
Luigi Lunari
Three on the Seesaw
Two acts

English translation by Maggie Rose

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The Cast

(in order of appearance)

MISTER A

SERGEANT B

PROFESSOR C

THE WOMAN

Act One

Scene one

A large room, which could be the well-appointed anteroom of a luxurious office, a hotel reading-room, or anything of that kind. At the back, a large window overlooking a city. Armchairs, a well-disguised minibar, a table with magazines, a bench obviously meant for staff. Three doors: one on the right, one on the left, the third is imaginary, in the middle of the stage and toward the audience: these are the three entrances. A fourth door, also visible to the audience, leads to the toilet. At the start of the play all this might be hidden by the curtain. The first character to step onstage is Mr. A, who makes his entrance from the door supposed to be in the "fourth wall". He advances, in fact, from the audience, and comes up the little ramp of steps onto stage. It does not matter whether the curtain is up or down: he finds himself in front of a closed door – which we can call door No. 1 – and performs all the actions recommended in these cases. We see and hear him ring the bell, or knock, wait, ring or knock again as there is no answer, lean back as if to read the nameplate or the number on the door, and finally decide to go in. So he turns the imaginary handle, and steps in.

MR. A

Hello? ... May I come in?

(He clears his throat loudly)

Hello ... Is anyone there?

(He seems puzzled and annoyed. But in any case he is not one to waste time: he opens one of the other doors, sticks his head through, returns to the stage)

There's nobody here ...

(Repeats the procedure with the second door)

Or here ... Anyone there? ...

(He opens the door of the toilet)

It's a toilet ...

(He closes the door. Then he has second thoughts. He calls out again)

Is anybody there? ... Excuse me? ...

(He goes into the bathroom and closes the door)

(A pause. A few moments later we hear a knock on the door which we have called No. 2. Obviously there is no answer, the newcomer knocks again, and finally, after a last try, the door half-opens and Sergeant B – in civilian clothes – peers timidly in)

SGT. B

Hello? ... Can I come in? ... Is anybody in there? ...

(He has come into the room, looks around, coughs)

Excuse me? ... Hello? ...

(He seems perplexed, and a little irritated. He opens door No. 1 again, puts his head through as if to check the address. He appears slightly puzzled. He comes back in, goes to the door that we have called No. 3, opens it, shuts it, and does the same with the door in the fourth wall, No. 1; lastly he tries the door to the lavatory: the door opens, but shuts again immediately, vigorously pulled from the other side, as can happen, while a loud voice announces –)

MR. A *(from the toilet)*

There's somebody in here!

SGT. B

Sorry! ...

(He retreats, but seems happier. He calmly waits for the person to come out of the toilet. He whistles, looks out of the window, performs a couple of military knee-bends. Finally a flushing sound warns him that the wait is about to end. The Sergeant gestures satisfied.)

SGT. B

Oh, at last! It's about time..

(Mr. A comes out of the toilet; he also looks happier: he looks satisfied, but becomes straight-faced on seeing the Sergeant.)

MR. A

I'm awfully sorry. But as I didn't see anybody I took the liberty, while waiting ...

SGT. B

Not at all, not at all! I suppose that's what it's for.

MR. A

Sorry? ...

SGT. B

The toilet, I mean.

(Mr. A has left the door open for the next person ...)

MR. A

Please ... Would you ...

(... but the Sergeant is not interested)

SGT. B

I beg your pardon?

MR. A

Oh, I thought ...

SGT. B

No no. Thank you, but no.

(The Sergeant waits for Mr. A to close the door)

Erm ... Mr. Hamilton, I suppose.

MR. A

No.

SGT. B

Oh ... I'm sorry ... well ... but where is Mr. Hamilton?

MR. A

I don't know. I don't know him.

SGT. B

I'm sorry, but you ...

MR. A

I've got ... an appointment here ...

SGT. B

And it's not with Mr. Hamilton?

-
- MR. A I've got an appointment with ... with a lady ...
- SGT. B Oh, pardon!
- MR. A What do you mean, pardon?
- SGT. B What I mean is ... I belong to the old school. I can't help it. Whenever I hear a lady mentioned, I always ... say pardon pardon. French for ... "excuse me". It's a question of tact, of discretion ... Virtues well-known in the Army, my dear sir, whatever else they might say about it.
- MR. A You're in the Army, are you?
- SGT. B Retired. Secret Service. Discretion, for us, not only means gallantry, but is something essential!
- MR. A I assure you that in my case ... it's not the case. This lady ...
- SGT. B Ehm ehm ... pardon pardon!
- MR. A But I assure you ...
- SGT. B Pardon pardon! ...
- MR. A Anyway ... I was just wondering if the lady's arrived.
- SGT. B I don't know.
- MR. A Ms Felicity ... You don't know ... if by any chance ... she's arrived ... ?
- SGT. B No. And I don't see why I should know.
- MR. A I'm sorry, but ... here ... aren't you part of ... ? Aren't you perhaps the owner ... well, anyway, of this ... ?
- SGT. B It's the first time I've been here.
- MR. A Really? ... Well, excuse me, but why don't you mind your own business then?
- SGT. B Me? I simply said I don't understand ...
- MR. A I've got an appointment, with a lady. This lady hasn't arrived yet ... So I'll wait.
- SGT. B We'll wait together, then, since I've got an appointment with a certain Mr. Hamilton ... Mr. Hamilton hasn't arrived yet. I'll wait for him. I thought – you see – that you were one of the office staff.
- MR. A Which office?
- SGT. B This one
- MR. A This isn't an office. It's ... a guesthouse.
-

- SGT. B A guesthouse?! Isn't this Infomac?
- MR. A Infomac?!
- SGT. B Aren't we on the seventh floor?
- MR. A Yes but ...
- SGT. B And this isn't Infomac!
- MR. A Definitely not. This is the Aurora Guesthouse ... There's no point in looking on the door. There's no nameplate. I've already checked. And this is the Aurora Guesthouse.
- SGT. B *(Takes a letter from his pocket and reads the address)*
1 Graham Street.
- MR. A Ah, no no: that's why! It's all clear. You've made a mistake. You've got the address wrong. This is 2 Bloomsbury Sq.
- SGT. B Impossible! Are you sure?
- MR. A Absolutely!
- SGT. B Oh dear, dear, dear! That also explains Mr. Hamilton's delay! If I've got the wrong address for the meeting, it's a bit much to ask him to find me, and at the right time, on top of it. Ah ah, that's a good one ... Anyway, it's very strange, because I'm normally spot on with addresses. I can get the day, but never an address. However, I'm prepared to bow to the evidence ... That's why I couldn't understand: you've got a tête-à-tête with your lady friend ...
- MR. A I beg your pardon!
- SGT. B Ehm ehm ... pardon pardon! I'm only envious, you know? Because, unfortunately, I've got nothing to hide. Mr. Hamilton deals in machines for recycling tooth-paste tubes, so you can imagine! ... As you can see, we're miles apart. Good for you thought!
(Mr. A, irritated, looks ostentatiously at his watch)
But ... I can feel you'd rather be left alone. Ah ah! The Aurora Guesthouse, eh? But no nameplate, hmm! And you're waiting for a lady, ehm ehm ... sorry. Evidently a very discreet guesthouse. Good to know. The address? ... Ehm ehm ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. Anyway, you've already told me: 2 Bloomsbury Sq. I repeat, and end of message: 2 Bloomsbury Sq. Good to know. And now ... good bye. Arrivederci. It's been a pleasure.
- MR. A *(coldly)*
All right ... Goodbye.
- SGT. B I'm Sergeant Springthorpe. Delighted to have met you.
- MR. A ... Okay ...
-

- SGT. B I'm sorry ... I didn't quite catch your name. Oh, I understand ... ehm ehm Of course ... Pardon pardon!
(He exits through door No. 2, through which he had entered. Mr. A breathes a sigh of relief, but after a moment he grows worried again and begins searching around once more)
- MR. A Hello? ... Hello? ... May I ... For Heaven's sake, is anybody in there?
(he calls softly:)
Felicity ...
(Nothing. Mr. A picks up a newspaper from the table, but he has hardly time to sit down in the armchair and begin reading, when he hears a knock on door No. 3)
Come in!
(Door No. 3 opens and the Professor enters).
Ah, someone, at last.
- PROF. C Hello? ... May I come in? ...
- MR. A Ah, here's someone at last! Good afternoon.
- PROF. C Good afternoon. I hope I'm not too late.
- MR. A I don't know. I said "at last" because at last someone's turned up. This was beginning to look like the house of the dead. Are you ... ?
- PROF. C *(quickly)*
Yes?..
- MR. A Ms Felicity ... uhm? ...
- PROF. C Who, me?!
- MR. A I want to know whether Ms. Felicity ... uhm has already arrived.
- PROF. C What do I know?
- MR. A Excuse me, but aren't you ... the owner, here, or the manager of this ... ?
- PROF. C I wish I were!
- MR. A You as well! I beg your pardon, but why are you meddling in my affairs, then?
- PROF. C Me?! I'm not meddling at all! It's you who has taken me for Felicity. I can tell you it's the first time in my life that I've been taken for ...
- MR. A Well, anyway ... would you mind telling me who you are and what you want?
- PROF. C I only called to pick up a parcel ... with some proofs ... that need checking. You can't help me, I suppose.
-

- MR. A That's right: I can't. And if you've only come here to pick up a parcel, pick it up and leave. What else can I say? Please be quick about it.
- PROF. C Are you on edge?
- MR. A No! I am not on edge; I'm feeling extremely calm. But I don't feel like chatting. I'm here because I've got an appointment with ... with somebody, and I don't want to ...
- PROF. C I understand, I understand. I'm terribly sorry. There's no reason to attack me like this! You're here for a matter concerning you, and I'm here for a matter concerning me. So I fail to understand why I should leave, even after I've picked up my parcel, if by chance I decide I'd like to
- MR. A You are right: I am on edge, it's true. Please forgive my sudden irritation. I beg your pardon, but ...
- PROF. C *(pacified)*
Oh, I wasn't actually looking for apologies. Anyone can suddenly get irritable in this day and age. Perhaps you ... who knows ... In any case it's me who should apologise for not sensing that you, perhaps ...
- MR. A I what?
- PROF. C I don't know, I don't know – I don't wish to know ...
- MR. A You make it sound as if I've got something to hide.
- PROF. C Good Lord no! I mean ... everyone has his problems: there's an endless number of reasons, that can make somebody edgy ... Let me say again how sorry I am.
- MR. A Please, it's me who should apologise.
- PROF. C You are very kind.
- MR. A Thank you.
- PROF. C Thank you.
- MR. A Not at all.
(Pause. General clearing of throats)
- PROF. C May I ... just ... have a look to see if my parcel is around?
- MR. A Go ahead ...
(The Prof. rummages around the bench)
- PROF. C There's nothing here. A Bible.. ..newspapers ... some receipts and ... Oh, this is peculiar: well, I never ... a Singapore directory!..
- MR. A From where?
-

- PROF. C From Singapore.
(Mr. A, not interested, shrugs. And while the Prof. brings his own search to a close, he continues with his)
- MR. A Hello? ... Anyone there? ...
(Door No. 2 suddenly opens and in comes the Sergeant, panting a little and clearly irritated. Looking at Mr. A he bursts out)
- SGT. B There you are! What the Hell's all this about me having got the address wrong? I haven't got the address wrong. And in fact, as I have already told you, I might get mixed up with names or days, but never with addresses!
(He sees the newcomer)
Good afternoon.
- PROF. C Good afternoon.
- SGT. B I'm sorry, but this old chap's made me walk up and down seven flights of stairs, telling me that this is ... where exactly are we?
- MR. A We're at 2 Bloomsbury Sq.
- SGT. B *(to the Prof.)*
You see? You tell him ...
- PROF. C Actually ... this isn't 2 Bloomsbury Sq.
- MR. A *(suddenly in doubt)*
Oh God! Are you sure?
- PROF. C Perfectly sure!
- SGT. B If "he" doesn't know ...
- MR. A Oh Lordylordylordy! Then it's me who's made a mistake! I'm terribly, terribly sorry. After all, I too hardly ever make mistakes ... I'm sorry, I must look such a fool. I wonder what you must think of me ...
- SGT. B *(pacified, but still a little abrupt)*
Well, all right, all right, but don't let's make a mountain out of a mole-hill. I've not enjoyed walking up and down seven flights of stairs, but then these things happen in the best of families, as they say. However ... I'm sorry but ... if you got an appointment at five o'clock with ... ehm ehm ... that cousin of yours ... you're pushing things a bit. You should put your skates on.
- MR. A *(He's about to say something about the cousin, but then he gives up on the idea)*
You're right, of course ... What an idiot! I'll leave straightaway. Once again, I'm terribly sorry! It's been a pleasure. Ernest Topping's the name ... Good bye ... Sorry about my rush ...
(Says good-bye to the Prof...)
Good-bye ...
-

(... and leaves through door No. 1; he goes down to the stalls and walks through the audience muttering to himself)

What an idiot! ... That's what happens when you do things in a hurry ... And what about my lady friend ... when she doesn't see me turn up ... she might even leave ... and on our first date, too ... with all the trouble I've gone to ... Damn me and my rush ...

