Afternoon.
Scene 5	The dining room.	Evening.
Scene 6	The smoking room.	Night.
Scene 7	Smithson's room.	Night.

ACT II

Scene 8	Monty's room.	Night.
Scene 9	The smoking room.	Night.
Scene 10	Smithson's room.	Night.
Scene 11	The undercroft.	Night.

ACT I

SCENE 1

(The darkened undercroft of Blackbier Hall. Only the barest outlines of murky shapes are visible behind the single chair placed in the center of the stage.)

(A solitary figure sits on the chair, bedecked in a hideous headdress of gold and animal bone: the AVENGING SPIRIT. It is garbed in a dark cloak that obscures its form and is arrayed in a collection of feathers and ritualistic jewelry. Its face is a large, circular mask that obscures its features – the mask's eyes and mouth are dark, cut away holes. Every few seconds the SPIRIT draws the edge of a large dagger across a strip of leather. The high, drawn-out scrape of the sharpening blade is the only thing that can be heard.)

(Slow blackout to the sound of the knife. The sound continues once the stage is pitch black. After some seconds, a train whistle is heard in the distance – faint at first, but slowly building into a deafening wail that obscures the sound of the blade.)

SCENE 2

(A table in a cafe in the small English town of Batterlea-on-Dyke. The table is positioned in front of two large windows, through which the local train station is visible beyond an expanse of

grass.)

(The train whistle from the previous scene dies out as the scene begins. SMITHSON is seated at the table with a steaming pot of tea. The place is set for two; he is expecting MONTY. SMITHSON is dressed in a black clergy shirt and collar, and he is wearing dark glasses. He is reading a small pornographic paperback as he waits.)

(MONTY enters from stage right, carrying a suitcase and a large envelope.)

MONTY

Smitty, old thing! Is that you?

SMITHSON

(Looking up from his book, which he places on the table.)

Montgomery Chippentater, as I live and breathe!

(He stands and clasps MONTY's hands in his.)

How long has it been, old sport? Two years? Three? Please, have a seat.

MONTY

(Taking the seat opposite SMITHSON and placing the envelope on the table.)

Too long, that's for sure. I can't tell you how good it is to see you.

SMITHSON

Rather. Drop of tea?

MONTY

Please.

SMITHSON

(Pouring tea for MONTY and topping up his own cup. The two will continue to drink throughout the scene.)

I thought you would be thirsty after coming all the way up from the city, so I got a pot in. Was the trip long?

MONTY

Frightfully. You can almost feel life passing you by on a train, can't you? By the end I was thinking of contracting a terminal disease just to liven things up a bit.

(He takes a long sip of the tea and sighs out loud.)

Lovely. Distressingly lacking in alcohol, but nonetheless very refreshing.

SMITHSON

We'll put that right soon enough. Where we're going the landlady keeps a cellar that would put even the one at Blacks to shame.

MONTY

Music to my ears. Speaking of the old club, I must say that I had never really believed what the other chaps there said until now. Smitty Smithson becoming a priest! It's as if Cupid himself had dropped his quiver and enrolled in a correspondence course on investment banking. But now you sit before me, hands clasped in meditative contemplation, the light of God in your eyes...

SMITHSON

(Taking off the sunglasses.)

Ah, sorry about that. I always forget that I'm wearing them, and they reflect the sun something terrible. But I'm not really a priest yet, you know. I'm only just starting my curacy down here; I've got years to go before I can start taking tea with old widows and calling myself vicar.

MONTY

Still, you must admit it's all a bit implausible. That one of Casanova's own would trade it all in overnight for the simple pleasures of cold porridge and the collection box! The last time I saw you, you were still chasing after that pretty young milkmaid from Dorset.

SMITHSON

Jeannette! Yes, she was something special. Legs smooth as butter, and a laugh like a strangled vole. There was a mix-up involving myself, the family dog, and some local bar types, though. Long story, the

upshot of which was that she threatened me with a milking bucket and forbade me ever laying eyes on her again. Bit rough, really. You think you know someone, what?

MONTY

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, especially one who knows her way around an udder. But how did you go from hounding working girls to knocking on the door of the theological college?

SMITHSON

Is a man not allowed to ask for something more in life than the plump and not inconsiderable delights of milkmaids and office girls?

MONTY

And magistrate's daughters.

SMITHSON

Yes, and a dozen more besides. But hush up, Chippentater. You want to know why I have dedicated myself to the clergy?

MONTY

Very much.

SMITHSON

Well, I'll tell you. If you must know, it's because I... Well, I...

(SMITHSON considers for the question for a moment before answering lamely.)

I suppose it seemed like something to do. And I've always liked the country, you know that.

MONTY

Yes. Among other things.

(MONTY tilts his head in the direction of SMITHSON's paperback, still visible on the table.)

SMITHSON

Ah, well. You can't expect a chap to change his habits that quickly, can you?

MONTY

I certainly don't; I know you. But I rather imagine

the Church of England has a different idea entirely.

SMITHSON

Utter tosh. This is the twentieth century! We live in an enlightened age, Monty, when the French can splash colors about at random and call it art and curates are free to read what they like in front of train stations. Besides, in a way, that's rather why I invited you down here in the first place.

MONTY

(Raising his eyebrows.)

If you're thinking of writing your own, I'm afraid I will be of no help. I don't have much of a reputation in the city, but I think even my name might be blackened by a collaboration with the Pornographic Parson.

SMITHSON

It's nothing of the sort, I assure you. You see, Monty, the truth is this: I'm in love!

(Pause. MONTY gives no reply.)

Oh, I know what you're thinking, but it's the real thing this time, I swear! Her name's Eloise Pennymoor, daughter of the local baroness, Lady Blackbier.

MONTY

Ah, that would explain the lodgings.

SMITHSON

That's right. I convinced the old thing to put us up for the week at Blackbier Hall. I told her that it would be a good opportunity to discuss the organization of church services in the town, but frankly I think she must just be happy for the company. She doesn't usually take a very active interest in local goings-on.

MONTY

(Motioning to the envelope.)

Perhaps. But why on earth did you ask me to bring these along?

SMITHSON

Oh, you did get them! Blackbier will be pleased, she asked for them specifically as a favor for letting you

stay.

MONTY

What could a retired noblewoman want with a four dozen detailed photographs of Parliament?

SMITHSON

(Shrugs.)

Who knows? Perhaps she's head plotter for some anarchist bomber sect? Whatever the reason, it hardly concerns us.

MONTY

But you didn't invite me down purely to deliver picture postcards to a violently radicalized aristocrat, surely?

SMITHSON

Not in the least. As I said, it's this girl Eloise. I've fallen madly for her, but she's utterly unreachable.

MONTY

Parental intervention? You have a respectable career, a binder full of potentially seditious photography, and a fat inheritance from your Uncle Albert. What more could a prospective mother-in-law desire?

SMITHSON

You misunderstand me. It's not Blackbier that's the issue; it's Eloise. Whenever I try to engage her around the town, she barely gives me the time of day!

MONTY

(Laughs.)

What, the great Douglas "Smitty" Smithson, conqueror of serving girls and defiler of brides-to-be, has finally met a girl immune to his unaccountable charisma?

SMITHSON

Shocking, I know.

MONTY

And correct me if I'm wrong here, but, of all people, you brought in *me* to help?

SMITHSON

(*Grinning.*)

That's about it, yes.

MONTY

(*Feigning seriousness.*)

Have you considered that it might be the cassock?
It's not really in the popular style, after all.
Girls might find it intimidating.

SMITHSON

Let's just say that it hasn't been an issue before.

MONTY

Oh, Smitty, tell me you haven't.

SMITHSON

I confess to nothing. And yes, I am fully aware of
the irony.

MONTY

(*Sighs.*)

Is there nothing you won't make a mockery of?
Alright, so what do you want from me in this impious
scheme of yours? It's not like there's anything I can
teach you about courting girls. Everything that I
know now, you had already picked up before you started
shaving.

SMITHSON

Truer words, and so on. No, what I have in mind for
you is more of a diversion.

MONTY

A diversion?

SMITHSON

I am, as you say, a suitor of the highest degree, if
not the greatest integrity. I have little doubt that
if unimpeded I would be able convince the young Miss
Pennymoor of my great merits as a partner in life and
love. However, there is a complication.

MONTY

A catch?

SMITHSON

A bloody great fly in my romantic ointment.

(MONTY grimaces.)

SMITHSON

You see, the housemaid's the rub.

MONTY

You're rubbing the housemaid?

SMITHSON

Hardly. This one's trouble, you see. She's had her eye on me since I arrived in Batterlea-on-Dyke, and she's not subtle about it. She has a reputation of being rather loose with her affections, if you catch my drift.

MONTY

Said the pot of the kettle.

SMITHSON

She's all sideways glances on market day and coquettish giggles of "Lovely service today, Mr Smithson." It's distracting!

MONTY

So what do you want me to do about it? Sounds like this girl should be right up your alley.

SMITHSON

Divert her. Woo her. Draw her from me as the persistent flame entices the distractable moth. It will be absolutely impossible for me to have even a moment alone with Eloise while that harpy still flutters freely about the Hall.

MONTY

Why me? It sounds like you're looking for some sort of Don Juan type, not a fellow whose greatest conquest was third place in the Blacks Snooker league for the summer of 1925.

SMITHSON

My thoughts were twofold. Firstly, there was the fact that you're an excellent chap, a good friend, and a fellow with whom I could happily spend a week's

holiday without becoming compelled to dig out my eyes with a soup spoon.

MONTY

Charmed. And the other reason?

SMITHSON

Well, despite your complete failure to find and keep an *objet d'amour* of your own (be it due to inadequacy or disinterest, I really don't care), you must admit that you have something of an inbred gift for earning the unwanted and often unwarranted affections of strange women.

MONTY

You've lost me.

SMITHSON

Cambridge, summer of 1921. There was that waitress who knitted you cozies for the complete works of Kant.

MONTY

The poor woman had a mental disorder.

SMITHSON

Soho, May to July of 1922. That duke's niece who was under the impression that you were a renowned tango dancer. And in Paris, that same autumn, you were chased about by that local girl with a name like a type of sweet bread.

MONTY

I hardly think that one should count. After all, it did turn out that she was only trying to get my uncle to not press charges against her brother for firebombing his merchant vessel.

SMITHSON

Fair enough. But what about the time that Cotswolds girl proclaimed her undying love for you after you found her father's missing rooster? Or that memorable weekend in 1924 when, if I remember correctly, you were engaged to be married to the daughter of an influential American glue mogul.

MONTY

All true, of course. You've got me bang to rights.

SMITHSON

While after all these years, you've got yourself banged to nothing. What are you waiting for with all these girls, Monty? Marriage? Permission from God? Or perhaps from your mother?

MONTY

Smitty! Is nothing sacred?

SMITHSON

Not if it occurs between a man and a consenting woman in the privacy of their bedroom. Or kitchen, car, theater, or convenient field or riverside, for that matter.

MONTY

Good Lord, man.

SMITHSON

Save me the sermon, Monty. I don't have a pen handy and I'd love to use it next Sunday.

(Finishes the last of his tea.)

Here, the two-seater's parked on the other side of the green. Why don't we head over to Blackbier to meet the inmates and settle in? You can tell me all about how you're the last defender of English decency and self-restraint on the way there.

(MONTY and SMITHSON rise. SMITHSON drops some coins onto his plate, and the two men exit stage left.)

SMITHSON (Off)

You really need to loosen up if we're to survive the week, Monty. That injured schoolboy act of yours is killing me.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(The smoking room of Blackbier Hall. The decor is ornate but faded; it is clearly from the early Victorian era or earlier,

and suggests a decaying glory. There are several comfortable arm chairs arranged around the room, each of which is partnered with a short table holding an ash tray. The room also features a sizable drinks cabinet. An imposing fireplace takes up much of the back wall, flanked by two large windows with window seats. A large fire is crackling away within it. Arranged on some of the tables and mounted around the fireplace is a large assortment of gilded ritual artifacts. Their design is primarily Incan, and they have a savage, violent quality about them — knives are prevalent among the masks and other implements, their blades long and cruelly barbed. A tablecloth is draped over a long table in the center of the room to obscure its contents, which bulge irregularly under the sheet.)

(AURELIA is sitting in one of the armchairs reading a book on model shipbuilding and smoking a thin cigarette. A door opens stage right to reveal SMETHWICK, who holds it open for SMITHSON and MONTY. MONTY is still holding the envelope of photographs in one hand.)

SMETHWICK

Misters Smithson and Chippentater to see you, Lady Blackbier.

AURELIA

(Looking up from her book.)

Ah, Smithson, you've arrived! Capital, capital. Excuse me one moment.

(AURELIA places her book on a small table next to her armchair and stubs

out her cigarette. She raises herself from the chair and clasps SMITHSON's hand in hers.)

AURELIA

Wonderful to see you. And your friend was able to come, too! Chippentater, was it?

(AURELIA holds out her hand to MONTY, who shakes it.)

MONTY

That's right, your Ladyship. Montgomery Chippentater.

AURELIA

I'm so glad that you could both make it. We have so few guests these days that most of the house has fallen into disuse. My fault, of course — I'm not really the social butterfly I once was. It's just Smethwick and the maid around the place, nowadays. Speaking of which...

(Turns to SMETHWICK.)

Thank you, Smethwick. You may leave us.

SMETHWICK

Very good, my Lady.

(SMETHWICK bows slightly and turns to leave.)

AURELIA

Oh, and Smethwick!

(SMETHWICK turns back around.)

SMETHWICK

Yes, my Lady?

AURELIA

Send in Millicent with a pot of tea, would you?

SMETHWICK

Of course, my Lady.

(SMETHWICK bows again and exits stage right.)

AURELIA

I always have a cup or two about this time. As I get older, I have found that it is necessary to help me resist the siren song of the mid-afternoon nap. Perhaps young men such as yourselves would prefer something stronger, however?

SMITHSON

Gin and tonic, please. Monty?

MONTY

I'll take a double whiskey. With ice, if you have it.

AURELIA

But of course, my dear boy!

(AURELIA opens the drinks cabinet and begins to prepare beverages.)

AURELIA

I generally have Smethwick do the honors, but I like to keep my head in the drinks-making game as much as possible. You can tell me if I've lost my touch. Eloise — my daughter, you know — she won't touch the stuff, and I'm quite certain that I could give Smethwick a glass of fresh pig's mess and he'd still tell me it tasted like God's own private stock. There is a fine line between loyalty and obsequiousness that I'm afraid to say the man has never quite got the hang of. There!

(AURELIA begins handing out filled glasses, narrating their selections as she goes along.)

AURELIA

One gin and tonic. With a twist, if you'll excuse the indulgence...

SMITHSON

Thank you.

AURELIA

...And one double whiskey, neat, on the rocks.

MONTY

Thanks awfully.

AURELIA

Not at all, not at all. Please, don't wait for me to get mine. Millicent Haversley is many wonderful things, but quick with a kettle is somehow not one of them.

SMITHSON

Well, if you insist.

(Raises his glass.)

Cheers, then.

MONTY

(Raises his glass also.)

Cheers!

*(SMITHSON and MONTY drink deeply.
AURELIA spies something on MONTY's coat sleeves.)*

AURELIA

I say, Chippentater! Those wouldn't be Black Suits Club cufflinks, would they?

MONTY

Why, yes they are. Douglas and I are old members. Do you know the Club?

AURELIA

Know it? I met my third husband there in the eighties.

(Pause.)

Well, well. A priest who drinks at Blacks.

(Chuckles.)

I like you, Smithson. For a man of God, you certainly seem to have your priorities straight. I am sorry that I had not seen fit to invite you by before. The clergy are usually such a bore, you know.

SMITHSON

And those are just the ones with enough sense to be trusted with ordainment. The seminary was packed to the walls with wide-eyed devouts without one original thought between them. I've never seen such a collection of dullards.

AURELIA

You have my sympathies. Stimulating conversation is

as valuable to good life as water; without it, the mind screams and the body withers. And Christian tradition is so monochrome; restraint does not an exciting culture make.

(Gesticulates at the artifacts on the wall.)

At least the so-called American savages knew how to splash a bit of color about.

MONTY

I was meaning to ask you about those. What are they?

AURELIA

Ritual implements from Darkest Peru, or so I was told. There's a bit of a story behind them, if you're interested in hearing it.

SMITHSON

I'm sure we'd be delighted to.

(AURELIA settles into her chair. The others take chairs, too. MONTY places the envelope on his lap.)

AURELIA

In my youth, I had a bit of a falling out with my family.

MONTY

Was it bad?

AURELIA

You might say that. A month later I was in Peru, marrying a six-foot-two barkeep with biceps like melons and a— well, I needn't bore you with the details. The poor man caught malaria within the year and was dead in a fortnight.

SMITHSON

I'm sorry to hear that.

AURELIA

Ancient history. He left me a tavern in Callao, and I spent a happy two years running the place. I don't remember it too well thanks to a fondness for sampling our wares, but towards the end I was the benefactee of another untimely death. This time it was an explorer,

who had arrived on our steps laden with native baskets and his own deadly fever.

MONTY

(Motioning towards the artifacts.)

And the baskets were full of all of this, I suppose?

AURELIA

And more besides – these are just my favorite pieces. The actual collection is many times larger. My cellar's practically overflowing with the stuff.

(MILLICENT enters from stage right, carrying a tray containing a tea set.)

MILLICENT

Your tea's ready, my lady.

AURELIA

Thank you, Millicent. I'll take it here, please.

MILLICENT

Yes, my Lady.

(MILLICENT places the tray on the table next to AURELIA's chair and pours her a steaming cup of tea. She turns towards SMITHSON and MONTY.)

MILLICENT

And can I pour a cup for either of you...

(Beat)

...fine gentlemen?

(SMITHSON fidgets uncomfortably. MONTY, realizing who MILLICENT is, tries to turn on the charm.)

MONTY

But of course, my dear. Miss Haversham, was it?

MILLICENT

(Giggles)

Haversley. But please, sir, call me Millicent.

(She begins to pour MONTY's tea.)

Milk or sugar, sir?

MONTY

Just milk. Thank you, Millicent. And since we're onto first name terms already, Monty's my epithet of choice.

(MILLICENT finishes preparing the drink and places it into MONTY's hands. She bends low as she does so, exposing her cleavage. While she is leaning over MONTY, her angle betrays that the view is clearly for SMITHSON's benefit.)

MILLICENT

Well then, there you are, Monty.

(Still leaning over, she looks up seductively at SMITHSON.)

And can I get anything for you, sir?

SMITHSON

No, thank you, Miss Haversley.

MILLICENT

(Standing up.)

Nothing at all? It's no bother for me, really.

SMITHSON

No, thank you. I'm really not interested.

MILLICENT

Whatever you say, sir.

AURELIA

(Cutting in, exasperated)

Thank you, Millicent. Stop badgering our guests; the deacon said he's not thirsty. Leave us, now. I was in the middle of telling these gentlemen about my stay in the Americas and I've quite lost my train of thought.

MILLICENT

Oh!

(She leans in conspiratorially towards AURELIA, but her voice can still be heard clearly.)

Have you told them about the you-know-what yet?

AURELIA

*(Glancing furtively at SMITHSON and
MONTY.)*

Ah, no. Not yet. Go now, Millicent. I would like to speak to Mr Smithson and Mr Chippentater in private.

MILLICENT

*(Suppressing a smirk and glancing at
Monty)*

Of course, my Lady.

*(MILLICENT exits stage right. As she
leaves, she gives out an audible giggle
at Monty's name.)*

MILLICENT

Chippentater!

AURELIA

My apologies for Millicent. She's an excellent housekeeper, but a bit too spirited for her own good.

MONTY

I thought she seemed a very attractive young woman. You must be proud to have her around.

AURELIA

Attractive? I suppose she must be, if the rumors are to be believed.

MONTY

(Ignoring this.)

So what did she mean by the "you-know-what"?

AURELIA

Oh, who knows what she meant by that. Reminiscing is a waste of a good lifetime, anyway. Who would like to see what I really spend my energy on?

SMITHSON

Definitely.

MONTY

Oh, rather.

AURELIA

(She gets to her feet and walks over to

the covered table. The others stand, too.)

Gentlemen, if you would care to step this way.

(She grasps the sheet.)

I give you...

(Beat)

Neither of you are allergic to gunpowder, are you?

(MONTY and SMITHSON shoot each other a look, and MONTY hides the envelope of photographs behind his back. They turn back to AURELIA and shake their heads.)

AURELIA

Wonderful. Then prepare yourselves, gentlemen, to be completely blown up. Or rather, away. I give you— the greatest model battlefield in the country!

(AURELIA pulls the sheet off of the table, revealing a scale model of central London. The model is focused on Westminster, but the Palace of Westminster itself is only half-completed. Big Ben is standing in its iconic location, but most of the rest of the Palace is missing entirely. Everything else on the table is exquisitely rendered, however. The buildings are carefully handmade from wood, and the blue velvet Thames is populated by a vast array of model warships.)

1:2000 scale! Accurate to the yard! All handcrafted by yours truly, with none of that detritus they make for the general public. And here's the best part...

(She picks up one of the model ships, turns it over in her hands, and flicks a switch on its side. There is a loud bang, and sparks and smoke billow from the side of the ship.)

Simulated cannonade with real gunpowder!

(SMITHSON's jaw drops. He is examining the table closely, clearly impressed.)

SMITHSON

It's amazing! You made it all yourself, you say?

AURELIA

Every matchstick.

SMITHSON

Simply incredible.

(SMITHSON scans the table, and his eyes come to rest on where Parliament should be.)

If you don't mind me saying, my Lady, it does seem to be missing a certain something.

AURELIA

You mean the Palace? I never had quite enough reference material to get that down to my satisfaction. The architecture is so exquisite that I had to make sure that I do it justice. Were you able to get the photographs that I asked for?

SMITHSON

(His face lights up with understanding.)

Oh! Yes, of course. Monty brought them, didn't you, Monty?

MONTY

(Taking the envelope out from behind his back.)

I did indeed.

(He walks over to AURELIA and holds out the envelope towards him, but then he pauses.)

Ah— just to clear something up, you're not planning on using these to blow up Parliament, are you?

AURELIA

(She looks at Monty quizzically, then throws his head back and laughs.)

Not unless it's in 1:2000 form, I assure you. May I see the pictures?

MONTY

Of course.

(He hands over the envelope. AURELIA opens it up and begins perusing the contents.)

AURELIA

Yes, yes. These will do fine. They're just what I was looking for. Thank you, my dear boy— (I'm sure they will be of great use to me.)

ELOISE (Off)

Mother!

AURELIA

Oh, what is it now?

(ELOISE enters stage left. She is carrying a ledger.)

ELOISE

Mother, have you even looked at our records lately? Old Kingsbott is six months behind on rent, the pub has definitely been serving after hours without permission, and I'm fairly certain that even the church is cooking its books.

AURELIA

Eloise, dear, now is really not the time.

ELOISE

Well, if you took even half an interest in the family finances, I think you would find that I would be a little more— (willing to make allowances for your eccentricities.)