(*He goes out. On stage, the conversation starts up again*)

- SGT. B Ah, at last! Good afternoon, I'm Sergeant Springthorpe. Just think, he made me believe I'd come to the wrong address! Me, of all people! As far as I can remember, I've never got an address wrong in my life. I fell for it like a fool. I just left, just like that! Only, once downstairs, I checked, of course; and of course I discovered I wasn't wrong at all. It doesn't surprise me, knowing me. But anyway it's a relief, I must say: in my youth I dealt with timers for ... time bombs. (Secret Service, naturally: not as a hobby). And ... as I was saying ... avoiding mistakes ... was quite crucial. Ha ha. Anyway, here we are. All's well that ends well. I too can allow myself that famous saying: once I thought I was wrong, but I was wrong. Mr. Hamilton, I presume.
- PROF. C Eh? No.
- SGT. B No?!
- PROF. C No!
- SGT. B Are you sure? I've got an appointment with a certain Mr. Hamilton ...
- PROF. C (*somewhat annoyed*)
Well, it's not me. And I am sure of that. You're sure of your addresses, and I'm sure of my identity. But you, to hear you talk ... you don't work in this office.
- SGT. B I thought ... you were ...
- PROF. C No. I have only come to pick up some proofs ... a book of mine ...
- SGT. B Ah, a writer.
- PROF. C Yes, I've a book they're publishing here ... At the Olympus Press ...
- SGT. B Yes but ... there is no publishing house ... here.
- PROF. C It's the Olympus Press.
- SGT. B No. This is Infomac.
(*Laughs*)
Don't tell me you've got the address wrong too! That would be just too funny!
- PROF. C No, no: it's 12 Oxford Street.
-

- SGT. B Oh, just as I thought. You've made a mistake, too. This – and I've just checked a moment ago, so please don't make me do the stairs again – is 1 Graham St., seventh floor.
- PROF. C But that's impossible: I gave the address to the cab driver, and he brought me to the front of this building.
- SGT. B I'm sorry, but haven't you ever been to the publishing house handling your book?
- PROF. C They've just moved to new premises, and so it's the first time I've been here.
- SGT. B Sorry! This is Infomac.
(In a different tone of voice)
It's unfortunate, but you obviously got out of the taxi without looking at the number or the street name properly.
- PROF. C I must admit I did hurry in ...
- SGT. B Terribly sorry.
- PROF. C But of course! You're absolutely right. My apologies.
- SGT. B What for? Don't bother. There must be some kind of epidemic around. A new virus, ha ha!, and it mixes up addresses.
- PROF. C What's more, any moment now there'll be the siren for the pollution emergency exercise ... I'll end up being caught out on the street ...
- SGT. B Then you'd better get going!
- PROF. C Thank you. My name is Wittfield, with two tees. Professor Wittfield.
- SGT. B Sergeant Springthorpe ... S for Springthorpe, P for Pringthorpe ... Ah ha! It's a pleasure.
- PROF. C The pleasure's mine, good-bye.
- SGT. B And all the best with your book.
- PROF. C *(modestly)*
Oh, it's only a thriller.
- SGT. B *(with sincerity)*
In that case I'll buy it.
- PROF. C *(reappraising himself)*
Well ... a psychological thriller.
- SGT. B *(conciliating)*
I'll buy it anyway. As a present for my wife.
-

- PROF. C Thank you.
(Exits through door No. 3. The Sergeant, now alone, carries out the customary search exercise)
- SGT. B Is anyone there? ... Hello? ...
(Pulls a puzzled face, then decides: the SGT. opens the bathroom door and steps in, closing the door after him. Pause. Mr. A, extremely irritated, re-emerges from the audience)
- MR. A Really, there are some people around with nothing better to do than make others waste their time! Graham Street, my foot! And I listened to him, and even apologised! There you are: they've gone.
(Pause. He looks around)
Hello? ... Is anyone there? ... Half past five!
(Goes to the bench, picks up the phone)
Hello? ... Hello? ... Hello!
(With increasing irritation he dials various numbers trying to contact somebody, but without success.)
It's dead ... No answer ... No dialling tone even ... I'll try the operator.
Hello? Yes, could you tell me ...
(THE TELEPHONE – "This is directory inquiries. The service is temporarily out of order owing to union action. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause. This is directory inqu ... "
He angrily hangs up.)
Oh, that's it then! And I know what's going to happen! I'm feeling edgy, then she gets here ... and I mess it up. Hello? ... Anybody there?..
(The Prof. rushes in through door No. 3, by which he had exited, and immediately picks on the only person he finds on stage.)
- PROF. C You! Which address do you think this is then?
- MR. A *(equally decisive)*
You tell me: what on earth made you think that man was right?
- PROF. C What man?
- MR. A The one who was here before.
- PROF. C And where is he now?
- MR. A I don't give a damn.
- PROF. C I only said that this isn't Bloomsbury Square!
- MR. A Oh I see. So you think it's Graham Street?
- PROF. C Graham Street? No.
- MR. A No?
- PROF. C No. Never said anything of the kind!
- MR. A Oh.
-

- PROF. C This is 12 Oxford St.
- MR. A Oh yes? And who told you?
- PROF. C I've seen it; I've seen it – twice – with my own eyes. And just to make sure that I wasn't hallucinating, since there are some people here convinced of that, I also asked a passer-by. He probably thought I couldn't even read. That reminds me. Where's the sergeant?
- MR. A I don't know. He's probably left. I don't give a damn! I.. was waiting for a lady ...
(The sound of flushing comes from the toilet)
Perhaps in there ...
- PROF. C Ah, so she's arrived.
- MR. A I mean your sergeant.
- PROF. C He's not "my" sergeant. I don't even know him. I'm here to pick up some proofs, that's all
- MR. A Anyway, I've just checked: this is 2 Bloomsbury Square!
- PROF. C I don't know how you have the nerve to insist on such a thing.
(The Sergeant comes out of the toilet looking satisfied and relieved. But it doesn't last long. Mr. A and the Prof. immediately go for him:)
- MR. A You! Would you mind telling me what you're playing at?
- PROF. C I've climbed up and down seven flights of stairs thanks to you!
- MR. A This is Bloomsbury Square.
- SGT. B This is Graham Street.
- PROF. C We're in Oxford Street.
(General row: each one reiterates his own reasons: "But I went back downstairs to look! I'm certain! I even asked a passer-by!" and so on. When the quarrel reaches its climax of mutual incommunicability, the Sergeant calls for order and imposes silence.)
- SGT. B Hold on a moment! Be quiet everyone! I've got it. I understand everything!
(The others fall silent and look at him, without appearing too sure; but the Sergeant is convinced: he walks around the room to check the truth of his intuition and rubs his hands satisfied.)
Of course! It's obvious! As clear as day! How could I have missed it? Elementary, my dear Watson! Ha ha, you write thrillers, professor, so you've missed a good opportunity, if you don't mind me saying! Go on, how do you explain this little mystery, eh?
- PROF. C What mystery?
-

- SGT. B What mystery?! But what else could it be: here we are, the three of us: all adults, in good physical and mental health, and all three get the address wrong!
- MR. A I got absolutely nothing wrong. I've checked it out!
- PROF. C And I went up and down seven flights on foot!
- SGT. B Have I made a mistake, then? No. Because I've also looked, and I've also found the address to be undoubtedly the right one. Therefore I am in Graham Street, you are in Oxford Street, and you ... ?
- MR. A In Bloomsbury Square.
- SGT. B Number two! Could it be? It couldn't be! And yet, obviously, it is! Are we beholding the mystery of the Holy Trinity of addresses? How is it possible, how?
(No-one seems to know)
You surprise me, professor. And you too, Mr ... who, having arranged, shall we say, a dubious appointment, should be well trained in the little riddles of life ...
- MR. A Now listen here! ...
- SGT. B *(continues euphoric and unstoppable)*
It looks like the much berated British Army has got there first! Before culture and before ... what do you do?
- MR. A That's none of your business.
- SGT. B Oh, it's only to see if everything adds up.
- MR. A *(more to keep him quiet than anything else)*
I ... own a small company.
- SGT. B *(completes his thought)*
... and before business! First prize ... to the Army!
- MR. A I can't stand him!
- SGT. B I hope this pun isn't too subtle, but it's no coincidence I'm in the Intelligence service! Ha, ha!
- MR. A Listen, it's getting late. If you've discovered what lies behind this mystery, let's hear it! Otherwise ...
- SGT. B Very simple, ladies and gentlemen! All three of us are right! This building has got three entrances!
- MR. A What do you mean, three entrances?
- SGT. B Three entrances: one, two, and three!
(He carries out the demonstration with eloquent explanatory gestures)
-

You've come in through that door, you from that one, and I through the third one. From three different landings, you go down three different stairs, which in turn lead to three different halls which go out onto Graham St., Bloomsbury Sq. and Oxford St. respectively. Three entrances, three addresses. If you care to go to the window, you can personally check this out without troubling to go down the stairs. The building, as you can see, is like a pier jutting onto a square, from where two streets lead off on either side of the pier. In fact, Bloomsbury Sq.'s there, Graham St.'s on this side, and Oxford St.'s over there! Hee, hee ... What do you think?

(Pause)

MR. A Could be.

PROF. C Seems plausible.

SGT. B What do you think? Voilà!

MR. A *(After a pause, worried and uneasy)*
I don't like this business!

SGT. B Why? It's very simple. I can't wait to tell the story in the officers' mess, especially to the barman, that bloody John, who collects jokes about the Irish and then retells them as if they were about Intelligence Service agents. Well, this time ...

MR. A *(edgy, he interrupts him)*
Quiet, be quiet! I don't like this! Three addresses, that's ok. But what exactly is this place: a guesthouse, a firm, and a publishing house all rolled in one?

SGT. B That's true, I hadn't thought about that.

PROF. C Are you afraid?

MR. A I'm on edge, yes, I'm on edge. I don't like this place. What's more, any moment now the alarm will be going off, and we'll be stuck here. I'm leaving.

SGT. B And your ... ?

MR. A I don't know: maybe she couldn't come, she might have changed her mind, perhaps she had something else on ...

SGT. B Ehm, ehm, pardon pardon! ...

PROF. C I'm going to wait a while. This business with the alarm practice might have caused delays ... I'm hoping someone from the publishing house will turn up ...

SGT. B Mr. Hamilton should certainly turn up!

- MR. A I'm leaving. Gentlemen, I bid you good evening! No, just a moment! I'm going down to Oxford St., just to see what this peculiar building with three entrances is like ... and to avoid going out the same way I came in. *(He goes to door n° 3, tries to open it, but the door won't budge)*
It's locked.
- PROF. C It can't be. Try pulling.
- MR. A *(tries, and fails)*
It's locked.
- SGT. B I'll give you a hand. Damn! It really is locked.
- PROF. C It's very strange: I came through it a moment ago!
(He tries to open it: the door opens without the least effort)
There you go, it's open. Where did you see it was locked?
(Showing the way to Mr. A)
After you.
(Mr. A is about to go out, then thinks again and stops)
- MR. A No, I want to look at something.
(He goes up to door n° 2)
Where does this one lead to?
- SGT. B Graham Street.
- MR. A *(tries to open it: the door is locked, but Mr. A does not appear surprised)*
This one's also locked. I knew it. Have a go.
- SGT. B Me?
- MR. A No, the professor.
- PROF. C *(After having tried)*
It's locked.
- MR. A Wait! Try that one.
(He points him towards the door facing the audience: door n° 1)
- PROF. C *(Does as he's told)*
It's locked too.
- MR. A *(to the Sergeant)*
You?..
- SGT. B *(although suspicious, he carries out the test requested)*
Shut.
- MR. A *(walks decisively towards "his own" door and opens it with ease)*
For me ... it opens.
(Once more addressing the Sergeant, pointing to door N° 2)
Now try opening that one.
-

- SGT. B *(tries, and the door opens)*
There you are.
- MR. A So, Sergeant? Are you in a position to solve this little mystery as well?
- SGT. B I don't understand.
- PROF. C Ah, I know what you mean! Each one of us ... can easily open the door ... through which he came in ... but none of us can open the doors ... the others came in through ...
- SGT. B *(struggles a bit to understand, and has to repeat)*
What, what?.. Each of us ... his own door ... the others, on the contrary ... It's true! I hadn't thought of it.
- MR. A *(despite the worry)*
Intelligence Service at a low ebb, eh?
- SGT. B Well, what's that got to do with you? If you want to go down to Graham Street, I'll open the door for you.
- MR. A No. I don't like these doors.
- PROF. C Oh come on, that's ridiculous!
- MR. A Well, I can't help it, I'd rather go out through mine!
- PROF. C All right, all right, don't get up. I tell you what: I'll come with you. I'll show you "I" can go through "your" door. I'll come by for the proofs tomorrow.
- MR. A I'm ... going to wait another ten minutes.
- PROF. C I thought you said you wanted to go.
- MR. A I've changed my mind. I'll wait ... a bit longer, and then I'm leaving.
- PROF. C I understand: you're scared.
- SGT. B Scared?
- MR. A No.
- PROF. C You're scared and you want to see what happens to me!
- SGT. B But what you mean, "happens"?
- PROF. C You shouldn't be ashamed, you know. Anyone could get a bit frightened when faced with certain small coincidences that sometimes arise and cannot be explained. At first Man feels things and events with indifference, then he experiences them with a moved and confused soul, and finally he becomes aware of them with a lucid and serene mind. That's Spencer, of course.
-