AURELIA

Eloise, please! I am entertaining guests.

ELOISE

More like boring them half to death. Some of your friends from the toy club, I take it?

AURELIA

Very droll, my dear, but these men are not more suitors for you to chase from the Hall with your mockery. Mr Smithson you already know, and this other gentleman is his friend Montgomery Chippentater, down from London for the week.

ELOISE

Of course, I should have realized. Good afternoon, deacon, Mr Chippentater.

MONTY

Ms Pennymoor.

SMITHSON

My lady.

ELOISE

I hope you will excuse my discourtesy, I thought you were arriving later. Had I known the truth, I would have made sure not to burden you with the family's financial drama.

SMITHSON

Please, think nothing of it.

ELOISE

You're too kind, Mr Smithson.

(Turns to AURELIA)

Mother, we will discuss these details later. You can't hide from your work forever, you know.

AURELIA

Just watch me. Besides, we always take a loss this time of year. We'll spring back in the autumn months, you'll see. Your problem is that you have no faith in the free market, my dear. These peaks and valleys are all just part of the country's natural economic rhythm.

ELOISE

I hardly think so. Were it not for my efforts, we'd have valleyed our way to bankruptcy years ago.

*(Turning to MONTY and SMITHSON,
smiling.)*

I was hoping to get in a game or two of backgammon before dinner. Would either of you gentlemen care to join me? Smethwick plays such a predictable game.

SMITHSON

I would not miss it for worlds.

(He looks meaningfully at MONTY.)

Monty?

MONTY

Uh— Me too? Worlds and all that.

(SMITHSON winces and glares at MONTY,

but nobody notices.)

ELOISE

Lovely. Are you ready to play now?

MONTY

Oh, yes.

ELOISE

Come along, then. We'll play in the drawing room.

*(MONTY and SMITHSON get to their feet.
MONTY notices SMITHSON glaring at him.)*

MONTY

What? Something eating you, old sprout?

SMITHSON

You know perfectly well— we'll talk later, alright?

MONTY

I'll add it to my calendar. I say, Blackbier, terribly sorry to leave you mid-demonstration, but it looks like Smithson and myself have to retire to shuffle some checkers about a board.

AURELIA

Yes, yes, my boys. I wouldn't dream of keeping you. Perhaps I could show you some more of my models later?

MONTY

Let's count on that. Thanks again for inviting us to stay. It's terribly good of you.

AURELIA

Not a word of it. You two pop along and have fun, now.

(MONTY and SMITHSON nod goodbye and exit stage right. SMETHWICK follows them out, closing the door. AURELIA settles back into her armchair and swirls her tea.)

AURELIA

Ah, to be young again. I'll have to keep an eye on those two.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 4

(The drawing room of Blackbier Hall. Several chairs are arranged around a small table. Beside it is a basket containing a variety of games and entertainments, including a backgammon board.)

(MONTY, SMITHSON, and ELOISE enter stage left.)

ELOISE

Here we are. Please, sit anywhere you'd like.

(The three of them take seats. ELOISE retrieves the backgammon set from the basket and places it on the table.)

ELOISE

Now, who would like to play first?

SMITHSON

Well, I'm not one to brag, but I— (haven't lost a game of Backgammon since I was six.)

ELOISE

Oh! How stupid of me. I'm terribly sorry, Mr Smithson, but I think I left my shawl in the smoking room. Would you be a dear and fetch it for me?

SMITHSON

(Jumping at the opportunity to help out ELOISE.)

But of course! I won't be a moment.

ELOISE

You're so sweet. Thank you so much.

(She gives him a sweet smile. SMITHSON exits stage left, and ELOISE begins to set up the backgammon board.)

ELOISE

I love backgammon, don't you? Such a cerebral game, and yet so brutal. It operates on so many layers. To me, it always seems to speak to the fact that, no matter what life may throw at you, there is always a way to make the best of things. You just have to know how to find the best move, and you'll be able to crush your opponent every time.

MONTY

I completely agree. I must tell you how nice it is to talk to someone who appreciates the subtler things in life. Many of my conversations today have seemed better suited to the bawdy-house than the drawing room.

ELOISE

(Laughs.)

I heard Mother telling you about South America. She's amiable enough, but it's true that she has little sense of decorum. She says that she finds protocol stifling. I suppose that that is part of why she so disregards the welfare of the family estate, spending her attentions on modeling those military trifles instead.

MONTY

At least it's only miniature militias that occupy her. When Smithson told me that I was to bring fifty photographs of the House of Lords to Blackbier Hall, I must say that I half expected your mother to be some sort of hellbent, bomb-waving anarchist mastermind.

(ELOISE finishes setting up the game.)

ELOISE

(Giggling.)

Oh, Monty, you are funny. May I call you Monty?

MONTY

Please do. Everybody does.

ELOISE

Then you must call me Eloise. So tell me, Monty, does a funny man like you have many girlfriends in the city?

MONTY

Well, not really. I don't, that is to say, I, um...

ELOISE

(Talking over MONTY.)

There is no need to be embarrassed, Monty. I am an enlightened woman and an avid feminist; sexuality is hardly a foreign topic to me. Please, speak your mind. Consider me just another of your "bawdy-house buddies."

MONTY

My what?

ELOISE

Blue is just as good a color for language as any other, Monty.

MONTY

I hardly— (think that this is something we need to talk about right now.)

ELOISE

(Cutting off MONTY's words.)

And of course there is no shame in virginity, even these days, although I must say that it is surprising to find, especially in a gentleman of your age and standing.

MONTY

Ms Pennymoor, please! I did not come all the way from London to discuss the intimate details of my private life with you!

ELOISE

No, you didn't. You came to discuss Mr Smithson's private life, didn't you?

MONTY

(Taken aback.)

I don't know what you mean.

ELOISE

Spare me the act, Monty. I know that you're hardly here for a simple week's holiday with an old friend. I've been watching our curate closely for the last few months, and I'm fully aware of what he's got planned.

It's very sweet of you to play along, but don't think for a moment that I'm going to fall for it.

MONTY

(Crestfallen.)

You know everything?

ELOISE

How could I not? They have hardly been subtle about it. Ever since he first arrived, she's been there every Sunday, bobbing about after service, flaunting her fundament and giggling all the way to the public house. And that's nothing compared to how she behaved at the village fête! If you think that I will sit idly by while some upstart deacon romances away my house staff, you're mistaken.

MONTY

(Almost speechless with confusion.)

Oh?

ELOISE

It really is impossible to find good help these days, and while Millicent is undeniably an irrepressible trollop, she is an excellent housekeeper and a capable cook to boot. It will take me months to find someone even half as skilled willing to work for what we pay her. I refuse to see her married off until the proper preparations have been made, understand?

(Beat)

I imagine that Mr Smithson invited you here to distract me while he pursues his clandestine downstairs affair, correct?

MONTY

What? No! That's not it at all.

ELOISE

Oh no? How silly of me to think so. Well, now that I have foolishly given you the idea, let me assure you as to how futile an attempt it would be. I require an experienced hand on my rudder, so to speak. My lovers are all powerful men with powerful desires; I am afraid that you simply would not stand a chance.

MONTY

(Weakly.)

Is that so?

ELOISE

(Laughs.)

You really are a sweet man, Monty. Simple and misled, perhaps, but well-meaning enough. Come here.

(ELOISE kisses MONTY on the lips before he can react. She holds him in place for a second, clearly loving how uncomfortable this must be making him. SMITHSON enters stage left. MONTY catches his eye and goggles. He gesticulates at SMITHSON, trying to make it clear that this kiss was not his idea.)

SMITHSON

Terribly sorry, but I couldn't seem to find it anywhere...

(ELOISE lets go of MONTY and SMITHSON storms out of the room, exiting stage right.)

ELOISE

What on earth was that about?

(There is a peal of thunder from outside.)

MONTY

I imagine we'll find out soon enough.

(Beat)

I don't much like the sound of that thunder.

ELOISE

(Laughs.)

Don't worry, Monty. We'll be safe from the storm in here. I do feel bad for Mr Smithson, though.

MONTY

(Quizzically.)

Oh?

ELOISE

If that storm is as bad as it sounded, the dyke is

sure to overflow. We'll be cut off from the town, and Mr Smithson won't be able to make it to Sunday service.

MONTY

Ah. Knowing Smitty, I have to imagine that will be the least of his worries.

(Sudden blackout to the sounding of a gong.)

SCENE 5

(The dining room of Blackbier Hall. The room is dominated by a long dinner table at which four places are set. Rain can be heard pouring down hard in the background.)

(The gong echoes and dies before the lights come back on. When they do, SMETHWICK is patiently standing by the table. After several seconds have past, AURELIA, MONTY, SMITHSON, and ELOISE begin to file into the room. They greet SMETHWICK and each other with various degrees of enthusiasm and take their seats at the table. As they do so, SMETHWICK pours wine at each place setting.)

AURELIA

Good to see that we're all here at last. What's on the menu tonight, Smethwick?

SMETHWICK

As we are entertaining guests, my lady, Millicent has prepared leek and carrot soup, followed by *tuna au poivre*, *coq au vin*, beef with roasted parsnips, rhubarb tart, and a selection of fresh fruits.

AURELIA

Sounds scrumptious. Send in the first course, won't you?

SMETHWICK

(Bows.)

Right away, my Lady.

(SMETHWICK exits.)

AURELIA

(Leans back in her chair and takes a drink of wine.)

Ah, that's good. So how did the game go? Any record victories I should be made aware of?

MONTY

Eloise beat me three-nothing. Your daughter's an excellent player, my Lady.

(ELOISE smiles at MONTY.)

AURELIA

She certainly is a sneaky one.

(MILLICENT enters with the soup, which she begins placing in front of the diners, starting with AURELIA.)

AURELIA

Thank you, Millicent.

ELOISE

What did you do with your afternoon, Mother?

AURELIA

Oh, this and that. I spent several hours downstairs in my workshop. I must say, Chippentater, those photographs are fantastically helpful. You have a great eye for detail.

SMITHSON

And for beauty, eh, Chippentater?

MONTY

(Warningly)

Smitty...

SMITHSON

(Flashes MONTY a wide, shit-eating grin.)

Yes, Monty?

(Tastes the soup.)

I say, Millicent, this soup is simply outstanding.

MILLICENT

Why, thank you, Mr Smith—

SMITHSON

(Cutting off MILLICENT.)

You've got to try this soup, Monty. We have such similar tastes, you and I. If I like it, I just know that you're going to want to be all over it.

MONTY

Thanks, I've had some. It's lovely, by the way, Millicent.

MILLICENT

(Simpers and curtsies.)

Thank you very much, Monty.

SMITHSON

That's good. It's good that you're enjoying yourself.

(MILLICENT exits.)

AURELIA

I'm sorry, is there something going on that I should know about?

MONTY

No, no, Lady Blackbier. Nothing's the matter, really.

SMITHSON

Oh, yes. Everything's going just swimmingly for you, isn't it, Monty?

MONTY

(Hisses at SMITHSON.)

We'll talk later.

(Smiles at AURELIA.)

Why don't you tell us more about your time in Peru, my lady? Do you know any more about the man who left you your collection?

ELOISE

I'm not sure that that story is appropriate dinner conversation.

AURELIA

(Waves a dismissive hand at ELOISE.)

Mr Chippentater made a perfectly reasonable request, my dear. Who are we to say "No" to our guests?

ELOISE

(Shrugs at MONTY.)

Don't say I didn't warn you.

(MILLICENT and SMETHWICK enter.

MILLICENT starts clearing away soup bowls and replacing them with plates of fish. SMETHWICK moves around the table, refilling wine glasses. Once their respective jobs are completed, the pair exit.)

AURELIA

(Eating while telling her story.)

You already know how I ended up running a tavern, so let's start there. We had a number of rooms upstairs that we would rent out to guests, and in '85 a group of explorer types from the Royal Geographic Society had booked the rooms for the whole summer. They were only planning on actually staying in the city for a couple of weeks at the start and end of their trip; the rest of their time was going to be spent hacking away at the jungle looking for God knows what. I have no idea what they set out to find, but something must have found them in that tropical wasteland.

MONTY

Found them?

AURELIA

That's right. Only one of them ever made it back, you know. Langhorne, I think his name was. He showed back up in Callao a month ahead of schedule, delirious with illness and driven in a donkey cart by a local farmer. He had nothing to show where he had been except for two huge wicker baskets, each of which needed several men to lift it into the tavern.

(MILLICENT and SMETHWICK enter again.

MILLICENT begins replacing the fish with the chicken. SMETHWICK returns to doling out wine.)

ELOISE

Millicent, you've outdone yourself! This *coq au vin* looks simply to die for.

MILLICENT

Thank you, Miss. I've always considered *coq* to be one of my specialties.

(She winks at SMITHSON, who chokes on his food and knocks over his wine glass. ELOISE rolls her eyes and glances at SMETHWICK, who shrugs.)

SMITHSON

(Coughing and catching his breath.)

Dash it all, I'm sorry about this, Lady Blackbier. I must have completely ruined your tablecloth.

AURELIA

Think nothing of it, Smithson. Smethwick will have that out no trouble, won't you, Smethwick? The man's simply a genius when it comes to cleaning up stains.

SMETHWICK

(Refilling SMITHSON's wine glass.)

If you say so, my lady.

(SMETHWICK bows, and he and MILLICENT exit.)

AURELIA

(Tasting the chicken.)

Mm, this is even better than Millicent's usual fare. You boys had better watch out, she must be trying to impress you.

(Chuckles to herself.)

Now, where was I?

MONTY

You'd just had a half-dead Livingstone type dropped off on your doorstep.

AURELIA

Ah, yes. I was never able to find out many details about the expedition. The explorer died a week later, and he was completely insensible the whole time he was sick. Kept on yelling out the names of his dead

colleagues and other rot. It scared a lot of good customers away, let me tell you. Anyway, the poor bugger bought it eventually, so we stuck him in the ground, hauled his loot down to the cellar, and waited for someone from the Society to arrive and lay claim to it. We were still waiting a year later when I received my summons back to England, so I closed up shop, loaded the lot onto the first ship that would take me, and sailed back to England laden with a title, a quarter ton of native treasures, and several of the more interesting venereal diseases.

ELOISE

(Resignedly.)

Good Lord, Mother.

AURELIA

Yes, my dear? You have something to add?

ELOISE

I'm sure that our guests do not want to hear the gritty detail of your sexual experiences at dinner.

AURELIA

I'm sure that the subject is hardly a great scandal them. They've heard the kind of talk that goes on over cocktails at Blacks, after all.

SMITHSON

I'm don't know, my lady. Monty tends to be somewhat more conservative in his conversation.

AURELIA

Is that so? Well, I suppose it takes all sorts. I'm sorry if I offended your sensibilities, Chippentater.

MONTY

It's no trouble at all, Lady Blackbier. Please, don't mind me.

SMITHSON

In fact, the whole sexual area is sort of a no-go for you, isn't it, Monty?

MONTY

(Aghast.)

Smitty!

SMITHSON

That is, unless it's with some other chap's girl, am I right? That gets you off alright, doesn't it, Judas?

AURELIA

My boys, I don't know what— (is troubling you, but I do hope it won't ruin my dinner.)

SMITHSON

(Stands and shouts at MONTY.)

Perfidious little tit!

MONTY

Dash it, Smitty, not now! Let me expl—

SMITHSON

Stuck-up, unsexed boy-man!

(Shocked pause.)

MONTY

Right, that's it. You let me talk right now, Smithson, or I'll, I'll...

SMITHSON

Oh, to hell with you. If anyone needs me, I'll be in the smoking room.

(SMITHSON storms out.)

MONTY

I am so very sorry, Lady Blackbier.

AURELIA

Don't be, Monty, don't be. There's really no shame in being a virgin these days. I hear that it's actually highly desirable in some circles.

ELOISE

That's what I told him!

MONTY

What? No, I meant about Smitty!

AURELIA

What, Smithson? Clearly he has a lot on his mind. The religious life must be tough on a man, after all.

(Pause.)

Here, Chippentater, why don't you go and find him? If the dyke overflows we'll be stuck here for the next day at least. I don't want any bad blood spoiling our week's fun!

MONTY

Thanks. I'm terribly sorry about this. We must have completely ruined your dinner.

AURELIA

Not at all, dear boy, not at all. Go on, now.

(MONTY nods and exits.)

AURELIA

Just leaves more for us. Smethwick!

(SMETHWICK enters.)

SMETHWICK

My lady?

AURELIA

Bring the wine back in, there's a good chap.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 6

(The smoking room of Blackbier Hall. The fire has burned low, and it fills the room with a dark, warm glow.)

(SMITHSON is slumped over in one of the armchairs. A bottle of brandy is clasped loosely in one of his hands, and the other limply holds a glass that he drains and refills periodically. The fight seems to have gone out of him; it has been replaced with booze.)

(The door opens at stage left and MONTY pokes his head into the room.)

MONTY

Smitty?

SMITHSON

Go away. I have nothing to say to you.

MONTY

That's as may be, but I still need to talk to you.

SMITHSON

I said go away, you rat-faced little sneak. You're disrupting a vital scientific experiment. I'm attempting to replace all of my bodily fluids with alcohol.

(MONTY opens the door all the way and cautiously steps into the room.)

MONTY

Can I at least take a drink with you, then?

SMITHSON

If you must. I suppose it can't really do more damage than you've already done, you back-stabbing, duplicitous son of a snake.

MONTY

(Walks over to the drinks cabinet and pours himself a stiff whiskey.)

Would you like me to explain myself, or would you prefer to keep slandering me instead?

(MONTY sits down in the armchair next to SMITHSON's.)

SMITHSON

I'll go with the slander, if you don't mind. Or better yet, if you do. You... bastard.

MONTY

Ha. You're getting sloppy.

SMITHSON

(Gesticulating at MONTY with the bottle.)

No, you're getting sloppy.

(He sloshes brandy down his front.)

Oh, bugger...

(Pause.)

(The two men avoid eye contact with each other for several silent seconds.)

MONTY

I didn't kiss her, you know.

SMITHSON

Bollocks. I know what I saw.

MONTY

That's not what I meant. I mean, she kissed me. I didn't get much say in the matter.

SMITHSON

Are you trying to make me feel better? I don't think it's working.

MONTY

Quiet, you ass. You're drunk.

SMITHSON

You're ugly.

MONTY

(Ignoring SMITHSON.)

I think it was a sympathy kiss. She laughed and called me simple beforehand – that's not a great omen when romance is concerned.

SMITHSON

A sympathy kiss? Why would she sympathize with you?

MONTY

We were talking about my... you know. Sexual inexperience.

SMITHSON

(Laughs.)

What the hell were you talking about that for?

MONTY

I don't know, she brought it up!

SMITHSON

And how did she know to? It's not like you go around with a great sign on your back reading "I am a virgin."

MONTY

Women's intuition? Not that it matters anymore. I'm sure the whole bloody village knows about my sexual non-history after your little outburst in the dining room.

(Pause.)

SMITHSON

So you weren't trying to seduce Eloise behind my back?

MONTY

No! Of course not. Of all the women for me to choose, why would I pick one that I am expressly supposed to be setting you up with?

SMITHSON

I don't know, I just... I thought... Christ, Monty, I'm sorry. I really wronged you back there, didn't I?

MONTY

Forget about it. Water under the bridge, old bean. But we have a problem.

SMITHSON

What?

MONTY

Eloise has pegged on to why I'm here. Sort of, at least. She realizes that I'm running assistance for you.

SMITHSON

But?

MONTY

But, she thinks you're trying to elope with Millicent.

SMITHSON

What?

MONTY

I'm not joking. She thinks you're trying to make off

with her prize housekeeper, and that you've invited me along to distract her while you do so.

SMITHSON

You're pulling my leg.

MONTY

Not a bit of it.

SMITHSON

(Laughs.)

Well, this is alright! So what if she thinks I'm trying to ruffle Miss Haversley's voluminous skirts? I just need to step up my game and show her otherwise.

(Gets rather uneasily to his feet, and declares triumphantly:)

You mark my words, Chippentater! Within the week, Eloise Pennymoor will be changing her name to Eloise Pennymoor-Smithson-to-be!

(AURELIA enters from stage left. She wanders over towards MONTY and SMITHSON, swaying slightly as she does so. She has been hitting the wine hard in the others' absence.)

AURELIA

Well, well, well. What are we talking about in here, then?

(SMITHSON falls back into his armchair in shock. MONTY busies himself with his whiskey.)

SMITHSON

Nothing! Nothing at all, Lady Blackbier!

AURELIA

Nonsense. I distinctly heard the telltale bombast of bold proclamations coming from this room.

SMITHSON

You must have been mistaken, my Lady. Perhaps it was the next room over?

AURELIA

(Quizzically.)

The coal cellar? I hardly think that likely.

*(She notices that MONTY and SMITHSON
have finished their drinks.)*

Oh, my dears! Your glasses are empty! Here, allow me to rectify this terrible situation for you.

(AURELIA busies herself preparing three cocktails. As her back is turned, MONTY and SMITHSON frantically gesture and mouth words to each other, trying to establish what they are going to tell her. AURELIA finishes making the drinks, hands them out, and slumps into her own armchair.)

MONTY

Thanks.

SMITHSON

Thanks.

AURELIA

You're most welcome. Frankly, I'm just happy to not be drinking alone for once. Now, what were we talking about?

SMITHSON

Monty was just telling me that— (he recently won a tennis tournament in London.)

MONTY

Mr Smithson would like to court your daughter, Lady Blackbier.

(SMITHSON stares at MONTY in horror.)

AURELIA

Does he, now?

(Turns to SMITHSON.)

Is this true, deacon?

SMITHSON

(SMITHSON nods, still in shock.)

Yes, my Lady.

AURELIA

Hrm. Good thing, too. I wish you the best of luck in

your endeavors. She can be a tough nut to crack, that girl.

SMITHSON

You're giving me your permission?

AURELIA

Why not? You're a delightful young man with an excellent taste in clubs, and, as I understand it, you are financially very well off indeed. I can't say that I understand your choice of profession, but at least you have one, which you can't say for many eligible bachelors these days.

SMITHSON

Why, this is wonderful! I really can't thank you enough.

AURELIA

Oh, I think you'll find that you can. You'll have to watch yourself, you know. Eloise has seen her share of suitors, and has sent more than one of them away from the Hall in tears at the end of a weekend.

SMITHSON

Weak men, no doubt, undeserving of your daughter's fierce affections.

AURELIA

One was a captain in the Royal Marines. He left some scribbled excuse in his room and disappeared in the middle of the night. We never heard from him again.

SMITHSON

Doubtless he was later court-martialed for his inveterate cowardice.

(Beat)

You know, I feel that everything is going to work out for Douglas C. Smithson from now on!

AURELIA

That it is! Here, let's toast to it.

(AURELIA attempts to climb out of her chair, but she lacks the coordination and falls back into the cushion with a thud. MONTY gets up and motions for

AURELIA to stay seated.)

MONTY

Don't worry, my Lady. I'll pour the drinks.