- SGT. B Colonel Spencer? Of the third squadron?
- PROF. C No, no, an other Spencer. Evidently, the Sergeant is at stage one, you're at stage two ...
- MR. A All right, I am scared. Or rather, I'm not exactly scared, but I have no wish to get scared. It's ... as you said: I'm ... moved and confused. I don't like this place at all.
- PROF. C I don't have any irrational fears: I've evidently reached the stage of serene mind. And as you see, I'm going.
- MR. A Aren't you going out through "my" door?
- PROF. C *(laughing)*
No, but not for the reason you think, believe me. It's just that Oxford Street is really more convenient. Gentlemen, I hope to see you again!
(He takes his leave bowing profusely and goes out through his own door: N° 3.
Pause.
The Sergeant walks to the window and calmly looks out)
- MR. A Hello?... Is anybody there ...
I don't like this business at all!... Oof! It's a bit stuffy in here, why don't we open the window a bit?
- SGT. B Of course.
(Opens the French window.)
- MR. A How come it's so silent?
(He walks towards the window and looks out)
Almost no-one around, why's that?
- SGT. B Well, I suppose nobody wants to be caught outside when the siren goes off.
- MR. A Ahh! Of course!.. What time's the practice?
- SGT. B Any time after five.
- MR. A So ... any time now.
- SGT. B Obviously, any time now.
- MR. A Good God! The heat that's coming in through that window!
- SGT. B It must be like an oven outside.
- MR. A It's like Africa. Do you mind if I close it?
- SGT. B No, no ... go ahead ...
(Mr. A closes the window)
-

- MR. A It's so hot! I'd give anything for a beer!
- SGT. B There's a minibar over there.
(Mr. A opens the minibar and is pleasantly surprised)
- MR. A Plenty of beer. Wonderful.
(He gets a can of beer out of the fridge)
Would you like something?
- SGT. B An orange, please.
- MR. A There's no orange juice, only beer.
- SGT. B No thank you, then. I don't like beer.
(Mr. A shuts the minibar. But the Sergeant changes his mind:)
But then ... rather than die of thirst ...
(He walks to the minibar, opens it, and shows surprise and irritation.)
What the hell are you talking about? There's nothing but orange!
(He gets out a can of orange. Surprise and dismay from Mr. A. The Sergeant has already got over the problem, opens the can and drinks delightedly.)
Ahh! The heat coming from that window is unbearable! The poor Professor is probably melting. I really don't envy him!
(But door N° 3 opens and the Prof. bursts in. He is drenched, not with sweat, but clearly with rain.)
- PROF. C Ah, I'm sorry! But I think I'd better wait here till it stops raining! God!
Never seen a downpour like it!
- SGT. B Is it raining?
- PROF. C Raining? It's bucketing down!
- MR. A Where is it raining?
- PROF. C Outside, it's raining! Where else on earth could it be raining?
- SGT. B But if out there in Bloomsbury Square the sun is shining!
- PROF. C *(trying to dry himself or at least to wring his clothes)*
Listen! That's enough, all right? I came in from Oxford Street, I went back into Oxford Street, I only answer for Oxford Street! And in Oxford Street – bugger it – it's raining cats and dogs!
- SGT. B Take your jacket off. Can I get you anything?... Anything to drink?
- PROF. C I would give anything for a cup of hot chocolate.
- SGT. B I really don't think there's any hot chocolate.
- MR. A *(intense and almost dramatic)*
You are wrong! Hot chocolate ... coming up!
-

(The others look at him with astonishment)

In the minibar.

PROF. C In the minibar?! And hot?

MR. A *(definitely dramatic)*
Hot!

SGT. B But ...
(Although sceptical, the Prof. walks to the minibar, opens it, and takes out a big cup of steaming hot chocolate, causing stunned wonder in the Sergeant and a gloomy taking stock of the situation in Mr. A.)

MR. A *(now tragic)*
I don't like this place! I don't like it at all! ...
(Suddenly, from outside, the wailing of various sirens, both nearby and far away.)

PROF. C The practice ...

SGT. B The alarm ...

MR. A And we've got to stay here all night! ...

Scene Two

The same scene, an hour later. The Sergeant and Mr. A are present, or at least visible. Mr. A is holding a pair of trousers in front of an electric fire, which is switched on. They are obviously the Professor's trousers drying after the downpour. The Sergeant is reading out the instructions for the emergency pollution practice exercise from a newspaper.

- SGT. B ... At sunset, or anyway not later than 18.35, switch off all household appliances: especially refrigerators ...
(unplugs the minibar)
... electric water-heaters ...
(walks to the bathroom door and knocks)
Is there an electric water-heater in there?
- PROF.C'S VOICE Yes.
- SGT. B Unplug it! ... Wirelesses, record players, washing machines, dishwashers ...
...
(He looks around: there aren't any.)
... electric fires ...
(He looks at Mr. A)
Aren't they dry yet?
- MR. A They're still dampish.
(The Prof. leans round of the bathroom door.)
- PROF. C It's OK, it's OK! It doesn't matter if they're a bit damp!
(Mr. A immediately switches off the electric fire, stands up, takes the trousers to the Prof, who disappears again into the bathroom.)
- SGT. B Lastly, unplug televisions, video OK-phones, tills, computers, video games etc., limiting consumption to strictly necessary lighting.
(The Prof. comes out of the toilet, doing his trousers up: he is in shirt-sleeves and he puts on his jacket, which is hanging to dry on the back of a chair.)
- PROF. C At last ... I've got my trousers back. Thank you! Ah, trousers are like health, like youth! Only when they are missing do we understand their real worth, their fundamental importance.
(To the Sergeant:)
Did you say wirelesses?
- SGT. B Who, me?
-

- PROF. C Earlier, while reading. Strictly speaking, the plural of wireless is wireless, not wirelesses. There can't really be more than one less, which anyway in this case serves as an adjective, and cannot therefore take on a plural form.
- SGT. B I've always said wirelesses.
- PROF. C You've always said it wrong, then. Let's say it's a little like a collective noun, in that it means all radio appliances without wires. It's a bit like "sheep" never becomes "sheeps", or "furniture" "furnitures". Except that, strictly speaking, wireless is in fact a compound of noun and adjective which popular usage has turned into a noun.
- SGT. B It should be unplugged anyway.
- PROF. C Yes, of course. Another curious case: in all grammars of Indo-European origin, if you're interested in these matters ... You are, aren't you?
- SGT. B No.
- PROF. C Oh, I thought ...
- SGT. B No. As a matter of fact, I always hated grammar badly at school. Let's say I'm a man of action. And especially grammar ... I see, however, that they don't teach it any more ... My grandchildren, as a matter of fact, don't know a thing about it.
- PROF. C And do you think that's good?
- SGT. B Well ... I don't know ... No, of course not!
- PROF. C Grammar forms the basis of linguistic precision in any spoken and written language. And lack of precision can lead to serious mishaps. Boccaccio has it, for example, that two foreigners, staying overnight at an inn in Tuscany, asked for two 'white' sheets. They later found themselves sleeping between sheets smeared with 'white' paint because, as the inn-keeper explained the following day, you shouldn't say 'white', but 'newly-laundered'. Do you understand?
- SGT. B It seems to me that the inn-keeper could well understand what the couple wanted to say ... And even more considering they were foreigners ...
- PROF. C Oh, but the inn-keeper had understood, but he wanted to teach them a lesson.
- SGT. B Why? What had they done?
- PROF. C Nothing, but ...
- MR. A *(In a bad mood, butting in)*
To me this story sounds like a load of bollocks!
- PROF. C But it's Boccaccio!
-

- MR. A It's a load of bollocks just the same! And I cannot understand how, soaked as you are, you can be bothered to think about grammar ... Aren't you worried? Are you feeling calm? Do you think everything's all right? Do you think this situation's normal? Is this a place like any other? Don't you sense something odd, mysterious, unclear? Tell me, answer, speak!
...
- PROF. C Well, let me speak, then! ... Would you like a practical, operative answer, or more of a rational-philosophical one?
- MR. A What do you mean?
- PROF. C Do you want a yes or no, sort of informal and in the family, so to speak, or would you rather have a more detailed analysis?
- MR. A For Heaven's sake! I want to know what you think of all this business! If you're worried! If you think everything's normal!
- PROF. C Well, what I think is ...
- SGT. B *(clears his throat)*
Erm ... Excuse me. It's almost seven o'clock, and at seven I like soaking my feet briefly. Today I was thinking I'd have to skip my usual routine, since I was supposed to be meeting Mr. Hamilton ... But since he hasn't shown up, I'd quite like to soak them, if you've got nothing against it ...
- MR. A Go ahead ...
- SGT. B Thank you
- MR. A *(to professor C.)*
And so ... ?
- SGT. B Ehm ... The fact is I wouldn't like to miss out on your discussion. Could I ... leave the bathroom door open ... or even soak my feet here?
- PROF. C Go ahead. Since we're going to spend the night together, I don't think we need to be too formal ...
- SGT. B Thank you.
(He goes to the bathroom and returns a short while later with a basin full of hot water, which he puts on the floor in front of a chair. He then proceeds to indulge in a careful and relaxing footbath. He does up his trousers, takes off his shoes and socks, pours into the basin the contents of a sachet which he takes from his pocket and which stirs into a nice lather ...)
- MR. A So?
- PROF. C So, would you tell me, to start the ball rolling, what's wrong with this situation. A building with three different addresses? Unusual, but not impossible! Three different people who show up for an appointment at the
-

- same time? But five o'clock is a classic time for meetings, and my own wasn't even specifically for that time.
- MR. A But why all here? In ... these premises, with three different doors?
- PROF. C Aurora Guesthouse, Infomac Ltd., Olympus Press.
- MR. A Without nameplates, without names, without anything?
- PROF. C My dear Sir, it's as simple as pie! Olympus Press has just moved: the new address is not even in the telephone directory ... The Aurora Guesthouse ... well, from what I've understood, at the Aurora Guesthouse you had planned an amorous tryst, with a lady ...
- SGT. B Ehm, ehm ... Pardon pardon!
- PROF. C Some degree of discretion is more than natural. As regards Sgt. Springthorpe's Infomac ... the sergeant himself mentioned the Secret Service: I don't want to pry, but Infomac ... could even be a cover, one of those companies used to hide ...
- MR. A Come on! Machinery for recycling empty tooth-paste tubes! This is exactly what the Sergeant himself said.
- SGT. B But it's Army business! Toothpaste used by all three forces. Not only that, but we're also dealing in tubes from NATO bases in Europe: a business – I don't think I'm letting anything out of the bag – that's worth millions. I'm not surprised Infomac prefers to keep a low profile!
- PROF. C Very likely ... their profits are probably shared by certain people ...
- MR. A By who, for example?
- SGT. B Ehm, ehm.
- PROF. C Well, the odd politician, probably.
- MR. A Is that true?
- SGT. B Ehm, ehm.
(Sings, standing with his feet in the basin, turning a deaf ear)
"Blue moon ... I see you standing alone ... "
- PROF. C We've obviously got it right. So, as you can see, everything's perfectly logical.
- MR. A Even so, why only one room?
- PROF. C Just an address. Have you ever been to Montecarlo, or Jersey, or even better, the Bahamas? There you find three room flats serving as the legal address for over one hundred and fifty commercial, industrial and financial companies. Nothing but a simple address. A company like Infomac, obviously, doesn't need much space.
-

- MR. A What about your publishing company?
- PROF. C It's a small publisher. It probably only needs a representative office in the centre, even a shared one is probably enough, and the actual work is done in the suburbs, where rents are lower.
- MR. A What about me, damn it? What about me? If I'm going to meet a lady, I'm going to need some space!
- SGT. B Ehm, ehm! Pardon pardon!
- MR. A *(bursting out, irritated)*
And you, do please stop that pardon pardon!
- SGT. B Traditional Army discretion.
- MR. A Try to make better use of this discretion. I've already told you that there's nothing strange about this meeting!
- SGT. B Nothing strange? And who ever said there was anything strange? It's the most natural thing in the world: a man and a woman ... You can't get any more natural!..
(hums)
"When I was just ... a little girl
I asked my mother ... what will I be ... "
- MR. A I can't stand him!
- PROF. C You said, quite rightly, 'I need space'. Obviously, the meeting place is one thing; an other thing is where the meeting – let say – is consummated. I have no doubt that, if the lady had turned up, a discreet coachman would have whisked you thither.
(Pause. Sergeant B goes on humming his song.)
- MR. A *(turning round, miserable)*
Hello? ... Is anybody there? ...
- SGT. B Not again?
- MR. A Is somebody there?
(Suddenly, almost with a jolt, aggressively, he starts the argument again with the Professor.)
And what about the minibar, eh? When I open it, there's only beer! He opens it, and there's orange juice! You open it ... and there's hot chocolate!
- PROF. C *(Laughs, shaking his head almost with compassion)*
No, no! You don't know your Schopenhauer!
- SGT. B Oh yes, that German racing driver!
(But he doesn't look convinced)
-

- PROF. C The World as Will and Representation. You fancied a beer, and you only 'saw' beer. The Sergeant wanted orange juice, and only had eyes for orange juice. Each one of us sees what he wants to see; each one imagines what he wants. If I like blondes, I will notice blondes especially, and in the evening – going back over the day – I think I've only seen blondes.
- SGT. B *(He's got it, at last!)*
Schumacher!
- MR. A And what about your hot chocolate?
- SGT. B Ah, that's really inexplicable! In this case there is no doubt we're up against a miracle! A real miracle!
- MR. A I would not say a miracle, but something mysterious, certainly!
- PROF. C Well, let's call it a miracle then. There's not much difference between miracles and mysteries, in the face of Logic and Reason.
- MR. A You feel like a hot chocolate, you open the fridge, and, lo and behold, what do you find? Excellent hot chocolate!
- PROF. C Well, it wasn't excellent, it was just about drinkable!
- MR. A Do you find it reasonable?
- PROF. C No.
- MR. A Aha, you see? And why's that?
- PROF. C Because normally you don't put hot chocolate in the fridge!
- MR. A So, how do you explain it?
- PROF. C Somebody wanted to cool it down and wasn't patient enough to wait.
- MR. A Is that all?
- PROF. C It's sufficient.
- MR. A Somebody who?
- PROF. C I don't know!
- MR. A *(as if he had caught him out)*
Aha!
- PROF. C How am I supposed to know? It's the first time I've been here. But somebody must have put it in there!
- MR. A And how can you know that?
- PROF. C Because it was in there. Don't you find it sufficient proof?
-