(MONTY heads to the drinks cabinet and does just that.)

AURELIA

Bah! To hell with all this claustrophobic "my Lady" nonsense. My name's Aurelia, boys, Lily if you're feeling close. I was Aurelia to my mother, I was Aurelia to my husbands, and by God I'll be Aurelia to Saint Peter when I have the pleasure.

SMITHSON

(Slumping to one side, and limply flailing his empty glass about.)

Here, here. Here's to Aurelia.

(MONTY hands out drinks and raises his own glass into the air.)

MONTY

And here's to Smitty's chances with her daughter! Cheers!

AURELIA

Cheers!

SMITHSON

Cheers!

(The three drink deeply, draining their glasses.)

AURELIA

Wonderful! Just like at Blacks, eh, boys?

MONTY

Just so, Lily. You can really take your drink with the best of them!

AURELIA

Glad to hear it!

SMITHSON

You'll have to come with us to the club one day.

You'd love it.

AURELIA

(Laughs.)

I doubt they'd go for that. You know, Smithson, you're a strange one for a village priest. How'd you get into that line, I wonder?

(MONTY stands up a little unsteadily. He turns again to the drinks cabinet and performs the necessary duties for another round of drinks.)

SMITHSON

Well, that's an interesting question, Aurelia.

(He settles deeper into his chair, affecting the pose of a serious raconteur.)

See, it all started a few years, back, when— (I was just getting back from a delightful trip to Cannes.)

(AURELIA snores loudly. MONTY laughs out loud.)

MONTY

Modern audiences, eh? I don't suppose she'll be needing this, then.

(MONTY pours the contents of one of the glasses into the other two, and lays it down. He hands one of the drinks to SMITHSON and sits back down in his seat.)

The dear old fish has a point, though. What on earth did drive you into the clergy?

SMITHSON

(Sighs.)

Look at us, Monty. We're approaching thirty, we've no real skills, and we've done nothing good in our lives. I know I've spent all my best years chasing flower girls. Christ only knows what you've been doing.

MONTY

Being chased by flower girls. And I'm quite good at tennis.

SMITHSON

See? A man needs more to life than that. He needs more... Stability. I used to live life dependent on handouts from relatives, speeding between exotic and relaxing locales, and generally enjoying each day as it came. But I never had any idea what the next day would bring, never had any idea where my allegiances lay.

MONTY

Alright, I understand that. But why a priest? Of all the professions available to a wealthy, educated London socialite, why go into the church? If anything, it seems like the farthest from your interests. It actively condemns some of them.

SMITHSON

I—

(He considers this.)

I don't really know. It just seemed like something to do, I suppose. I've spent so much time in the country, and it seems like you have the, well—

(Beat.)

I don't want to say the poor, but, you know, butchers, bakers, tinkers, that sort of thing. And then you have the toffs, and the servants, and then...

MONTY

The church?

SMITHSON

(Lamely.)

The church. Like I said, it just seemed like something I could do. You know, village fêtes, fundraisers, that sort of thing. I knew those.

MONTY

And the sermons? The restraint? The religion?

SMITHSON

I sort of thought that those would come with the territory. Two years of seminary school had to teach me something, right?

MONTY

Apparently not. Still, you're alright, Smitty. You're a slanderer and a degenerate, but you're my

friend, and you're doing alright.
(*Raises his glass.*)
Here's to you, Smitty.

SMITHSON

Cheers!

(*They drink.*)

SMITHSON

How about another?

MONTY

Don't mind if I do.

(*Blackout.*)

SCENE 7

(SMITHSON's bedroom. It is a spacious second-story room, with a four-poster bed, several large dressers, a writing desk, a full-length mirror, and a small balcony. One of SMITHSON's suits is hanging in plain sight, and a ceremonial sword and shield are mounted above the desk. The bed's curtains are drawn back. There is a single door to the room located stage right, and a largish rug has been placed between the door and the bed.)

(MILLICENT is standing in front of the mirror. She is wearing a loose nightgown that shows off her figure. Her hair has been let down – she is dressed as the seductress.)

(*MILLICENT brushes her hair smooth as she watches herself in the mirror. Satisfied with her appearance, she looks around the room for a moment before settling down on the bed in a*

come-hither pose. She waits for a few seconds, then begins to fidget. She adjusts her dress around her bosom and smooths down her front. After a several more seconds of waiting, MONTY and SMITHSON become audible down the corridor outside of the room. MILLICENT cranes her head in their direction to listen.)

MONTY (Off)

And then you had to hide the goat in your room for the rest of the weekend!

(MONTY and SMITHSON both laugh. Their voices are growing louder. It is clear from their tones that both men are very drunk.)

SMITHSON (Off)

Old Foghorn would have thrown the book at me if he'd ever found out. But really, it doesn't even come close to that time with you and that girl from Brighton!

MONTY (Off)

Lord! That one who wouldn't leave me alone, but kept insisting that I teach her nephew the viola? Don't remind me.

(They laugh again. They are now right outside the door. MILLICENT gets off of the bed and tip-toes over to the door.)

MONTY (Off)

Say, Smitty, isn't this your room?

SMITHSON (Off)

By jove, you're right! Well, then, Monty, this is where I say good night.

MONTY (Off)

Good night, then, Smitty. Need I say how brilliant it is to see you again?

(MILLICENT leans in close to the door to hear what the others are saying.)

SMITHSON (Off)

I was thinking just the same thing. Good night, Monty.

MONTY (Off)

I'll see you tomorrow. Good night, sweet prince, and so on.

(SMITHSON opens his bedroom door, and his head becomes visible. As he does so, the back of the door collides with the top of MILLICENT's skull with an audible thump. She falls backwards onto the rug, unconscious.)

SMITHSON

Ah! Monty!

(MONTY steps towards SMITHSON, becoming visible.)

MONTY

Smitty?

(He looks through the doorway.)

Ah! What happened?

SMITHSON

It's Millicent! I— I think I killed her! Monty, I've slain a housemaid!

MONTY

Well, don't tell the whole Hall! Come in, quick, and lock the door.

(MONTY and SMITHSON enter the room and close the door behind them.)

SMITHSON

Oh, Jesus. Jeeesus. Of all the confounded— What am I going to do? What was she even doing here?

(Pause. MONTY examines the fallen MILLICENT.)

MONTY

Waiting for you, by the looks of it.

SMITHSON

Stupid, stupid, stupid! What the hell was she thinking?

MONTY

I would have thought that you of all people would—
(know that.)

SMITHSON

Shut up, Monty! For once in your life, shut up! She knew I wasn't interested! I'm a God damn deacon! People can't go waiting about in my bedroom at all hours! And now she's— And now— Oh, hell!

MONTY

Wait a second, Smitty. Don't go to pieces just yet — I've had an idea. Grab that other side of the rug.

(MONTY bends over and picks up the side of the rug closest to him. SMITHSON clasps the other side, and the two men lift it up enough to be able to slide MILLICENT along the floor.)

MONTY

All right, bring her over to me.

(They walk a few steps into the room, bringing MILLICENT with them.)

MONTY

Wait, no. Towards you.

(They step back towards the door.)

MONTY

No, no, sorry. I had it right the first time.

(MONTY tries to step back into the room, but SMITHSON isn't moving.)

SMITHSON

I'm sorry, Monty, but just what the hell do you think you're doing?

MONTY

I—

(Defeated.)

I'm not really sure. I thought that once we had her lifted, the rest would just come naturally.

(They drop the rug to the floor.)

I'm sorry, Smitty. What are we going to do now?

SMITHSON

Let's roll her under the bed. We're in no state to dispose of a body right now. We'll wait until morning, then get rid of her once we've sobered up.

MONTY

You make it sound so easy.

SMITHSON

Maybe it is! People kill each other all of the time, and most of them don't even have the benefit of a university education. We'll just—

(He thinks.)

I've got it! Grab that sword.

MONTY

(Pointing to the weapon mounted above the desk.)

What, this sword?

SMITHSON

Yes, that sword! Do you see any other swords in here?

(MONTY gives the blade a tug, and it comes away in his hands.)

MONTY

Alright, I've got it. Now what?

SMITHSON

Now you give the corpse a good chopping.

MONTY

I what?

SMITHSON

I'm afraid of blood! I'd be no help at all at dismemberment.

MONTY

(Placing the sword on the bed.)

Why do you want to lop bits off of Millicent in the

first place? It's a horrible thing to suggest.

SMITHSON

Think about it, Monty! How are we supposed to smuggle a full-grown woman out of the house undetected? At least this way she'll be portable. We'll hide her in a suitcase, take her out to the moorland and sink her in a bog. Or we could roll her into the dyke, or— (find some local dogs and leave her for them.)

MONTY

You're the one who's not thinking! How many people are staying in this house?

SMITHSON

Six! No, wait... Five.

MONTY

That's right. And who do you think they'll blame when half the serving staff turns up missing tomorrow morning?

SMITHSON

(Realizing the answer. He moans.)

Oh, God! Christ, you bastard! Why? Why did this have to happen now?

(He grabs MONTY and shakes him.)

I can't go to jail, Monty! I'll lose everything! I'm not built for prison. They'll grind me into dogmeat and sell me to the gypsies! I just can't do it!

MONTY

Then there's only one thing to do. I'll have to take the fall.

SMITHSON

What? You'd do that for me?

MONTY

I have to. Smitty, you have a bright future ahead of you — wealth, the Church, a beautiful wife! And what do I have? Only my friends, only you. I can't let you throw that all away!

SMITHSON

That's beautiful. You're beautiful, Monty!

(He throws his arms around MONTY, close

to tears.)

Thank you! Thank you so much.

(He wipes his face.)

But how will you do it?

MONTY

We'll swap rooms. You sleep in my bed, and I'll take yours. When Smethwick finds me here in the morning and sees that we were so stone drunk we couldn't find our own rooms, he'll have to conclude that I accidentally slaughtered the maid in some sort of boozy fugue.

SMITHSON

Yes, yes. It's perfect!

(He clasps MONTY's shoulder.)

You're a good man, Chippentater.

MONTY

Not at all. It's the least I can do.

SMITHSON

This is where I say good night, then.

MONTY

And good-bye. The next time you see me, I'll be a confessed criminal.

SMITHSON

Don't, Monty! I can't bear it.

(Pause.)

I'll never be able to thank you enough.

MONTY

Just promise me that you'll write. Tell me of your beautiful life with Eloise outside of prison! That alone will sustain me.

SMITHSON

Oh, Monty!

(He pulls MONTY to him and sobs drunkenly into his shoulder. MONTY pats his back gently.)

MONTY

It's alright. Everything will be alright. Now get off to bed, and remember: you don't know that this

happened.

SMITHSON

*(Peeling himself off of MONTY and
drying his eyes.)*

You're right, of course. You always are.

MONTY

Yes, yes. Now get out of here before you wake up the whole Hall.

*(SMITHSON nods and opens the door.
Before he steps through it, he turns.)*

SMITHSON

Monty?

MONTY

Yes, Smitty?

SMITHSON

I love you.

MONTY

Out!

*(SMITHSON closes the door behind him.
He can be heard walking up the corridor
to MONTY's room. We hear the door open
and close, then silence. MONTY busies
himself with taking off his jacket and
loosening his tie.)*

MONTY

What a character...

*(He slumps down on the bed and looks
down at MILLICENT.)*

Oh, Millicent. What are we going to do with you? Ah, well. Can't make an omelette...

*(He falls backwards onto the bed. His
eyes begin to droop.)*

You did the right thing, Chippentater. Smitty will have a long, happy life thanks to you. Yes, indeed. The right thing...

*(MONTY begins to snore. They are loud
snores, drunken and throaty. Time*

passes – just how much, it is impossible to tell. It could be anything from a few seconds to several hours. It is still dark out, and MILLICENT begins to stir. She slowly lifts her head from the floor and winces, clasping a hand to her temple. She lifts herself shakily off of the floor and begins to cross towards the door. Halfway there a thought strikes her and she turns to see MONTY lying on the bed. She considers this for a moment, shakes her head in confusion, and opens the door to leave. She has barely stepped through the door when she screams.)

MILLICENT

Aaah!

(MONTY wakes with a start.)

MONTY

Huh? Wha?

(He blinks and sees MILLICENT.)

Millicent! What are you— What—

(Beat)

What's the matter?

(MILLICENT staggers into the room and collapses onto her knees. MONTY climbs off of the bed to grab her around the shoulders.)

MILLICENT

Oh, Mr Chippentater! It was awful, like something out of a nightmare!

MONTY

What was? Millicent, what did you see?

MILLICENT

I don't hardly know! It looked at me with dead eyes and walked off down the hall. It came out of your room, Mr Chippentater!

MONTY

Smitty! You stay here, Millicent. I'll be back in a moment.

(MONTY runs out through the door. We hear him make his way down the corridor and open the door to the room where SMITHSON was sleeping.)

MONTY (Off)

Aah! Jesus! Fuck!

(There is the sound of footsteps approaching, as AURELIA comes up the corridor.)

AURELIA (Off)

Monty! What on Earth is the matter?

MONTY (Off)

Lily! Oh, God, Lily! It's awful! It's...
Smitty's... I can't begin to describe it, it's too
terrible. You'll have to see for yourself.

(More footsteps as MONTY leads AURELIA into his room.)

AURELIA (Off)

Oh my Christ! What happened to his head?

(Blackout.)

ACT II

SCENE 1

(MONTY's bedroom. It is laid out similarly to SMITHSON's room from the last scene, but is made almost unrecognizable by the liberal amounts of blood that paint the room a deep red. The bed is completely soaked with a dark crimson pool centered on SMITHSON's inert body. He is lying faceup on the bedspread in his bloodstained nightclothes, with a gaping gash visible in his throat. Some more blood has splattered onto the floor and walls. Some of it has formed natural drips and pools, but large amounts of blood have been intentionally smeared to form clear patterns: swirls, stars, and cryptic, vicious-looking runes.)

(MONTY and AURELIA stand in the center of the room, examining SMITHSON on the bed. MONTY is still half-dressed from dinner, but AURELIA is wearing her nightclothes.)

AURELIA

Is he dead?

MONTY

I'd say that's a safe bet, seeing how most of his blood has been used for a kind of post-Impressionist artwork. Smitty was always a fan, but I never suspected that he was this dedicated to the movement.
(MONTY checks SMITHSON's pulse anyway.)
Not a beat. He's dead as a doornail. Oh, Smitty. What happened to you?

(MILLICENT's voice can be heard coming from the corridor.)

MILLICENT (Off)

Lady Blackbier? Monty? What's going on? Is Mr Smithson alright?

AURELIA

Don't come in, my dear! This is not a sight for young eyes.

(Too late — MILLICENT is already rounding the doorway; she sees the bed's contents and shrieks.)

MILLICENT

No! Douglas!

(She collapses into a chair beside the door and starts sobbing.)

AURELIA

Douglas?

ELOISE

Mother? What's going on?

AURELIA

Eloise! Don't come in, I don't want you to see this.

(ELOISE enters and gasps.)

ELOISE

My God! Is that the deacon?

AURELIA

I don't know why I bother. Yes, my dear, I'm afraid it is indeed our beloved and now sorrily belated curate.

(MILLICENT wails, and ELOISE bends down to comfort her. SMETHWICK enters.)

SMETHWICK

Is something the matter, my Lady?

AURELIA

Smethwick! Just the man I wanted to see. I'm sorry to say that something is indeed the matter; Mr Smithson has met with a terrible accident!

MONTY

Accident? His throat's been hacked open!

AURELIA

So this wasn't an accident?

MONTY

Not unless you can explain how Smitty managed to scribble all over the curtains with his own blood. Lily, this is murder!

AURELIA

Then there's no time to lose! Smethwick!

SMETHWICK

Yes, my Lady?

AURELIA

Telephone the police at once!

SMETHWICK

Of course, my Lady.

(SMETHWICK bows and exits. MONTY starts tugging at SMITHSON's side, trying to extricate something from underneath him.)

AURELIA

What are you doing, man?

MONTY

There's something stuck under his—

(He turns to AURELIA and holds out a small gold disk.)

What's this?

(AURELIA goes pale.)

AURELIA

Why, I've never seen anything like it before!

MONTY

Is that so? Because it strikes me that this little disk looks awfully similar to all of those trinkets in your Peruvian "collection."

AURELIA

Just what are you implying? I've got crates upon crates of that junk! I'm telling you, I've never seen it before!

(SMETHWICK enters again.)

SMETHWICK

My Lady?

AURELIA

Smethwick! Thank God you're back, Mr Chippentater is—
(making terrible accusations against me.)

SMETHWICK

Lady Blackbier. I'm sorry, but the phone line is dead, and the dyke has broken its banks, blocking the road into the village. We will not be able to contact the constabulary tonight.

AURELIA

The line's dead? Do you think it was the storm, or...
(She trails off.)

MONTY

Or someone cut it on purpose. Face the facts, Lily, Smitty was murdered!

AURELIA

But who would do such a thing? There's only the six of us at the Hall... No, wait. Five. Unless...

MONTY

Unless what? What aren't you telling me?

AURELIA

It's nothing.

MONTY

Nothing? It's nothing? Smitty's dead, someone's been fingerpainting on the walls with his vital bits, the phone's been cut, and you think that you can hold out on us? Who do you think you are?

AURELIA

But it can't be important! It's impossible! Utter nonsense!

MONTY

What is? What are you hiding, Blackbier?

(AURELIA slumps into a chair.)

AURELIA

There might be a little more to the story behind those artifacts than I told you.

(ELOISE shoots SMETHWICK a meaningful look.)

MONTY

Go on.

AURELIA

You see... The thing is... They might be a little, you know. Cursed.

MONTY

Cursed? Cursed how?

AURELIA

Just... Cursed. Like your regular, garden curse, I suppose. A hex on your family, stalked by a vengeful spirit, that sort of thing.

MONTY

A vengeful spirit?

AURELIA

It's all nonsense, though! Native superstition is all.

MILLICENT

I've seen it.

(Everyone turns to face her.)

AURELIA

You've what?

ELOISE

Don't get excited, dear. You've had a shock.

MILLICENT

The spirit's real, I tell you, real! I saw it walking the halls this very night! Rattling with gold and

stinking of death, it carried a blade a foot long and glared at me with empty eyes!

ELOISE

I think we'd better get you out of here, Milly.
Mother? Can we continue this conversation downstairs?

AURELIA

I think that would be wise. This grim scene isn't helping any of our attitudes, and we'll be safer downstairs, anyway.

MONTY

Regardless of what may be prowling the corridors.

AURELIA

Just so. Everyone?

(She motions towards the door.)

Stay together now. If there is some sort of sanguinary specter out for blood tonight, I see no reason to make its job any easier for it.

(All exit.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(The empty smoking room of Blackbier Hall. The fire has burned out hours ago, and no one has bothered to close the curtains.)

(AURELIA, MONTY, and MILLICENT enter from stage right. MONTY helps MILLICENT into one of the window seats.)

AURELIA

Alright, let's continue. Are we all here?

MONTY

Not at all. Lily, where are Smethwick and your daughter?

(A scream comes from stage right.)

AURELIA

Eloise!

(ELOISE bursts through the door at stage right, panting and clutching a blood-soaked black jacket – SMETHWICK's.)

ELOISE

It's real!

AURELIA

What?

ELOISE

The spirit! It's real! And, oh, Mother! It got Smethwick!

AURELIA

Sit down, Eloise. Rest yourself, and tell us what happened.

(AURELIA guides ELOISE to an armchair, which she takes a seat in. MONTY locks the door behind her.)

ELOISE

That... *thing* grabbed me from behind as we were crossing the foyer. Smethwick tried to tackle it, but it had a knife, and—

(She sobs.)

It dragged him into the night. I tried to hold onto him, but...

(She waves SMETHWICK's bloody jacket.)

AURELIA

He died a hero. It's what he would have wanted. At least I think it is. He never talked much, did he?

(ELOISE glares at him.)

AURELIA

Sorry, dear, sorry. I know you were attached to the chap.

MONTY

So that seals it, doesn't it? Someone or something is skulking about the Hall and picking us off one by one. What are we going to do?

MILLICENT

I think we should try to kill it. There are still guns in the Hall, aren't they, my Lady?

AURELIA

No one's been hunting for years! I don't even know where they are now, let alone if they'd still work. Oh, if only Smethwick were here, I'm sure he'd reveal that he's been cleaning and oiling the damn things for the last half-decade. It would be just like him.

MONTY

You had better tell us everything you know about this curse. If we know what we're up against, perhaps we can work out some way to stop it before it slaughters the lot of us.

AURELIA

Where to begin? The dying explorer, Langhorne, he wasn't insensible the whole time. Between his bouts of madness, he was able to tell me some of the details of his expedition.

MONTY

Go on.

AURELIA

They were on assignment to march as far as they could through the Amazon and investigate the ancient cultures that had once made their homes there. But trained explorers and archaeologists though they were, nothing could have prepared them for what they found on the wind-blasted and sun-bleached mountaintops of the Peruvian Andes.

MILLICENT

What was it?

AURELIA

Temples. Altars, carved out of the very rock. And in them, riches beyond their wildest imaginings. Apparently the fortune that Langhorne managed to carry

back was only a tiny fraction of the full haul. But in addition to the gold, there were... Other things.

MONTY

What, Lily? What did they find?

(Something moves past one of the windows outside of the Hall. While it is only a flash of movement, it is enough for us to recognize the silhouette of the SPIRIT.)

AURELIA

Bodies. Dead bodies, dried by the cold and perfectly preserved. Men and women, but mostly children. Children of eight and nine, gutted and cut apart, some of them still pinned to the rock with the blades that ended their lives.

MONTY

Good God!

ELOISE

Why would someone do that?

AURELIA

Among the treasures they found parchments: crumbling things written in charcoal and blood. One of the men was an expert in hieroglyphs, and he was able to divine some meaning from them. These people, they believed that their gods were angry, vengeful for some ancient indiscretion. They thought that unless they sacrificed something pure and virginal, they would have terrible punishments reaped upon them.

MONTY

And so they murdered their own children?

AURELIA

As far as they knew, they had no choice.

MILLICENT

What a terrible way to live!

AURELIA

It gets worse. To hear Langhorne tell it, those same gods of the mountains, they were bound to the earthly

relics of those people. He said that once they had loaded their mules with treasure for the return journey, they never had a moment's peace or safety. He said that they could hear something out there in the jungle, a dark presence that brought death and calamity to the party wherever they went. Langhorne was the only one left when he stumbled into that farmer's plot, and he had one foot well into the grave already. Until the end, he maintained that he could still feel it, that even in Callao he could hear the spirit breathing outside his door at night, draining his life away for what they had done. When I think about how we found him that last morning—

(AURELIA shudders.)

His lifeless face was contorted in such an image of terror as I have ever seen. It has haunted me for my whole life, though I have done everything in my power to forget it.

MONTY

But none of these men were found stabbed to death, throats slit, or with pictographs carved into their chests?

(The SPIRIT appears again, rising slowly at the window behind MILLICENT. It stares through the window with its empty eyes and waits.)