- SGT. B *(in the meantime he has begun reading a paper, reacts to the level the voices have reached)*
Shh, please!
- PROF. C The argument goes as follows: hot chocolate drinks are not born and bred in fridges. If one comes across a hot chocolate – or something similar – in a fridge, it's a sign that there is, or there has been, someone who put it there. Cogito, ergo sum. Cioccolatam posuit, ergo est! Your old Descartes!
- SGT. B *(to Mr. A, as if warning him)*
Hee hee, you had better watch out, the Professor writes thrillers!
- PROF. C But the actual story of that somebody and his hot chocolate can be told in a thousand ways. Here we leave the field of logical certainty, and enter the one of phenomenological feasibility. We can put forward any number of hypotheses. For example. Before going home, early, to avoid being caught out on the streets by the practice, somebody, from the Aurora Guesthouse, Infomac, or Olympus Press, ordered a drink from the bar opposite. The barman came up bringing 'the usual', as usually happens in offices. One of the 'usual' drinks is hot chocolate for Mrs. Major. Mrs. Major normally waits for the chocolate to cool a little, but this time she can't, because of the practice she's got to go home. So Mrs. Major puts the hot chocolate in the fridge. Someone tells her she shouldn't put hot things in the fridge, but she doesn't care: the fridge belongs to the company! And then ... she forgets it.
- MR. A Do you find it credible?
- PROF. C Do you find a miracle more credible? What do you think more likely: a mystery, or the fact that someone, at about five o'clock, orders a hot chocolate? Shall we do a survey of bars, and see what they do more of: hot chocolate or miracles?
- SGT. B Hot chocolate.
(Pause)
I didn't quite get who Mrs. Major is.
(A sudden doubt)
Ah ... pardon pardon!
- MR. A *(After a pause)*
And what about the doors?
- PROF. C A small case of collective hallucination. Probably what you thought, and what for a moment I almost believed myself, wasn't at all true. Were they really locked? Have we really tried to open them? A hypothesis: you turned the handle the wrong way, this way instead of that way, and we – influenced by you – did the same. But I'm sure that if I try now, the doors will easily open. Is this the Sergeant's door?
(He goes up to door n° 2 and opens it the with the utmost ease)
See?
-

- MR. A And the downpour, eh? A deluge in Oxford Street and not even a drop in Bloomsbury Square?
- PROF. C Why not? Listen: wherever there's a downpour there must be a line dividing where it's rain from where it isn't. All right?
- SGT. B That's true. The same thing happens with sun and shade.
- PROF. C This dividing line, in the case of today's shower, cut exactly through this building; in fact, through this very room!
- MR. A *(with evident sarcasm)*
Obviously; everything is crystal clear! An exceptional case, but easily explained! A lucky case!
- PROF. C Lucky! I wouldn't put it that way!
- MR. A Why not! Here we are, terrified by these mysterious facts and strange coincidences, and we find out that everything is logical and perfectly explainable!
- SGT. B Let me just say that I'm not at all terrified!
- PROF. C Anyway, it wasn't my intention to argue that the situation is particularly fortunate. In fact, it's better never to say whether something is good or bad ...
- SGT. B What, what?
- PROF. C That's right. It may happen that an event we consider lucky turns out to be unlucky, and vice versa. An old saying goes that sometimes the gods, when they want to punish mortals, don't do anything else but grant their wishes!
- SGT. B That's the first time I've heard that.
- PROF. C The grandfather of a maid who worked for my family, lived in a real hovel in a village on the Tyne. Well, one day he was asked whether he wished to sell his house for a sum roughly four or five times its real value. Lucky or unlucky?
- SGT. B Lucky.
- PROF. C Obviously that's what he thought too. He struck the deal straightaway, before the buyer could change his mind, and the very same evening he moved in with his sister, who lived close by. During the night ... the house collapsed!
- SGT. B The jammy bastard! Pardon!
- MR. A *(aggressive)*
That's o.k. for him! But what about the buyer?
-

- SGT. B Well, hard luck for him,.
- PROF. C There you are wrong. Because he thought that below the house there was a seam of coal. And the house's collapse would save demolition costs.
- SGT. B Well, he was a jammy bastard, too!
- PROF. C Not exactly: because it turned out there was no coal.
- SGT. B Doubly jammy the granddad!
- PROF. C I knew you'd say that! But the fact is that by moving house straightaway and in a great rush as he did, for fear that the buyer would change his mind, he caught pneumonia, and two weeks later he snuffed it! See? That's life!
- SGT. B Ah, life! (*pause*) As my old vicar used to say ... Nobody ever departs from life alive!
- MR. A I can't stand him!.
- SGT. B What can't you stand?
- MR. A You! You! Can't you shut up?
- SGT. B (*between surprise and irritation*)
Who, me? But he talks far more than I do!
- MR. A I know! The Professor loves talking! But you ... You come out with such things ... they really get on my nerves! Just tell me what's the good, on a day like this, when you can't understand a thing, of coming out with witticisms like 'nobody departs' What was it?
- SGT. B (*with conviction*)
Nobody departs from life alive.
- MR. A There you are!
- SGT. B But it's not a witticism: it's true!
- MR. A (*Getting progressively more irritated until he explodes*)
It's not 'true'! It's obvious! It's god dam ridiculous! How does one depart from life? By dying! So what's the sense of saying that no-one departs from life alive? If somebody, after death, is still alive, it means that he hasn't departed life: so he's not dead! In other words, if you die, you die; if you are alive, you are alive!
- PROF. C The stoics used to say: "While you live, death is not there, so why be afraid of it? When death comes, you are no longer there: so how could you be afraid of it?"
- MR. A Thus spoke Sheherazade!
(*Pause*)
-

- SGT. B Who?
- PROF. C Zarathustra.
- MR. A I meant to say Zarathustra. Don't you correct me! I can correct myself! I know, who Zarathustra is!
(Pause)
- SGT. B I don't know who Zarathustra is. The trouble with being in the Army is that you never meet anyone! You're there, in the barracks, all day long, evening comes, a parade every now and then, an exercise every blue moon ... When there's a war on they give you a blue berretta and send you to change babies' nappies. Then you retire, you go back to your village ... and your old friends see you and say "Oh, here you are again!" Or else you die ... and when people read the obituary, they say "Oh yes, I'd forgotten about him!". Or, even worse – "Isn't he already dead?".
- MR. A Not again! Always this talk about death! Can't we find something less ... something less ...
- SGT. B I'll tell you a joke. To tell you the truth, I'm not very good at telling jokes: I'm more a man of action. But this is a special joke, so even I can give it a shot.
- MR. A It's always better than having to hear about ...
- SGT. B There was this fellow called John. No: Peter. Or ... what's your name?
- MR. A Me? Ernest. Why?
- SGT. B It's important ... He was called Ernest! One day he emigrates to Australia, settles in Australia, gets married in Australia, works in Australia ... but suddenly he's left alone, don't ask me why, I don't know – let's say ... wife and children are all dead.
- MR. A Not again!
- SGT. B Sorry! What matters is that one day he decides to come back to England – because he is English, I can't remember if I've already told you – if nothing else ... to die in his own village.
- MR. A There he goes!
- SGT. B Beg your pardon! He withdraws his savings, gets on a ship, which crosses the Indian Ocean, goes past The Cape, comes up the west African coast, sails past France, and the closer he gets to England the more he gets excited. Then he crosses the Channel, he sees Bristol harbour ... Finally he goes ashore, and his excitement is so strong he feels so excited he could die ...
- MR. A There he goes again!
-

- SGT. B But he steels himself, and catches the train to his home town, which is ... Swindon! No, Birmingham! Or further still. Where are you from?
- MR. A Let's say ... Manchester.
- SGT. B No, it won't do. If you come from Australia, you don't disembark at Bristol to go to Manchester, you get off at Liverpool.
- PROF. C Well, I don't think there's much choice for anybody going from Australia to England! He'd have to disembark wherever they tell him!
- SGT. B Yes, but I don't like longwinded jokes! I prefer to have him get off at the most logical place.
- MR. A Listen, why don't you get on with the joke? I've already got wind that I'm not going to like it at all!
- SGT. B Let's say, a distant city up on the hills.
- MR. A Okay: Birmingham!
- SGT. B Further still, further still.
- MR. A Leeds, Huddersfield.
- SGT. B Further, further ... Perth!
- MR. A *(fuming, very nervous)*
And he comes ashore at Bristol!
- SGT. B He catches the train, and his excitement is growing by the minute ... Finally he gets to Perth, comes out of the station, goes to another smaller station – his excitement's mounting by the second ...
- MR. A Come on, get on with it!
- SGT. B I'm getting there, I'm getting there.
- MR. A Didn't you say you don't like longwinded jokes?
- SGT. B Yes, but one thing is futile long-windedness, as an end in itself, and another thing are the details needed to prepare the punch line, to create suspense. For example, here I'm creating suspense. If I get to the end straightaway, the joke ... fall flat!
- MR. A Of course!
- SGT. B So, he gets to the smaller station, where you catch the train to go up the valley ... He gets on, the train leaves, he begins to see his valley ...
- MR. A *(pressing him on, irritated)*
His excitement's growing!
-

-
- SGT. B Didn't I say that?
- MR. A Yes, yes!
- SGT. B His excitement's growing continually as he sees the valley, recognises the mountains, the lakes, and the hamlet at the bottom of the valley where the train leaves him ... and where ... at last ... he catches the bus ...
- MR. A Even a bus! But where the hell does he live?
- PROF. C Don't interrupt him!
- SGT. B The bus begins to climb, and climbs, and climbs, and climbs ... He's more and more excited by the minute, he makes out the meadows, the woods where he played when he was small, the paths where he went courting his first girlfriend, the football pitch where he first played ... He really feels like his heart is about to burst ... Then he sees the church spire, the square, where the bus stops and lets him off ...
- MR. A Has he arrived?
- SGT. B Almost.
- MR. A Doesn't he have to go miles on foot?
- SGT. B Do you already know it?
- MR. A Nooo!
- PROF. C Don't interrupt him.
- SGT. B So, Ernest gets off, with his two suitcases ... Did I say he'd got two suitcases?
- MR. A No, but it doesn't matter.
- SGT. B They're important!
- MR. A All right, now you've told us!
- PROF. C Don't interrupt him. And you, don't let yourself be interrupted!
- SGT. B Well, strictly speaking I should start again: it's much better if this fellow, with his two suitcases, leaving Australia, arriving in Bristol, catches the train ...
- MR. A Okay, we can try imagining it. Go on. We've got to the village.
- SGT. B I warned you that I am not good at telling jokes! I know I'm not good!
- MR. A Get on with it!!!
- SGT. B So, he takes his suitcases and starts walking along the road from the bus stop to his old house, the house of his forbears, and of course you can
-

imagine how his excitement pikes as he sees the alleys, the houses, the backyards. Suddenly, coming from the other end of the street ... he sees the postman! Think of his excitement ...

MR. A For the postman?!

SGT. B The postman is an old childhood friend of his, they used to play together, he hasn't seen him for twenty years! Twenty years!

MR. A Okay.

SGT. B Ernest puts his suitcases down, so moved inside he can hardly speak, and shouts – "Peter, Peter!"
(Speaking in a normal tone of voice, like a footnote)
Peter is the postman's name

MR. A Yes, yes, go on!

SGT. B "Peter, Peter!" The postman stops, turns round, looks at him, and calmly asks: "Oh, Ernest: you aren't going away, are you?"

MR. A What?

SGT. B "Oh, Ernest: you aren't going away, are you?"
(Astonished pause)

MR. A *(indignant and quivering with rage)*
That's a barbarous and outrageous joke!

SGT. B Do you see why the suitcases were important? Otherwise the postman ...

MR. A It's a completely idiotic joke!

SGT. B You wanted something amusing ...

MR. A And do you think that's amusing? Can't you see, it's tragic! It means that we don't mean anything, we don't exist! It isn't at all important whether we are here or not.

SGT. B Maybe; but doesn't the postman make you laugh?

MR. A The postman?!

SGT. B Well, not very bright, is he?

MR. A I can't stand him!

SGT. B Listen, since you're so hard to please, why don't you tell one?

MR. A I don't feel like it. I've got other things on my mind, you know!

SGT. B Ehm, ehm. Pardon pardon!