AURELIA

Not that I remember. But Langhorne was half-mad at the best of times. There could have been plenty that he left out of his tale.

MONTY

So what are we dealing with here? I mean, none of us has been taken ill with jungle fever or driven into a lake of piranhas or anything. Our spirit has contented itself with direct physical violence, grabbing its victims and—

(He sees the SPIRIT through the window.)

Millicent, look out!

(His warning comes too late. The SPIRIT breaks down the window and wraps

its arms around MILLICENT, dragging her towards it. MILLICENT and ELOISE scream, while AURELIA stands dumbstruck. MONTY moves on instinct, grabbing the closest weapon at hand: the model of Big Ben that lies on the table in the center of the room. He swings the building at the SPIRIT's head. It hits the SPIRIT hard in the mask, and explodes with a crack as it does so. The SPIRIT releases its grip on MILLICENT and falls backwards out of the window, while MONTY clutches at his burnt hand.)

MONTY

Ow! God, Lily! Why was Big Ben packed full of gunpowder?

(His eyes widen.)

You are a bomber, aren't you! I'm trapped in the haunted headquarters of a dangerous anarchist!

AURELIA

What? No! The powder's just for effect! I told you, my models are the most comprehensively designed in all of Britain!

ELOISE

Shut up, both of you! Where's the spirit? Did you kill it?

(MONTY looks out of the window.)

MONTY

Nothing there — it must have got away. But that mask felt solid enough. Divine agent or not, I think it would have left something behind if we had killed it.

(MILLICENT wraps her arms around MONTY's midriff.)

Eh?

MILLICENT

Monty, you saved me from the phantom! I can never repay you!

MONTY

(Trying to pry himself free.)

It's fine, really. I'm sure anyone else would have done the same in my situation.

MILLICENT

But they didn't! It was only you, Monty! Only you were brave enough, only you were smart enough and quick enough and sexy enough to think to fight off the spirit!

MONTY

Really, it was nothing. You don't owe me anything.

MILLICENT

Owe you? Monty, I love you!

(MONTY manages to pull himself free of MILLICENT's grip.)

MONTY

Oh, not again, not now. Listen, I'm flattered, I really am, but perhaps now is not the right time? We're all under a lot of stress, and we do have a serial killing spirit of destruction to deal with.

ELOISE

So what do we do now? Fight it off? Each grab a handful of volatile models, pick a corner, and hope we survive until morning?

AURELIA

But I've got a limited number of miniatures, and since we don't have any proper weapons...

MONTY

(His face lights up with inspiration.)

But we do! There's a sword just upstairs in Smitty's bedroom! If we could just fetch that, we'd have a way to defend ourselves!

AURELIA

Brilliant! But how are we going to get up there safely?

ELOISE

Yes, we're in enough danger together down here. Are you seriously suggesting that we head back upstairs?

(She begins to choke up.)

After what happened to poor Smethwick?

MONTY

I'll just have to chance it. Lily, you stay here and protect the girls!

(AURELIA salutes.)

AURELIA

Yes, sir!

MONTY

I'll be back in a jiffy.

(He opens the door at stage left and looks around.)

Alright, the coast is clear. Everybody stay safe, now. We'll get through this, you'll see.

(MONTY runs out stage left.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(SMITHSON's bedroom.)

(MONTY bashes the door open and sprints inside, breathing heavily. He glances around the room to make sure that it is empty, and then grabs the sword from the desk. As he is lifting the weapon, MILLICENT enters and locks the door behind her.)

MILLICENT

Are we alone?

MONTY

Millicent! What are you doing here?

MILLICENT

I was worried about you going out on your own! Since the spirit seems to target us when we're alone, I thought that I should follow you and make sure that you were safe.

MONTY

That's very sweet of you, but it was also very foolish. What if you had been attacked while you were following me? I wouldn't have known to protect you in time.

(MILLICENT steps towards MONTY.)

MILLICENT

You're so sweet. But don't you think you've protected me enough tonight? Maybe it's time for me to look after you in return.

(She pushes herself up against MONTY and begins to move him in the direction of the bed.)

MONTY

Ah, really, it's fine. You don't need to do anything on my account.

(He yelps as MILLICENT shoves him backwards onto the bed.)

MILLICENT

Oh, I know I don't have to. I want to.

(She climbs on top of MONTY, pinning him to the bed. She starts closing the curtains of the four-poster, obscuring everything except her and MONTY's silhouettes.)

MONTY

Don't you think we should be getting back to the others soon? I was meant to get them the sword, and there is the whole general mortal peril thing going on, you know.

MILLICENT

(Tugging at MONTY's shirt.)

Oh, Monty! You're so brave, trying to look after us. And you're so strong, too. Let's get a better look at those muscles...

MONTY

Well, I have always considered myself something of a

sportsman. I swim at the club twice a week, you know, and — dash it all, Millicent! We have to get back. You're being very distracting.

MILLICENT

Is that so? You think that I'm... Distracting?

(She pulls off her nightgown, revealing her undergarments to MONTY. She leans over MONTY and begins to kiss him.)

MONTY

Millicent, please! Restrain yourself! Think of your dignity, your honor! Think of England!

MILLICENT

Oh, I wouldn't worry about that.

(She pushes the two of them down onto the bed, obscuring their shapes from clear view.)

MONTY

(Protesting.)

Ah! What are you— ah! Aah!

(Beginning to enjoy himself.)

Ah! Ah! Aah!

(Another shadow begins to rise up inside of the curtains. It looms over the moaning forms of MILLICENT and MONTY, bristling with feathers and jewelry; the SPIRIT watches, and waits.)

Aah. Mmm. Oh, Millicent. Aaah.

(MONTY catches sight of the SPIRIT and sits up in shock. He yells out.)

Millicent! Aah!

(The SPIRIT grabs MILLICENT, covering her mouth with a hand and muffling her screams. It drags her off of the bed and towards the door. MONTY tears open the curtains and tries to follow, but trips on his half-open trousers and falls to the floor.)

MONTY

Stop, you! Millicent!

(The SPIRIT exits out the door. MONTY climbs to his feet and sprints to the door, holding his trousers up with one hand. He leans out the door and looks around, but MILLICENT and her captor have vanished.)

MONTY

Don't worry, Millicent! I'll find you!

AURELIA (Off)

Monty? What's all that noise about?

(AURELIA enters through the door.)

MONTY

Lily! The spirit! It was here, and it carried off Millicent!

AURELIA

Good God, man! We haven't got a moment to lose!

(Beat)

What happened to your trousers?

MONTY

I— That's not important right now! How are we going to save Millicent?

AURELIA

I've got it all worked out. Hand me that sword will you?

MONTY

(Passing over the weapon.)

You've got a plan? God, I'm happy to hear that!

AURELIA

It came to me in a flash downstairs. Come on, we haven't much time. Follow me!

(Both exit.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 4

(The undercroft of Blackbier Hall. This is where AURELIA builds her model ships and stores the rest of her collection of Peruvian artifacts. The majority of the floor is taken up by a large worktable, upon which a nearly completed scale model of Westminster Palace is sitting. Various tools and supplies are scattered about the table's surface, the most prominent being a small barrel of gunpowder. Lining the walls of the room are large crates, through which gold and bronze relics are visible. Some of them, including several ornate masks, are mounted to the sides of the crates or drooping off of their tops. Together the worktable and the visible masks give the room the appearance of a sacrificial altar. A bare stone staircase runs up the back of the room.)

(The room is dark, but AURELIA flips on an electric light as she and MONTY descend the steps into the undercroft. Unbeknownst to the two of them, MILLICENT is bound and gagged on the floor beneath the staircase.)

(AURELIA leads the way down the staircase.)

AURELIA

Here we are, Monty.

MONTY

The coal cellar? What are we going to do in here?

(Beat)

Wait a minute. This is your workshop, isn't it?

(He darts in front of AURELIA to examine the model on the table.)

And here's Westminster! Lily, it's exquisite. Did you make all of this today?

AURELIA

I had the scaffolding in place already. Once I had your photographs, the detail work came together quickly. I was just adding the gunpowder when the gong rang for dinner.

MONTY

It's fantastic work, it really is. It makes me seriously regret blowing up Big Ben, I'll tell you that.

(He picks up the barrel of gunpowder from the table.)

I understand now! Explosives! Lily, you're a genius. With this barrel, we can rig a trap to blow that specter sky high! All we'll need is a fuse and some matches. Even a bit of flint would do.

(As MONTY babbles about his plan, AURELIA raises the sword above her head and prepares to bring it down on MONTY. MILLICENT begins to yell at MONTY to get his attention, but her voice is muffled by the gag.)

AURELIA

That's right, my boy. It's a good plan, isn't it?

MONTY

It's better than good, Lily. It's cracker jack!

(He begins to turn around.)

Say, do you hear something—

(MONTY spots AURELIA raising the sword and MILLICENT on the ground simultaneously.)

MONTY

(He looks at AURELIA.)

Lily!

(He stares down at MILLICENT.)

Millicent!

(He focuses on AURELIA again.)

Lily! What on earth are you doing?

AURELIA

I'm sorry, dear boy. I wish it could end any other way, but I have no choice. You have to die!

MONTY

You're helping the spirit?

AURELIA

Good Lord, no! I'm banishing the damn thing! Remember, the vengeance of the gods could only be satisfied with a pure, virgin sacrifice. As bad luck has it, you're the closest thing we've got!

MONTY

That's what it comes down to? My virginity? Well, I've got sour news for you, Blackbier, but I don't think that I'm the candidate you're looking for anymore.

AURELIA

What? We've been running for our lives all night. What the hell could have happened since... Oh. Millicent.

(She looks down at MILLICENT.)

Really, Milly? You don't think you could have had restrained yourself just this once?

(MILLICENT mumbles a response. AURELIA shakes her head. She bends down and starts undoing MILLICENT's bonds.)

So you're definitely not a virgin anymore?

MONTY

Well, we didn't exactly... I mean, not fully. You know.

(MILLICENT continues to mumble as AURELIA undoes her gag.)

AURELIA

I really don't. What happened, precisely?

MONTY

What, right here? It's a bit, you know. Risqué.

AURELIA

(Exasperated.)

Whisper it to me, then, if it will make you feel so

much better.

(MONTY leans in and begins talking into AURELIA's ear.)

AURELIA

Uh huh. Okay. She what? Uh huh. I understand.

(Pause)

Nope, sorry, Chippentater. As far as I'm concerned, you're still ninety-five percent choir boy. Ready to take one for the team?

(ELOISE enters, carrying a long ceremonial dagger. She is followed by SMETHWICK, who is dressed in the costume of the SPIRIT, although he has removed the mask, revealing his face. The top of the stairs are in darkness, obscuring their dress at first.)

MILLICENT

(Grabbing AURELIA's arms to hold down the sword.)

Don't do it, my Lady!

MONTY

I say, Lily, no! I mean— (don't do it.)

ELOISE

Put the sword down, Mother. You're not sacrificing anyone today.

AURELIA

Eloise! You're safe!

MONTY

Thank God! Eloise, you have to talk some sense into your mother!

(ELOISE and SMETHWICK step into the light.)

ELOISE

Of course I'm safe, Mother. I was never in any danger.

(MONTY, AURELIA, and MILLICENT all

gasp.)

AURELIA

What do you mean? Why are you carrying that knife?
And why is Smethwick dressed like that?

MONTY

Why is Smethwick here at all?

MILLICENT

You said he was dead!

AURELIA

What's going on, Eloise? You can't really be telling
us that you're, you're...

ELOISE

The spirit? Don't be so naive, Mother. There never
was any curse, no vengeful, homicidal phantasm
haunting our grounds. There was only me, my knife,
and the eldritch gods that have been keeping this
family afloat for the last six years.

AURELIA

Excuse me? Is this something I should know about?

ELOISE

There are a thousand things that you should know about
and don't, Mother. I keep telling you when I try show
you the family accounts, but no! You'd rather play
with your little toy boats than run an estate, and
you've driven me to this.

MONTY

That's what this is all about? Money? How does
hacking open my best friend do anything to help out
your confounded estate?

ELOISE

The deacon's death was a great shame. His only crime
was being in the wrong place and the wrong time.
Well, that and being a terrible priest and an
irrepressible womanizer, I suppose. But if you had
just slept in the rooms that you were supposed to, we
wouldn't be having this conversation at all right now,
and Mr Smithson would still be alive.

MONTY

What— you mean you wanted to kill me all along? Why?

ELOISE

(Ignoring MONTY.)

Mother, you mentioned the parchments that Langhorne and his men found in the mountain temple. Did you ever read the ones in your collection?

AURELIA

I may have glanced at them years ago.

ELOISE

Well, I did. I read them all — books on black magicks and dark rituals, secrets of the Dark Old Gods that only blood could unlock. A few of the translations proved to be quite accurate indeed, and I learned a great deal from those scrolls. I was able to make great use of their secrets throughout my childhood — bending local boys to my whim, convincing teachers of my special merit, that sort of thing — but it was only a few years ago that I dared to try the rituals dealing in human sacrifice.

AURELIA

No! You committed... murder?

ELOISE

I'd hardly call it murder. Not the first one, anyway. It was more of a mercy killing if anything. You'll remember him well: Ernest Boyle, my first suitor. A sniveling, pus-riddled little wretch, five foot six of moneyed ego with barely half an inch of brain across the lot. The world did not mourn the loss of young Mr Boyle, and the Gods smiled upon the house of Blackbier that day.

AURELIA

I don't believe it. What would drive you to do such a terrible thing?

ELOISE

You, Mother! You made me do it, with your drinking and your model glue and your ever-so-rapidly encroaching senility. You never gave a damn about the family accounts, and over and over you've driven this estate, my inheritance, into the ground. I had to do

something, and the Gods reward those who serve them greatly.

SMETHWICK

It is a highly efficient system, my Lady. The Dark Gods are very reliable. Oth'dogawah is particularly generous, although it is my opinion that no self-respecting bird god should have quite so many tentacles.

ELOISE

One virgin life for one year of good fortune for the Blackbiers. A fair trade.

MONTY

Good God, woman, if you wanted money that badly, why not just marry some well-off nob and get it over with?

ELOISE

Listen to you! You men are all the same, so blinded by comforts that you can't see beyond the ends of your cigarettes. You think that all a woman's good for is getting married to some rich little shit for his money. Well, not this one! I'm the only child of a British aristocrat, woman or not, and I will get what's mine the proper English way: by waiting for all of my relatives to die off and leave me my rightful fortune.

(She turns on AURELIA.)

And I won't let any of you screw that up for me!

AURELIA

I don't understand. One life for one year... How did I never realize that this was going on in my own home?

ELOISE

You said it yourself at dinner, Mother — Smethwick's a real a genius when it comes to cleaning up stains.

AURELIA

(Turning to SMETHWICK.)

You were party to these atrocities? I can't believe this! After everything I've done for you over all of these years!

ELOISE

All these years of what, Mother? All these years of

ignoring him, of taking him for granted, expecting him to answer your call at every hour of the day for barely a word of thanks? Do you realize that Smethwick practically raised me as his own after Father died? You weren't there for me then, just like you're not really here for the family now. And so, Mother, it's like I said. You can't sacrifice Monty tonight.

AURELIA

Fine! There's been far too much killing already.

ELOISE

You misunderstand me. You can't sacrifice Monty, because I have to kill him myself.

MILLICENT

No!

(MILLICENT runs at ELOISE, but SMETHWICK grabs and restrains her.)

I won't let you do this! Monty, my love! I'll protect you!

ELOISE

Ah, Millicent. I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't want to have to hurt you, but I needed some way to lure our little virgin down here. I hadn't even dreamed that he might end up here of his own accord.

(She turns towards MONTY.)

But now my bank account's getting low, and your little boyfriend's starting to look more and more like a great big postal order.

(She advances on MONTY, who backpedals away from her. He looks at AURELIA for help, but AURELIA steps back and shrugs with a look that says "Sorry, but she's my daughter...")

MILLICENT

Monty!

MONTY

Perhaps we can work out some other exchange? I'm not too badly off myself, you know, perhaps we could arrange some sort of monthly cheque?

(ELOISE gets almost within arm range of

MONTY, who yells and throws the barrel of gunpowder in her face. White powder billows all over ELOISE, blinding her, and MONTY takes the opportunity to drop the barrel and dodge to the other side of the table.)

Ah! Sorry, clearly you're not interested. Perhaps you'd prefer a cash handoff, then? Or I have a very attractive flat in London. You could have the keys today, no problem.

(ELOISE clears her eyes of powder and swipes at MONTY with the knife. He yelps and crawls back under the table. She chases him back and forth around it while MONTY keeps on jabbering.)

Alright, so you don't like those ideas. Well, that's what you get with brainstorming. You win some, you lose some. They're not all keepers, eh? I'm sure we can come up with something else. What if we just tell the Black Gods that Smitty was a virgin? He was a priest, that has to count for something—

(He trips on the empty gunpowder barrel and falls to the floor. He begins to crawl backwards away from ELOISE.)

Oh, hell. You're set on going through with this, aren't you?

ELOISE

Very. Good-bye, Monty. I'd like to say that it's been fun, but in truth I find you to be a singularly dull man, one who keeps terrible company and thinks he is far too funny for his own good.

MONTY

I say, steady on. You're already trying to kill a fellow, you don't have to insult him to his face as well.

ELOISE

As you wish.

(ELOISE raises the dagger above her head and prepares to strike down with the blade.)

MILLICENT

No!

(MILLICENT elbows SMETHWICK in the groin and pulls free of him. She dashes towards ELOISE, grabbing the model of Parliament from the table as she does so.)

Don't you dare touch him, you mad, stuck-up bitch!

MONTY

Millicent, no! The powder!

(MONTY's warning comes too late. ELOISE barely has time to scream before the model hits her in the chest and bursts into flame. Her clothes are heavy with gunpowder, and she and MILLICENT completely disappear in the resulting explosion. Smoke fills the undercroft. When it clears, MILLICENT and ELOISE are both dead. MONTY, AURELIA, and SMETHWICK are all coughing and picking themselves up off of the ground.)

AURELIA

Eloise! Eloise!

SMETHWICK

I don't think she can hear you, my Lady. I'm sorry, but it looks as if the explosion claimed the lives of both women.

MONTY

(Grasping MILLICENT's wrist.)

He's right. I'm sorry, Lily.

AURELIA

Stick it up your arse, Chippentater. If you'd just obliged and been murdered in your sleep, I'd still have a first child, albeit a murderous one, not to mention the finest scale replica ever built of our nation's government. And you!

(She turns on SMETHWICK.)

You! Collaborating with her, conspiring to kill my guests in my house! You are fired, you hear me? Fired!

SMETHWICK

Very good, my Lady.

AURELIA

Jesus, look at this place. My workshop, my family, my staff, all up in smoke, just like that. This will take some tidying up, let me tell you.

SMETHWICK

Indeed, my Lady. A great amount of cleaning and repair work will have to be done. Of course, due to the nature of the damage, it will also have to be done discreetly. It will be quite the challenge for you.

AURELIA

You're going to make me say it, aren't you?

SMETHWICK

Lady Blackbier?

AURELIA

You know I can't put this place back together without you. Alright, Smethwick, you're hired. You're back on staff.

SMETHWICK

Thank you, my Lady.

AURELIA

Just promise not to pull a stunt like this again, alright?

SMETHWICK

Of course, my Lady.

MONTY

Hang on a minute. You're taking him on again just like that? After everything he did?

AURELIA

You're damn straight I am. He's an excellent butler, and I challenge you to find me another servant who'll so quickly agree to helping me clean the exploded remains of my murderous daughter and licentious housekeeper out of a cellar full of cursed Peruvian artifacts.

MONTY

Well, when you put it like that, it makes perfect sense.

AURELIA

And don't think you're off the hook, either. Just because my daughter nearly killed you doesn't mean you don't have to help clean this mess up, too.

MONTY

Excuse me?

AURELIA

You heard me. We're all going to go upstairs for a fortifying drink, and then we're coming back down here with brooms and mortar before this bloody cellar caves in on itself.

SMETHWICK

An excellent plan, my Lady.

AURELIA

Thank you, Smethwick. Alright, everyone. Quick march!

(AURELIA, MONTY, and SMETHWICK head up the stairs.)

MONTY

What a funny sort of day...

(The three of them exit.)

(Pause)

(MILLICENT and ELOISE begin to stir in the rubble.)

MILLICENT

Jesus, my head is killing me. What happened?

ELOISE

I'm not sure. There was a flash and a lot of heat, and—

(Beat)

Did you call me a bitch?

MILLICENT

(Gasps.)

I did! I remember now! You were trying to kill Monty!

ELOISE

And you just had to go and interfere, didn't you? Christ, Milly, I know you're boy-crazy, but this is just too much.

(Beat)

Where's my knife? I bet I can still find him in time to finish the job.

MILLICENT

Oh, no you don't!

(MILLICENT tackles ELOISE and the two of them grapple on the floor. As they wrestle, SMITHSON steps out from behind one of the crates. He is perfectly dressed and beaming. For a ghost, he has a lot to be happy about.)

SMITHSON

Ladies! Not fighting on my behalf, I hope?

(The women stop fighting and look up at SMITHSON.)

ELOISE

Smithson?

MILLICENT

Douglas!

(MILLICENT jumps to her feet and hugs SMITHSON.)

ELOISE

Just what the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be dead!

SMITHSON

Am I?

(He looks at himself.)

So I am. Well, if that's a surprise to you, you've got an even bigger one coming.

MILLICENT

You mean... Are we...

ELOISE

Oh, no. I can't be dead! I still have so much to live for! My future! My inheritance!

SMITHSON

Ah, forget your bloody inheritance. You know what your problem always was, Eloise? You think too much. You've got to learn to live in the now! Or die in the now, I suppose.

MILLICENT

Is it terrible being dead, Douglas?

SMITHSON

Terrible? I'm having the time of my life! You know all those things that the Church says you can never do unless you want to spend an eternity balanced on top of piping hot tridents? It turns out that no one cares about most of that. It really just comes down to "Thou shalt not kill," and even then there's an awful lot of grey area.

MILLICENT

Really? Is that true?

SMITHSON

Every word. I can't wait to show you some of the weirder things that they let slide.

(MILLICENT giggles.)

MILLICENT

Oh, Douglas. With you here, death doesn't seem half as bad.

SMITHSON

I promise you one thing: you'll never get lonely when I'm around. But we can't stay here. You've both got to cross to...

(He pauses for dramatic effect.)

The Other Side!

ELOISE

What, me too?

SMITHSON

Of course. You don't think I'd leave you here all on your own, do you?

ELOISE

But I killed you! I cut your throat and performed forbidden rituals with your blood!

SMITHSON

You should see what some of my ex-girlfriends have tried to do to me. Come on, it's no fun being dead by yourself.

(He helps ELOISE to her feet. The three of them begin to walk back behind the crates.)

Besides, just think of all the sinning we can do with three people. Honestly, I'm just dying to try it out.

(Blackout.)