- PROF. C Just the same, it would be the right thing to do, to help pass the time, if nothing else. I've told the story of the old man's house, the Sergeant has related this apologue ...
- MR. A Apologue?! You call it an apologue?! And why not a parable, if you really must!
- SGT. B *(modestly)*
No, no ... just a joke! I already tell them badly: if I go to the mess and say: 'I'm going to tell you an apologue ... or a parable ... '
- MR. A *(suddenly very heated)*
But you're both mad! Blind and mad! Don't you understand where we are? Don't you see what's happened to us?
(Pause. The other two look at him rather surprised)
I saw a film once.
- SGT. B Is it a joke?
- MR. A No! ... No, it wasn't a film: it was a play. It was set on board of a ship. The ship's about to leave for some kind of cruise, a luxury one, you might say, very select ... The first passenger arrives, a man of about fifty, well-dressed, distinguished... Then a young woman arrives ... then more people ... The captain does the introductions, the passengers get to know each other, different groups begin to form, with the normal likes and dislikes, the petty antagonisms that always exist between people who live together or are going to be doing so for a time ... And then certain odd ... oddities begin to come to light ...
- SGT. B Like what?
- MR. A For example ... nobody seems to remember why they're going on the cruise, and why they're all there alone, without husbands or wives, without relations, without anyone. And they don't even remember how they got there. For example, the last thing one man remembers before boarding the ship ... was that he was at home, in bed, ill ... Obviously I'm better, he says; and probably, no, certainly, he's on this cruise to convalesce. Of course! Now he remembers: the doctor had told him: 'The minute you're better ... what about a nice cruise to the Tropics!'. All very clear, but with some muddy bits, like gaps: the bed ... then the ship ... what about the in between? Somebody else, on the other hand, remembers everything perfectly, or so he thinks. That morning he'd gone to the bank to draw some cash: obviously, it must have been for the cruise. And just as he was about to leave there was a robbery. He actually found himself face to face with one of the robbers, pointing a gun and shouting at him to shut up and don't move. But at that instant all Hell broke loose: the police stormed the bank, the robbers opened fire, and he must have fainted, because suddenly he doesn't remember anything. Apart from the fact that he'd gone aboard, naturally ... But he couldn't remember how he'd got there or who'd taken him.
- PROF. C I've got it.
-

- SGT. B Is it finished?
- MR. A Dead! Do you understand? They were dead! And that was death! People die like that! Suddenly ... the void. One last clear recollection, then a strange void, and then the ship ...
- SGT. B That's a good one! And he's always complaining it's me who's talking about death!
- MR. A That was the imagination of a writer, I know. But who knows how you die? And if it's really like that? What if this, all this, was nothing but the moment that divides life from death? You find yourself in a strange place, you've come for a strange reason, you meet strange people ... you wait for people who are late, that don't turn up, that perhaps were never supposed to turn up ... There's nobody outside: the city is empty ... more than empty: deserted! The atmosphere is tense, you squabble, you argue over nothing, you suffocate, you feel uneasy, you tell idiotic stories ... And suddenly, some apparently unexplainable coincidence, something you remember, an intuition, an hypothesis ...
- PROF. C I understand.
- SGT. B I'm sorry, what was that? I got a bit lost.
- MR. A Dead. What if we are like them? What if we are in that limbo between life and death, and all we've got to do is understand, resign ourselves, finish dying? Who says it's not like that? And this incredible edginess that's got into us ...
- SGT. B I'm not edgy in the least.
- MR. A ... Couldn't this be life's last attempt to resist, to rebel against death?
- SGT. B And what happens in the end?
- MR. A Who knows? Little by little we might be enveloped by darkness ... then we all fall asleep one after the other ... and good-night!
(*To the Prof.*)
Do you see? For me ... it's been enough to sense it ... and I already feel much more calm. As if ... I'd drunk a sedative. Or I'd got rid of some nightmare or other. As if this were a necessary step to take! To understand ... to resign oneself ... to finish.. Now you will probably trot out your rational explanations, and knife me with your sarcasm ...
- PROF. C Noo, good Heavens, no! Well, maybe a little: you say 'darkness will envelop us ... we'll fall asleep one after the other ... '. Well, it's seven thirty in the evening: normally darkness actually falls at this time; and if it's true, as they claim, that the emergency pollution exercise is going to go on all night, it is not unlikely that I, for one, might fall asleep. As regards the rest, however, I've got no rational objection whatsoever. On the contrary, my rationality itself forbids me from pronouncing on these matters! What the Hell do I know about death? I've only ever seen it from the
-

other side, from the side of the living! How do I know how you see it when you're in the middle of it? How the Hell am I to prove what you say is untrue? I have no experience in the matter. Apart from anything else, it would be the first time I died. I don't think we need come up with such drastic conclusions Frankly, I only came here to pick up some proofs. It so happens that it's a book I care very much about: but I care about it while I'm alive. Posthumous glory, okay, is a wonderful thing, but let's keep it for as late as possible! You are telling me we're dead! I can't prove otherwise, ergo, we shall see. But if tomorrow morning, once the all-clear has been sounded, the editor of Olympus Press comes here and says: 'My dear Mr. Wittfield, with two tees, here's your proofs!', and I leave, and I correct them, and I bring them back, and the book comes out, and it sells two hundred thousand copies, and I go on a nice cruise to the Caribbean, on a nice ship with no mystery, and perhaps even with a nice blonde of the kind I like ... then, my dear Mister what's-your-name, I'll be only too pleased to send you a nice card signed "From the Caribbean, with best wishes, to the biggest harbinger of bad luck, the greatest jinx hoodoo sorcerer, the world record breaker pain in the arse, I ever met in my whole life!"

(Big sigh of relief)

Ooohhhh!

MR. A Are you feeling edgy?

PROF. C *(with emphasis)*

No, I'm not. I'm feeling very calm! But you should bear in mind that there's a warning siren, an emergency pollution exercise, a warning call all the same: all right? My cholesterol is a little high, in our family we suffer from high blood pressure, an aunt of mine's got cancer, and as if that wasn't enough, you can't open the paper in the morning without reading about Aids all over the place! And it's not even like at the beginning, when it affected guys of that sort! No! Aids for everyone! Aids galore! And for the last half hour, for God's sake, you've been doing nothing but winding us up ...

(But Mr. A interrupts him with a gesture of panic, pointing to the Sergeant on the couch, immobile, stiff, his eyes closed, his head thrown back, mouth half open ...)

MR. A *(almost voiceless and with eyes wide open)*

There you go! ... He went first ... then, soon, it'll be our turn ...

(They cautiously, timorously draw closer to the Sergeant. Even the Prof. seems seriously worried now. But when they get closer to the arm-chair, the Sergeant begins to snore loudly. The snoring obviously shatters the atmosphere.)

PROF. C *(bursts out, almost vindictive due to the fear he has been through)*

A postcard from the Caribbean! A postcard this big!

End of act one

Act Two

Scene one

The same scene, a few hours later. The Prof. and the Sergeant are playing cards. Mr. A is sitting in an armchair, facing the audience, deep in thought, staring into the distance.

- SGT. B *(at the end of a hand, scoring)*
Seven points to me, nil to you!
- PROF. C Congratulations.
- SGT. B The last to play should never leave only one card on the table.
- PROF. C Did I do that?
- SGT. B Yes! When you picked up the five and two with the seven.
(He deals the cards)
- MR. A Where did you get those cards?
- SGT. B *(In a good mood)*
Out of the fridge.
- PROF. C *(To Mr. A, reassuringly)*
Noo, noo, it's not true ...
(To the Sergeant)
Don't say things like that, you'll get him worried.
- SGT. B St. Patrick's fridge! Aladdin's fridge! Ha, ha!
- PROF. C We found them on the counter, under the Singapore directory.
- MR. A But they weren't there before!
- PROF. C We didn't see them before.
- MR. A Don't you think it's strange, a Singapore directory?
- SGT. B Why? There must be tons around!
- MR. A Yes, in Singapore!
(No-one replies. He repeats:)
In Singapore!
- SGT. B I'm sorry ... but we're trying to play.
-

- PROF. C Why don't you join in?
- MR. A What, and have three players?
- SGT. B We could play Bridge. The Holy Spirit can play dummy!
- MR. A *(almost shouting)*
That's enough!
(He gets up, goes to the bench, rummages around, finds a big black book – a Bible? – which he takes to the arm-chair, where he begins to read, very carefully. The others are finishing the hand.)
- SGT. B Seven points to me, nil to you.
- PROF. C Congratulations, you're very good!
- SGT. B Yes, but you're hopeless. The first to play must always try to leave a card on the table.
- PROF. C But I never got the chance!
- SGT. B Of course you did: when there was an ace and a six on the table, and you had a seven!
- PROF. C But that only left the four. What if you had picked it up?
- SGT. B Impossible, all the fours were already down.
- PROF. C No, I remember that, there was still one around.
- SGT. B Yes, but you had it!
- PROF. C That's true ...
- SGT. B It's incredible how hopeless academics are at playing cards. I mean all games: Bridge, Whist, Rummy ... What's the point of all that studying if you can't tell an Ace of Hearts from an Ace of Spades?
(To Mr. A)
Maybe you businessmen are better. Hey, I'm talking to you.
(But Mr. A is totally absorbed)
Good Heavens ... he's praying!
- PROF. C Shhh! Leave him alone ... What's the score?
- SGT. B One hundred and forty-seven to nil. Shall we go on?
- PROF. C What do you usually go up to?
- SGT. B Twenty-one, usually
- PROF. C Deal the cards. I want to see if I manage to score at least one point.
-

- SGT. B *(Dealing the cards, and then playing)*
May I tell you something in confidence?
- PROF. C Please ...
- SGT. B You won't be offended, will you?
- PROF. C I don't think so.
- SGT. B You know, in the Army we sometimes have a coarse, only-for-the-boys sense of humour.
- PROF. C Well, that seems reasonable.
- SGT. B Do you mind?
- PROF. C Please, go on ...
- SGT. B If by any chance you should get offended, let me apologise right now.
- PROF. C Well, I feel curious now.
- SGT. B If you want to score at least one point, you should try playing a cat's tail!
- PROF. C Sorry ... ?
- SGT. B Or a mosquito's wing.
- PROF. C But I didn't ...
- SGT. B Or maybe a falcon's beak!
- PROF. C Yes, but ...
- SGT. B In other words, you should stop playing the dog's bollocks! Ha, ha.
- PROF. C Oh, nice one! Ha, ha, ha.
- SGT. B You got it?
- PROF. C. I think I did.
- SGT. B Isn't it good? Rather subtle, if you think about it. They say we have no sense of humour in the Army, but it isn't true. The Army, for those who know it well, is full of life ... always jolly ... even when we're staring death in the face ...
(He stops abruptly, thinking about Mr. A's reaction. But Mr. A seems deep in thought)
He's really praying.
- PROF. C Shhh, leave him alone!
- SGT. B He must be really scared!
-

PROF. C Shhh!

MR. A I heard, I heard ... But this isn't the moment for jokes, my dear Sergeant! You should be praying too. If nothing else, pray that it isn't really like I say! I'd like to see you if, through that door, or that one, or through the ceiling, or from wherever ... someone were to come in!

SGT. B Someone who?

MR. A Someone, someone!

SGT. B Yes but which someone? Anyone?

MR. A Someone I'm thinking of!

SGT. B And who are you thinking of?

PROF. C (*Pointing up*)
Someone ...

SGT. B Ahh, God! ... And why can't you come out with it? He's not the devil: the very name says so. Someone, someone ... Listen, once and for all: first, this idea that you've got into your head, that we're dead and waiting for an entry visa ... I don't believe it. Second, even if I were dead ... I see no difference from being alive. But let's imagine: suddenly someone comes in, so what? What does he do?

MR. A What does he do? He passes judgement on us!

SGT. B Very well! 'Nothing to declare!'

MR. A I can't stand him! What does that mean, 'nothing to declare'?

SGT. B It means that I've done nothing in my life that I regret or reproach myself for. I've never stolen, I've never hurt anyone, not even in war, because I haven't fought any wars. I've done all that anyone, and not only a 'someone', can expect from somebody like me..

MR. A You haven't got any doubts?

SGT. B No sir. There is no place for doubts in the rulebook. Doubts are for sissies, or for philosophers ...

MR. A All in all, a clear conscience!

SGT. B It's four o'clock and all is well!

MR. A I can't stand him!

SGT. B "Holy Father", I'd tell him, "did you perhaps expect more from me than what I've done? You should have made me different!"

MR. A What do you mean?

- SGT. B 'Did you want me to be a saint, a hero, a great man? ... You should have made me a saint, a hero, a great man.'
- MR. A Who, Him?
- SGT. B Who else?
- MR. A I can't stand him! I simply can't!
- PROF. C Just a moment, just a moment! I think the sergeant has hit the nail on the head: which, if you like, it crucial question of free will.
- SGT. B Seven points to me, nil to you!
- PROF. C All right, I've lost.
- SGT. B From now on, if you want to play, we're playing for money. Lessons must be paid for, ha, ha.
- PROF. C The Sergeant has a specific point of view. Ah, let me just state that I am neither on one side or the other. Fair enough, the situation is rather strange, strange things happen. If we were really dead ... If this were, let's say, the anteroom of the hereafter ... I ... accept ... I make no opposition ... I bow down ...
(He realises he's talking more loudly than normal, addressing himself to the floor above, as if the listener were far away and high up. He starts to talk normally again)
... Obviously, I'm talking hypothetically. Nevertheless ...
- MR.A Nevertheless?
- PROF. C Nevertheless ... Well, I haven't committed any deadly sins either. Let's say that I too have a clean conscience.
- MR. A Well, if that's what we're talking about, mine is perfectly clean.
- SGT. B Well, one wouldn't think so, looking at you. You sit there, restless, tense, nervous, saying nothing but 'I can't stand him'!
- MR. A It's you I can't stand! You, you! With your hippopotamus-like calm, out there in the river, wallowing, nostrils above water, with your 'nothing to declare', with your comments ... You've no conscience.
- SGT. B I don't understand what I've said ...
- MR. A You've said that, if you haven't behaved as a hero or a great man, it's the fault of someone who hasn't made you a hero or a great man.
- SGT. B Actually, I didn't mention the word "fault".
- PROF. C That's true: no appraisal of merit has been made. The Sergeant has merely ... made an observation.
-

- SGT. B But to that Someone you're talking about you can say something more than 'You know, that's the way I'm made'. You can tell him: That's the way *you* made me! And then what does he say?
- MR. A What does he say?
- SGT. B What may he say? Nothing! There is no answer. He's all-powerful, he's perfect, he's good, he's just, he's all-knowing, and God knows what else! He created Heaven and Earth, and no leaf falls that He doesn't want to fall ... If a poor devil on this Earth kills his wife, whose fault is it? It is a leaf that's fallen the wrong way! And who makes the leaves fall?
(*Pause*)
- PROF. C Well ... here ... perhaps you've a little got carried away. Maybe this it's a little extreme ... I, for one, would look for a compromise, for a more moderate line ...
- SGT. B There's no moderating possible!
- PROF. C Well, I'm sorry, but there is! It's true that we're all made differently, but it's also true that in our own particular make-up – I mean, the way we're made – each of us is faced by a number of choices: you can go a little this way or lean more that way. This gentleman, for instance, is a businessman: he's certainly a tax-evader.
- MR. A (*rises, protesting*)
Who, me?
- PROF. C Do you pay your taxes?
- MR. A Well ... of course.
- PROF. C To the last penny?
- SGT. B To the last penny, without exception?
- MR. A Well ...
(*Pause*)
No.
- PROF. C If you wanted to ... could you pay more? Evade ... a little less?..
- MR. A Well ...
(*Pause*)
Yes.
- PROF. C What is it that holds you back? Something stronger than you? Something irresistible, something insurmountable?
- MR. A Nn ... no.
- PROF. C It's probably quite the contrary: Heaven alone knows what you get up to evade them! It would doubtless be far easier to pay up!
-

- MR. A Well ...
 (Pause)
 Yes.
- PROF. C Voilà! If the gentleman doesn't pay his taxes, it's not the fault of 'Some-
one'. It's his fault and his alone.
- MR. A For your information, I would pay my taxes, and willingly too, if ...
 first, everybody paid them! Second, if the Government didn't flush the
 money down the toilet! Anyway, it's true – I'm a small time tax-evader.
 But I'd never dare to say that it's Somebody else's fault other than mine.
 In any case, I hope you'll excuse me, but I don't feel like arguing.
- (He takes the Singapore directory and sits down in the arm-chair to
 read)*
- SGT. B I don't understand why he takes it all so to heart. He seems to hate me to
 death ... Pardon!
- PROF. C *(After a pause)*
 I have to confess, I don't pay a penny in taxes either on my private les-
 sons. If we include my wife, it's not a small amount
- PROF. C Anyway, I must admit that I could easily pay my taxes. All it would take
 would be a little good will ...
- SGT. B And why don't you put your good will into practice?
- PROF. C Who knows? I'm obviously too self-interested.
- SGT. B And why are you so self-interested?
- PROF. C A question of character!
- SGT. B Can't you change your character?
- PROF. C Well, I'm made this way.
- SGT. B You see? You're made this way! If you had a different character, less
 self-interested, more strong-willed ... Yes, it's true; you would pay your
 taxes! But you'd be another person, and this whole discussion would be
 meaningless.
 (The professor shrugs, and seems to give up)
- MR. A *(Bursts out, abandoning his isolation)*
 So, all in all, according to you, everything's all right the way it is ...
- SGT. B *(singing softly)*
 'All is well! All is well, yes, yes, all goes very weell!' ...
- MR. A The professor couldn't be better than he already is.
- SGT. B Obviously, otherwise he'd be somebody else.
-

- MR. A And so this world ...
- SGT. B ... is the best of all possible worlds. It wasn't me who said it; someone else said it, I don't know who, ...
- PROF. C Leibnitz.
- SGT. B ... And I totally and utterly agree.
- MR. A And I have never heard such absurd, such disgusting optimism ...
- SGT. B *(quoting)*
'If you can't go to bed with the most beautiful woman in the world, just imagine the woman you're going to bed with is the most beautiful woman in the world!'
- MR. A *(To the Prof.)*
Hear what he says?
(To the Sgt., growing heated despite himself)
And who said that: a blind man?
- SGT. B My uncle said it, who still reads without glasses at the age of ninety.
- MR. A *(More and more get up)*
Imagine, eh? What about in the morning? And what about when the sun comes up? And during the day? And if you get up to go to the toilet, turn on the light, and see her? ...
(Almost slapping himself)
And here I am answering him! Even arguing with him!
- SGT. B Well, it's more to kill time than anything else!
- MR. A Oh, of course; if we don't talk about death, or killings ...
- SGT. B Pardon! But I don't see what's to be gained by being pessimistic ...
(Pause. Mr. A continues reading, the sergeant sings softly)
"When I was just
a little girl
I asked my mother
what will I be ... "
- PROF. C Hmmm. Anyway, don't think you're as big an optimist as you think. To say that this is the best of all possible worlds, well ... It's a two-sided statement.
- SGT. B " ... Will I be happy
will I be rich
here's what she said to me ... "
- PROF. C In fact, if you come to think about it, one could say -
(In a triumphant tone)
"This is the best of all possible worlds! Yes, friends, brothers, comrades! Out of all the infinite and possible word, destiny has given us the
-

- very best one!"
Okay? But one could also say:
(Funereal tone)
"Nothing we can do about it, gentlemen! This shitty world we live in is the best of all possible worlds! We're never going to make it better! There's no hope! Kaputt!"
- SGT. B " ... Whatever will be, will be,
the future's not ours to see ... "
- PROF. C What do you think about that? Eh?
- SGT. B Nothing! Only if you want to make life more complicated than it is ...
Do you know what we say in the army?
- MR. A That's your own bloody business.
- SGT. B You see? He knows it as well!
- MR. A But I wonder if we really need to go on talking, talking, talking ... If we then ask ourselves what we were talking about, we haven't got a clue. We've been talking nonsense, that's the only possible answer. I can't even concentrate on what I'm reading!
- SGT. B It's difficult to follow what a directory says. Ha, ha. There are too many characters, and many by the same name.
(Mr. A, irritated, gets up and shuts himself in the toilet, with the Singapore directory under his arm)
Do you think he's offended?
- PROF. C No, no, he's only a bit edgy.
- SGT. B I'll tell you what's the matter with him: he's really afraid of being dead.
- PROF. C Yup!
- SGT. B Well, anyway, he should take it easy! If you get up on the first day ...
With the whole of eternity before you ...
(Sings softly)
"Que sera, sera
whatever will be, will be.
Now I have children of my own
they ask their mother
what will I be ... "
- PROF. C Shhh!
(He goes to the 'phone, and unhooks the receiver)
No luck, it's still dead.
- SGT. B Who do you want to call?
- PROF. C Home.
-

- SGT. B At this time?
- PROF. C Yes. I wanted to ask ... whether I was in.
- SGT. B Ah, I see you've also been influenced by our friend! This is catching.
(Suddenly the 'phone rings. The two of them stop in their tracks. The toilet door opens, and Mr. A leans out and stays there, motionless, as if paralyzed. One, two, three, four, five rings ...)
- MR. A Why didn't you answer, damn it?
- SGT. B I'm not expecting any calls; it's definitely not for me.
- PROF. C Why didn't *you* answer?
(Pause. Another two or three rings, then silence)
- MR. A They've hung up! Couldn't you bloody well answer, damn you?
- PROF. C Why didn't you answer?
- MR. A Who was standing closest? You were!
- PROF. C So what? Who's the most on edge?
- MR. A Why, must the one who's most on edge answer?
- PROF. C Well, the one who's least on edge, then! You're the most on edge, he ...
(Indicating the SGT.)
... is the least on edge: what have I do to with it? If there is one person who really has nothing to do.
(Suddenly, the phone rings again)
- SGT. B O.K. gentlemen: the phone is ringing, I'll answer it. Don't panic, remember Tobruk! The knight in shining armour answers the phone. He picks up the receiver ...
(Picks up the receiver)
And says ...
(With a stentorian voice:)
Hello! This is Infotec, Aurora Guesthouse, Olympus Press: as you prefer! ... I beg your pardon? ... No, I'm sorry, you've got the wrong number ... Good Lord, don't worry! ... These things happen ... Yes, it's a bit late, but everybody's still up ... you too ...
(He hangs up)
See? Wrong number. He wanted to speak to Mr. Coleridge.
- MR. A What about beforehand?
- SGT. B Beforehand? It was him again. Nobody answered, so he tried again.
- PROF. C Did he tell you?
- SGT. B No, but it's logical.
-

- MR. A Logical my foot!
- SGT. B He called again straightaway.
- MR. A It wasn't him, it wasn't him!
- SGT. B Excuse me, but how do you know? We didn't even answer.
- MR. A It's impossible to make the same mistake twice.
- SGT. B The gospel says that the holiest of saints makes seven mistakes seven times a day.
- MR. A *(Getting nervous)*
Yes, but a mistake happens by chance: you dial a three instead of a four, or a nine instead of an eight. And if you try again, the chances of making the same mistake are almost nil. There's only one way of dialling a number right, but infinite ways of dialling it wrong.
- SGT. B What?! Only one way of dialling a number right ... ?
- MR. A And infinite ways of dialling it incorrectly! Of course!
- SGT. B Well, I'm sorry, but that seems utterly stupid to me. If it was really like that, people would dial wrong numbers all the time, don't you think? While in fact, in most cases they dial the number they want.
- MR. A I can't stand him.
- SGT. B Professor, what do you think. Doesn't what I've said make sense?
- PROF. C I wouldn't know ... I teach literature.
- SGT. B Anyway, if he calls back we'll ask him.
- PROF. C *(beside the minibar)*
I'm thirsty, would you like something to drink?
- SGT. B No thanks
- PROF. C *(to Mr. A)*
What about you?
(But Mr. A doesn't answer. On his knees is the directory, he puts his hand to his heart with a moan)
Mr. Topping! ... What's the matter! ... Are you feeling all right?
(The SGT. and the professor rush to his side to help him)
- SGT. B Quick, quick ... get something strong.
- PROF. C Where? Have a look in the bathroom ... a first-aid kit.
- SGT. B In the minibar ... A brandy ...
-

- PROF. C But there is no ...
(He stops, runs without hesitation to the minibar, and gets a bottle of brandy and a glass out of it)
- SGT. B Mr. Topping ... Mr. Topping ...
(He takes the glass the professor is handing to him)
Napoleon Special Reserve! Mr. Topping, this stuff brings the dead back to life!
- PROF. C Shhh!
- MR. A No, no ...
- PROF. C What happened? Are you feeling ill?
- MR. A *(pointing at the directory, almost incapable of speaking)*
There ... in the book ...
- PROF. C What book?
- MR. A The ... directory ...
- SGT. B This one?
- PROF. C The Singapore directory?
(Mr. A nods)
And what's the matter? What's the matter with the Singapore directory?
(MR. Astill full of dread – replies by repeatedly jabbing himself in the chest with his right index finger ...)
- SGT. B Something about you? What?
- MR. A *(slowly getting his breath back)*
Me! ... I'm in there! Do you understand? In the Singapore directory! I'm in there – my name, my surname ... In Singapore ...
- PROF. C What are you saying?
- MR. A Me! ... I'm in there ...
- PROF. C Calm down, calm down ... It's clearly quite by chance ...
- MR. A *(tragic)*
No, no, professor! No coincidence! This is proof!
- SGT. B But ... do you by any chance have a house in Singapore? No? So? What are you getting so hat up about?
- MR. A That's proof, professor! That isn't the Singapore directory! ... That's the last cruel joke from someone who's enjoying himself at our expense ... It's the list ... I don't know ... today's list, or this month's, or this week's ... There are all kinds of names, look: Italian, French, German ...
-

- PROF. C Well, all kinds of people live in Singapore, it's a well-known fact. You know, one of those cosmopolitan cities ...
- MR. A Quiet, for God's sake, shut up! That's not the list of those living in Singapore ... That's the list of those living in Singapore ... because they're nowhere on Earth ... because they're not here any more ... Because they're dead, do you understand? Dead! And I'm in there! Me!
(In the meantime the sergeant has picked up the directory. From a position slightly away from the other two, he flicks through it.)
- SGT. B *(triumphant, serene, reassuring)*
Ah, here we are, you see? Look! There isn't anything to be afraid of!
(The other two stop, surprised, looking at him as if expecting an explanation)
Look, there's even someone with the same name as me!
(Mr. A crumbles. The professor rushes to the sergeant and tears the directory out of his hands)
- PROF. C Give it here! Let me have a look!
(Flicks feverishly through the 'phone book, muttering to himself)
Wittfield ... Wittfield ... with two tees! Wilkee ... Wirtz ... Wisnes ... Wittek ... Wittig ... Wloczewska ... Mr. Topping ... Mr. Topping ... calm down ... there's still a chance ... Wittfield isn't in here!..
(He almost kneels in front of him, shaking him)
Do you hear me? I'm not in there.
- SGT. B *(Picks up the directory again, and leafs through it calmly)*
What's your first name?
- PROF. C Who, me? Jonathan. Why?
- SGT. B Here it is. Witfield Jonathan. Wittfield with two tees is obviously a bit unusual. There's a printing mistake. You see? Full marks the Army, eh? See how it solves the little problems in life? Voilà!
- MR. A Shut up! For God's sake, I'm beg you! Shut up, or I'll throttle you with my own hands!
- SGT. B I'm sorry, but aren't you being a bit incoherent? If we're really dead, as you say, what do you want to throttle me for? And above all: how can you manage it?
- MR. A I was reading the Bible, a minute ago. I opened it at random, stuck my finger on the page with my eyes closed, and read ... 'I shall come like a thief in the night'. Dawn is near ... and here we are ...
(Pause)
- SGT. B Who's coming?
- PROF. C Shhh!
(The three men are motionless. Mr. A is filled with dread, the professor worried and dismayed, the sergeant calm as always. Suddenly thuds can
-

be heard, like a stick beating against wood, similar to those that signalled the beginning of the performance in classical theatre. The three react, each one in his own way: reactions ranging from curiosity to anguished expectation. All of a sudden a trap-door in the centre of the stage opens: the door, pushed up from below, turns and slams down onto the floor with a loud crash, kicking up a cloud of dust. A moment's pause, and then from the hole in the stage floor – thrown by an invisible hand – out comes a shapeless rag that falls on the floor beside the opening. Mr. A kneels down; then, all of a sudden, everything goes dark.)

End of scene one

Scene Two

A moment ... before. The trap-door is open, and out from the hole – thrown by an invisible hand – out comes a shapeless cloth, which falls onto the floor beside the opening. Mr. A falls to his knees. All – showing different degrees of paralysis – stare at the trap-door. Out of which, immediately afterwards, an arm appears, which places a bucket, then a broom, then a bag or holdall beside the cloth.

Finally, after climbing laboriously up an invisible ladder, a dishevelled woman emerges from the hole. She is wearing a faded shirt which is somewhere between a dressing gown and an apron, and a headscarf half covering the curlers of a home-perm. The woman is smoking. She comes out awkwardly, arching her back, sticking out her behind, facing the audience, and with her back turned to the three men, whom she does not see. She stops for an instant, draws on the cigarette, blows the smoke out, watching it rise and disperse, snorts with annoyance and tiredness (obviously thinking about starting work), then she turns towards the bucket, picks it up, realises there is no water, and while so doing sees the three men staring motionless at her.

- THE WOMAN Oh, goo' mornin' ...
- PROF. C *(after a pause, cautiously)*
Good morning.
- THE WOMAN I'm 'ere to do the cleaning.
(She looks around for a moment:)
Where's the bog?
- SGT. B The toilet?
(It's the sergeant who shows her ... but the woman has already seen it, or anyway she remembered)
- THE WOMAN Oh yeah, it's over there.
(with the bucket in her hand she walks past Mr. A:)
The floor's very dirty, watch your trousers!
(Goes into the bathroom. Mr. A gets up; with one hand on his heart, he leans on a chair)
- MR. A Ever seen her before? ... Who is she?
- SGT. B Well ... I think it's the cleaning lady.
- PROF. C She certainly looks like a cleaning lady.
-

- MR. A Did you hear what she said? 'I am here to do the cleaning'!
- SGT. B Precisely: she's the cleaning woman.
- MR. A It depends. It can mean a lot of things ...
(*Solemn, oracle-like, despite the terror he feels*)
'I am here to do the cleaning!'
- SGT. B No, she didn't say that, she didn't put on an act. She said "I'm 'ere to do the cleanin'!"
- MR. A ... "He will come to judge the living and the dead"
- PROF. C The cleaning woman?!
- SGT. B Oh, Lord in Heaven! ...
- MR. A Shh!
- SGT. B You know you're really impressionable? Even if she'd said ...
(*Imitates Mr. A's tone of voice*)
"I am here to do the house-cleaning' ... "
(*Normal again*)
She then added: "Where's the bog?"
- PROF. C And anyway, let's be reasonable, it's a woman. A woman, gentlemen!
While, according to tradition, and not only the Western ones ... that
'Someone' you talk of ... is always nothing else but male.
- MR. A Yes, but ... God is also a mother! The Pope said so!
- PROF. C Which Pope?
- MR. A John Paul I.
- SGT. B (*Amused*)
The one that didn't last long. He said it ... and paid for it.
(*He mimes the arrival of a thunderbolt – or of an axe – striking the hapless victim*)
Prraak!
- MR. A What do you mean?
- SGT. B I'm saying that as soon as he'd said it, down came the superior officer's denial!
(*Repeats the gesture, amused*)
Prraak!
- MR. A He's mad! He's mad and without a conscience!
- PROF. C (*To the sergeant*)
Erm ... Well ... I'm sorry, but perhaps this time the gentleman here is right. One shouldn't ridicule other people's convictions.
-

- SGT. B Eh? ... Ah, obviously not, but I ... really didn't want to offend anyone. Let me apologize. Soldiers, you know, have a bit of a bawdy sense of humour ... The fact is I didn't think you were so religious ...
- MR. A Well, and can I ask what made you think that?
- SGT. B Ehm, well, I wouldn't know. Maybe ... the fact that you came here, for example, to ...
- MR. A To what?
- SGT. B Pardon pardon!
- MR. A There he goes again. Anyway, since you're interested, I'm not in the least religious; I'm not even a believer, I'm an agnostic – in fact, I'm an atheist. *(Pause)*
But ... that's under normal conditions, during the day ... And anyway, I always thought you could change your mind ... perhaps with age ...
- SGT. B I've always said that it's better to believe in God, even to new recruits. After all, it doesn't cost anything! ...
- PROF. C I have to confess that, as a modern man of a modern scientific world ... I don't feel God's presence in history.
(He finds himself next to the toilet door and, almost without thinking, pricks his ear up. Mr. A makes an inquiring gesture, as if to ask if he can hear anything. The professor grimaces, indicating that there is no sign of life from the other side of the door)
One would expect to detect a design in history, and even in everyday life. The good are praised, the bad punished ... But it's not like that.
- MR. A Quite the contrary.
- PROF. C No, not even the contrary: because even the opposite would amount to a design! No! You can commit the worst crimes and the dirtiest low-down tricks, and it can turn out badly just as well as it can turn out right ... You can be the most upright of people, and it's the same: You can be tormented by disaster or live your life without any suffering. Instead nothing! Providence is nowhere to be seen! The Ancients were right when they said that the gods were fickle. And inconstancy seems to explain things far better than Providence. Everything happens by chance ... Life is nothing but ...
(The lavatory door opens and the woman comes out, not very satisfied, as sometimes happens when leaving the toilet)
- THE WOMAN 'Ere we are again.
(She looks around)
'as anyone seen ...
- PROF. C What?
- THE WOMAN a bottle of Arial?
-

- PROF. C A bottle of what?
- THE WOMAN Arial ... it's a detergent.
- PROF. C Nn ... no.
- SGT. B No
- THE WOMAN *(to Mr. A)*
What about you?
(Mr. A, without saying a word, goes to the minibar, opens it, takes out a bottle of detergent which he hands to the woman with an almost liturgical gesture, suggesting a small genuflection. The woman accepts the bottle flattered, almost with coquetry)
Oh, thank you.
(Pours a little liquid into the bucket, goes back to the bathroom, and at the door turns round:)
You're all 'ere because of the alarm, ain't you?
(Affirmative monosyllabic replies and gestures)
A bit frightenin', ain't it? It's a new thing. But it'll be over soon enough.
(The woman goes into the bathroom, this time leaving the door open. Her words have struck the three characters to varying degrees. Pause)
- SGT. B *(Softly, with indifference, but almost to break the uneasy tension that grown up)*
Will I be happy will I be rich here's what she said to me
(But a look and a nervous gesture from Mr. A stop him; the sergeant stops, makes a sign to apologize. From the bathroom comes the sound of flushing. Pause)
- THE WOMAN *(comes back into the room, closes the lavatory door, and takes the broom, singing softly the first lines of the Ave Maria by Schubert, or Onward Christian Soldiers)*
Aaave-Mariiiiiaaa ...
(Mr. A, timidly, embarrassed, joins in the singing at the third or fourth bar, also very softly, perhaps holding his hands as if praying, with his mouth shut)
- MR. A Mm mm-mm-mm mmm mmm ...
(But the woman stops. Mr. A also stops. Pause)
- THE WOMAN *(she pulls herself upright for a moment's rest)*
Yup, that's how it goes! Six days' work without a moment to catch your breath, and a day off! In this building, where everybody works a five-day-week! But if I'm not here ... everything grinds to a standstill.
(Pause)
- MR. A *(Goes up to her, cautiously, with a touch of martyr-like elegance)*
May I ... give you a hand?
- THE WOMAN *(Only momentary surprised)*
Oh, fank you. Please ...
-

(Hands him the broom)
(Pause)

PROF. C I'd gladly help out ... just to do something ...

THE WOMAN Can you clean windows?

PROF. C If a Ph.D. is sufficient ...

THE WOMAN A professor?

PROF. C Yes.

THE WOMAN Wha' abou' you?

MR. A I have a small firm ...

SGT. B Well, traditional Army gallantry ... doesn't allow me to shirk my duty.
May I ...

THE WOMAN Dust.
(Gives him a duster)
You're all very kind. Fank you. I'm glad to 'ave a little rest. You know, I'm much older than I look. Sometimes I fink I've always been around ... tha' there was no-one else before me ...
(Goes up to the fridge. Opens it)
A drop of Chartreuse ...
(Sits in the armchair, at the front of the stage, to one side, sipping at her drink. The other three are working: Mr. A sweeping the floor, the sergeant dusting the furniture, the professor cleaning the windows, standing on a chair. Pause)

MR. A *(not without effort, as if confessing his sins)*
It's true, I ... I've always had the odd time. I have always paid, though. I've never been a great one for Mass ... confession ... the last time was the day before I got married ... I've sometimes bad-mouthed priests, even though I'm convinced that on occasions ... 'anyone' would have agreed. Blacks and Arabs bother me, I admit, and I know it's not right ... And I often regret it. And then, if I manage to avoid declaring the odd pound ... I'm pleased, I confess. But I've never done any harm to anyone ... at least not directly. Well, yes, once ... I fired twenty workers, which wasn't perhaps necessary.
(Thinks about it)
Yes, it could have been avoided.

THE WOMAN Eh, the same fing 'appened to my son!

MR. A Fired?

THE WOMAN He got the axe. First, everyone loved 'im, and 'eaped tons of praise on 'im ... and then ... from one day to the next ...

MR. A An ... only son?

- THE WOMAN *(nods affirmatively)*
- MR. A I'm sorry.
- THE WOMAN Well, you know dear, for every worker fired there's a boss who does the firing! Ever though' about it?
- MR. A ... I will do now..
- THE WOMAN It's too late now! My son's gone through so much ... They really crucified 'im ...
- MR. A But then he ... he ...
(With his hands gripping the broom, nods upwards)
- THE WOMAN Wha'?
- MR. A Nn ... nothing ... nothing.
(Pause. They continue working)
- SGT. B Well, I ... just to be on the safe side ... What do you want me to say? I joined the Army at twenty-four, because I'd fallen in love with a gorg ... With a young lady ... very pretty, or at least ... I loved her. We were be-sotted, we wanted to get married, but I didn't have a penny to my name, and the only way to do things honestly ... and let me underline, honestly ... according to the fifth ... no, the sixth commandment ...
- MR. A *(impatiently)*
We've got it, we've got it, go on!
- SGT. B Well, the only way was to join the Army: steady employment, regular salary, canteen-lunches ... Yes, if I indulge in self-criticism ... I'd say I've sort of scrounged, coasted along. I haven't really done anything, I haven't been a great deal of use ... But ... I don't know what else I could have done ... I ... was made in the image and likeness ... of myself!
(Pause)
- PROF. C *(timidly)*
I ...
(Then, rebelliously)
No! I refuse!
(With firm Euclidean lucidity)
I am a man of learning. Full stop. I know I'm here because, colon: having written a book, having sent it to the Olympus Press, having the said book accepted, and having come to the premises of the said publishing house in order to take possession of the proofs, I was therein – I mean herein – caught out by the emergency pollution alarm. Full stop. I'm not a namby-pamby! I'm not a savage! I don't even read horoscopes! Exclamation mark! I am firmly convinced that all that happens in the world is logical, natural, rational, or in any case can be rationally explained! All this without straying into banal determinism, as purposeless as the most abstract metaphysics! I believe "chance" a priori and "necessity" a poste-
-

rior ...

(He has grown agitated, and the chair he is standing on collapses. The professor falls, but immediately gets up, furious, hurriedly, to avoid anyone intervening or making a comment.)

The chair has collapsed. Right-ho! It was liable to break, and it has in fact done so. It was a foreseeable possibility: chairs are made for sitting on, not for standing on. In fact, I'm sure that if we calculate my weight and the strength of the seat, and the wear and tear of the legs, it was a foregone conclusion that the chair was going to collapse. I'm as right as rain.

THE WOMAN

(calmly)

You've torn your trousers.

PROF. C

(vehement, but gradually becoming quieter, until silence)

So, I have torn my trousers. It's absolutely normal that, falling from a broken chair, one's trousers should tear. My suit, unfortunately, is new. It's very irritating: It cost me a hundred and fifty pounds at the sales, and it's in cashmere, bugger it!, it was for special occasions, obviously it's beyond repair, damn these bloody chairs, I almost feel like crying at the thought of buying another suit, uffff ...

(Long pause. The three continue working. The sergeant bustles around in order to move next to Mr. A, downstage. With a conspiring air and tone of voice:)

SGT. B

Listen, do you want me to ask her? Just to be done with it ...

MR. A

Ask what?

SGT. B

I'll ask: "Excuse me, who are you?" or "Excuse me, are you God?"

MR. A

Excuse me, are you mad?

SGT. B

What's wrong with it? Asking's allowed, answering's courtesy.

(The professor, having noticed them talking secretively, goes up to them)

PROF. C

What's going on? Has anything happened?

SGT. B

Nothing. I only said: 'Do you want me to ask her, without beating about the bush, if she is ... or isn't ... ' If she isn't, she'll think we're mad, but who cares! And if she is ... well, she can't lie.

PROF. C

That's enough! Come on, gentlemen, it's ludicrous!

MR. A

Remember your cashmere trousers!

PROF. C

(To the woman, apologizing for whispering)

Awfully sorry ...

SGT. B

It's only to ease his mind.

PROF. C

Come on, I repeat, it's ridiculous! The charlady!

-
- MR. A How many times have you cleaned windows in your life?
- PROF. C I ... Never.
- MR. A Is this the first time?
- PROF. C Yes.
- MR. A So you see it's not that ridiculous.
- PROF. C (*turning to look the woman up and down*)
There is nothing about her that might remotely make you think ...
- MR. A Yes, but these people are smart!
- PROF. C (*Cautious*)
Perhaps we could try with an indirect question, raising some matter that'll force her to show her hand ...
- SGT. B (*he's turned round to look at the woman*)
She's smoking.
(*The woman has in fact lit a cigarette. All three look at her.*)
- THE WOMAN Does the smoke bother you?
- ALL Noooo!
- THE WOMAN (*contemplating the cigarette*)
Eh, the work of the devil!
- MR. A (*exasperated*)
There you go: can you hear what she said?
- SGT. B Well, what did she say that's so strange?
- MR. A What need is there to bring the devil into it? Why didn't she just say that tobacco is harmful, eh? Or that smoking causes cancer? Why is everything she says strange, ambiguous, and hard to understand ...
- PROF. C There's nothing strange about it.
- SGT. B I've no trouble understanding.
- PROF. C Yes, of course! He understands everything!
- SGT. B No, I'm not saying I understand everything; but when someone says that cigarettes are the work of the devil, I understand very well. In fact, I don't understand what there is to not understand.
- PROF. C (*stops the conversation with a gesture, turns to the woman, and with a slightly stentorian tone of voice:*)
Do you know that smoking causes cancer?
-

- THE WOMAN Do you think I don't know?
- MR. A (*conspiring again*)
Have you heard?
- PROF. C Heard what?
- MR. A "Do you think I don't know?". What does it mean?
- SGT. B It means "I know".
- MR. A (*Too easy!*)
Well ... I don't know.
- SGT. B (*sure of himself*)
No, no: "Do you think I don't know?" is a rheumatic form.
- PROF. C A rhetorical form.
- SGT. B It really means "I know".
- MR. A And why doesn't she say so, then? Why doesn't she simply say 'I know'?
Why must she say 'Do you think I don't know'? As if to say "do you
think I don't know, I who know everything, I who am all-knowing?"
- PROF. C "Do you think I don't know" is a banal everyday expression ...
- MR. A And when she said that she works six days and has the seventh off?
- PROF. C Obviously an old trade union agreement.
- MR. A And that when she's not there everything grinds to a standstill?
- PROF. C But how many people really accept they aren't indispensable?
- MR. A You are both mad. And the only child?
- PROF. C Many people have only children. I am one myself.
- SGT. B I've got a sister, but we hardly ever see each other.
- MR. A Why don't you ask her what her son did?
- PROF. C Do you want me to ask her what her son did?
- MR. A (*defiantly*)
Yes!
- PROF. C I can do even better than that.
(*To the woman, still a bit stentorian, with Verfremdungseffekt*)
Excuse me, was your son by any chance a carpenter?
- THE WOMAN No
-

- PROF. C *(to Mr. A, with an air of revenge)*
There!
- THE WOMAN *(After a pause)*
'is father was a carpenter.
(Pause. The woman, almost to herself, adds:)
The poor wretch!
(The woman has finished the cigarette, gets up, looks at the three men as if to urge them on with their work):
Anyway ... I'm sorry ... but in a few minutes I've got to go ...
(The three don't understand)
I can finish off if you like ...
(The three understand and immediately set about remedying the situation)
- MR. A No, no! ...
- SGT. B I'm nearly finished.
- PROF. C We just started chatting ...
(They start the housework again with vigour: Mr. A with the broom, the sergeant dusting the furniture, the professor cleaning the windows ...)
- THE WOMAN I've got tons of fings to do this mornin'. I've got to rush off the minute they give the all clear. But firs' I got to change, take out me curlers ...
(Takes the holdall and walks towards the bathroom. At the door she stops, turns round, and contemplates the scene with satisfaction)
It's good to see ... for once ...
- SGT. B What?
- THE WOMAN Well ... A professah, a sergean', a boss ... 'elping out the poor! What do you think ... 'as it got somefink to do with the alarm? Who knows! Life is a game o' cards! Anyway, as they say ... "while the boat stays afloat, let it sail on".
(Goes into the bathroom and closes the door)
- MR. A ' ... While the boat stays afloat, let it sail on'. Is it a message? Is it an order? Is it a challenge? What does it mean?
- SGT. B Eh? ... But it's only an old song, from about a hundred years ago. I remember it well, it goes:
(Hints at the tune)
'While the boat stays afloat, let it sail on ... '
- MR. A And then?
- SGT. B Then nothing. It goes on repeating 'while the boat stays afloat, let it sail on'.
- MR. A Yes, but she hasn't sung it: she's only said it!
- SGT. B So what?
-

-
- MR. A So, maybe the song hasn't got anything to do with it, maybe it's just what the words say that means something.
- SGT. B So what do the words mean?
- MR. A That's what I'd like to know!
- SGT. B In my opinion they don't mean anything.
- MR. A And I don't feel like taking risks.
- PROF. C If you'll excuse me, I'd like to say something ...
- SGT. B What is it, a joke?
- PROF. C No, a comment.
- MR. A If it's one of your usual rational explanations, please spare us.
- SGT. B No, no, I like them. Then I can re-tell them at the mess ...
- PROF. C This, strictly speaking, may agree with what you were saying. It's a reflection on ... erm ... the intrinsic value of a statement out of its context.
- SGT. B Oh dear, oh dear, I can't tell this one at the mess!
- PROF. C No, no, it's not very complicated. For example, the phrase 'While the boat stays afloat, let it sail on'. Taken, as you say, from a song ... not a particularly intelligent one. Correct?
- SGT. B Correct.
- PROF. C Good. Now listen.
(*Opens the big black book that we've already seen Mr. A holding, and, on a biblical note, reads:*)
"And so he saw the boat Simon Peter and his brothers were on breaking its moorings and being swept by the current out to the middle of Lake Tiberiades. Simon Peter leant overboard, and, holding his arms out toward him, cried out tearfully: 'Rabbi, Rabbi, can't you see the moorings have broken, and the current is drawing us toward wicked Samaria? Why won't you come to our aid?' And he, without leaving the faithful who gathered around him, answered him thus: 'Simon Peter, thee of little faith, do you think a mooring can break without my Heavenly Father having foreseen that it would from the beginning of time? In truth, in truth I say unto thee: while the boat stays afloat, let it sail on'.
(*Pause*)
- SGT. B These song-writers ... they copy everything!
- MR. A And that's in the Gospel?
- PROF. C No, I've made it up.
-

- SGT. B What?
- PROF. C But it's terribly simple. In literature – But what am I saying: not only in literature, in life too! – it's not true that clothes don't make the man! Clothes do make the man! The very same phrase set in a pop song is stupid, but set in its right context – on Lake Tiberiades, spouting forth from someone all dressed up, with the right kind of staging, preceded by 'in truth in truth I say unto thee' – becomes one of those things they then sermonize about from the pulpit for two thousand years.
(Pause and perplexity)
- SGT. B Well, I'm not the quickest one around when it comes to grasping things. But I want to think about it ...
- MR. A So? ... What does it mean?
- PROF. C Wittgenstein said it: philosophy is man's struggle with the ambiguities of language.
- MR. A Forget Witt ... whatever his name is. Round off and conclude.
- PROF. C The conclusion is that you might be right. The meaning of all that woman said depends on who she is, or, better still, on who we think she is. If she is the Holy Ghost ... Well, in that case everything she's said has an incredible and mysterious meaning. But if she's the charlady, as she no doubt really is, there's no double entendre: the stupidity is nothing but stupidity.
- SGT. B She might be a clever charlady.
- PROF. C Yes, but let's not digress.
- SGT. B In any case, God bless the Army! If you brainy boots understand each other so well that you don't even know whether it's Sheherazade or the village fool that has spoken, I'd like to know what the point of all that studying was. In the Army, thank God, there aren't any misunderstandings: the rulebook says what it means, 'Forward!' means 'move', 'Halt' means 'stop', 'Eyes ... right! Eyes ... left! Right-left, right-leftChaaarge! ... Aaattention!
(He carries on with more military instructions, ad lib, getting more and more excited. Then:)
Imagine if the sergeant said left, and half the platoon went left, half went off to the right, and the other half jumped in the pool. For God's sake! You academics should all come and join up for a bit ...
(Pause)
- PROF. C Zarathustra
- SGT. B What?
- PROF. C It's not Sheherazade, it's Zarathustra
- MR. A Meanwhile, we haven't solved anything here ...
-

- PROF. C But there is absolutely nothing to solve! ...
(A noise from the bathroom door, and they all turn that way. The door opens, and the Woman comes out. She has changed – she is holding the holdall – and has grown elegant, with a well-cut coat, her hair combed and without curlers, high-heeled shoes, skilfully applied make-up ... Just long enough to take stock of the 'transfiguration', and we hear the wailing of the siren giving the all-clear)
- THE WOMAN The alarm is over. Just in time.
(She looks around)
Thank you. It's not spotless ... but it'll do. You've been very kind. It doesn't happen every day.
(She notices the three astounded looks)
The coat? A present from my son. Wif wha' I get I certainly couldn't afford it!
(She opens the bag, and puts in the things the three men hand to her: the broom, which is collapsible, the duster, the window cloth ... Then she goes to the trapdoor, opens it, puts the holdall down beside the opening ...)
Good-bye, and thank you again. Do you mind handing me the bag?
(She lowers herself through the trapdoor, takes the bag the sergeant hands her, and puts it under the floor out of sight. But before she disappears, Mr. A cries out ...)
- MR. A The directory! ...
(He hands her the directory, as if pleading)
- THE WOMAN *(Still half above the floor)*
It's not mine.
- MR. A ... It's from Singapore! ...
- THE WOMAN *(shrugging)*
Send it back there.
(The Woman disappears, the trapdoor closes. Pause)
- PROF. C *(at the window)*
The streets are filling up again. The pedestrians have gone back to polluting ...
- SGT. B All clear.
- MR. A Well, I really wonder what these things are for ...
- PROF. C It's been a peculiar experience.
- SGT. B I've enjoyed myself. Well, there are better ways to spend the night, aren't there? Ha, ha, erm ... Pardon pardon!
- MR. A Look, that's enough, all right? I have tons of things to do ... I don't find wasting a whole day either enjoyable or peculiar ... and in fact, if I think
-

- about it, it really seems to me that – and I know I've already said it – that ...
- PROF. C What?
- MR. A That we haven't come to any conclusion. He's washed his feet, you've played cards, you've torn your trousers, you've sung ...
- SGT. B ... I told a joke, you got really scared ... Ha, ha!
- MR. A ... What does it all mean? ...
- PROF. C *(willingly, delighted to show off)*
Shakespeare: What's life about? "A tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing"
- MR. A We've talked a great deal of nonsense ...
- SGT. B You can't always play Hamlet.
- MR. A No, but you could find a compromise! Well ... I ... erm ... I'm leaving. Good-bye, it's been a pleasure ...
(Shakes the Prof.'s hand ...)
(Shakes the sergeant's hand)
... A pleasure.
(In a hurry, embarrassed, anxious to leave)
Sorry about the hurry ... Good ... Good-bye.
(He struts hurriedly out of the door through which he came in ... climbs off the stage and walks away through the audience)
- SGT. B He was in a hurry to leave!
- PROF. C Well, I think it's almost the end of a nightmare for him.
- SGT. B Yes, but ... leaving ... just like that ...
- PROF. C I don't think he'll want to see us again.
(Hands him a card)
My card ... just in case.
- SGT. B Thank you. I'm afraid I haven't got one; cards obviously aren't allowed in the Secret Service. But I'm in the directory anyway. Sergeant Springthorpe. Es-es.
- PROF. C Es-es?
- SGT. B Secret Service. Should you ever need gambling lessons. Ha, ha!
- PROF. C Ha, ha!
- SGT. B Are you going that way?
- PROF. C No, that way.
-

SGT. B Well, hope to see you soon ... and again, it's been a pleasure!

PROF. C The pleasure was mine.
(They go out, each one through his own door. After a short pause Mr. A comes back in, in a hurry, in a panic. He goes up to the 'phone, unhooks it, tries dialling a number, the telephone doesn't seem to work. Mr. A vandalizes it, shouting:)

MR. A Hello! Hello! Damn it! Helloooo! Is anyone there? Hello!
(Through their respective doors first the sergeant, then the professor, come back in. Both stop on their respective thresholds ...)
My front door was locked ...
(The other two fail to reply.)

Blackout without haste.

The End
