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LEMON SOUFFLÉ
By Miriam Gallagher

CHARACTERS

SUE	A College Student
EMILY	Her mother
ROBERT	Sue's fiancé
MARTHA	Robert's mother
ALEC	Martha's brother
LOUIS	Master Chef, Valet, Chief Footman at The Old Abbey
TONY	Serving Lad at The Old Abbey

The action of the play takes place at The Old Abbey, where an engagement party is in progress.

SET

The set should reflect the play's dreamlike quality, giving the illusion of spacious halls and the feeling of a dream. Items denoting various Banqueting Halls can be symbolic, simple & vivid, E.G. a golden coat stand can be transformed into the apple tree or hung with sprigs of mistletoe. Banners (if used) could be of silky material falling softly to suggest ship's sails. An arched opening upstage with curtains (tied back where needed) with golden ropes or braid. Two screens/curtains are USR. and USL. Scenes outside The Old Abbey can be played DS.

MUSIC

The music is an integral part of the play, and should have a feeling of autrefois/other times. One suggestion would be to use extracts from some of the following which are very suitable:

FANTASIE. John Dowland. Lute Solo. (opening of Play/and p. 29)
THE FLATT PAVAN. John Johnson. Lute Duet (p.13 p.32 / Ending of Play)
JOYNE HANDS. Thomas Morley. Consort (p. 6, p.11)
FANTASIE IA RODINELLA (The Swallow). Thomas Morley. Consort (p.18, Rose Garden)
LA ROSSIGNOL (The Nightingale). Anonymous. Lute Duet (p.37, pp.38)
MY LORD OF OXFORD'S MASKE. William Byrd. Consort (Minstrels' Gallery)
MUSIC FOR A WHILE WILL ALL YOUR CARES BEGUILLE. Purcell. Song p.23

Most of the ABOVE can be heard on record: Julian Bream Consort. "An Evening of Elizabethan Music" (RCA Victor Label Decca Record Company

(PLAY opens with Lute MUSIC or SONG. MUSIC stops abruptly as TONY (early 20's) enters DSR., who has been startled. He is dressed as a serving lad in breeches, tights & jerkin in varying shades of green. He looks rumped, shirt undone, jerkin stained, wrinkled tights etc.)

TONY. You called Sire?

(LOUIS enters DSL. He is of indeterminate age, dressed like a footman in "Cinderella": clothes of gold breeches, white frilly shirt, black buckle shoes and white socks. He is half dressed - without his cloth of gold jacket or white powdered wig.)

LOUIS. *(slightly irritated)* Not now. As you can see, the guests are not yet here.

TONY. Sorry Louis.

LOUIS. Antoin.

TONY. Tony's the name.

LOUIS. *(ignores this)* Tonight every detail must be perfect. No false moves. You must listen. Come only when you are called and no interruptions. *(looks at him)* You have seen to the goblets?

TONY. All glinting in the pantry.

LOUIS. And to the mead?

TONY. It's ready and I've rinsed out the flagons for the wine - I mean Sack.

LOUIS. Bon! *(distastefully looks at Tony's tights)* Now, go and get dressed. *(TONY moves)* And *(TONY stops)* Look to your lute. Tonight we will have need of sweet music.

(Exeunt. A chord of music. Then DS. SUE and EMILY who are nervous. EMILY, delicate and birdlike in her movements, wears her best dress, fusses with lipstick, glances in compact mirror. SUE watching her tensely, tall and wears jacket and skirt two piece. Her hair contrasts with EMILY'S fussy style.)

EMILY. How do I look Dear? Oh! I hope everything goes well.

SUE. Mum, don't fuss.

EMILY. You have to do things properly.

SUE. *(mutters)* If this is the engagement what's the wedding going to be like?

EMILY. It's what people expect...what your father *(breaks off, wistful)* what Gillie ---

SUE. *(mutters)* Don't start that.

EMILY. (*getting weepy*) It's alright for you Darling but poor Gillie will never know what it's like to be married.

SUE. (*sighs*) Come on, dry your eyes.

EMILY. At a time like this (*breaks off*) My eye make up! (*attends to it*) What are they like - the Howards?

(EMILY dries eyes, looks in compact mirror. SUE looks away.)

SUE. Bob's mother is fat, wears furs & adores strawberry creams.

EMILY. Susie! You haven't even met! (*puts stole around shoulders, sighs, then*) It will be nice you being Mrs Howard.

SUE. I'm keeping my own name

EMILY. But that's ridiculous. No one will know who you are.

(As they exeunt DSL. MARTHA & ROBERT are DSR. She's fattish, dark with a brooding quality, faces out front as if before mirror, tries on jewels. Her expensive dress doesn't hide her bulges. ROBERT looks impeccable: smart suit, neat hair. He impatiently waits, holding her fur jacket. She sighs.)

MARTHA. Who is she anyway? (*admires pearls she's just put on*) We always thought you'd marry the Matthews girl.

ROBERT. Are you ready?

MARTHA. It's all a bit too (*peers into jewellery box*) sudden for my liking.

ROBERT. You'll love Sue when you meet her.

MARTHA. Mmm. All this love at first sight is a bit suspect. (*puts on large garish ring, inspects it*) Doesn't last you know.

ROBERT. Mother, you're always trying to fix me up.

MARTHA. Robert, I want you to be happy.

ROBERT. I will be.

MARTHA. (*pauses*) Why your father has to be at a meeting at a time like this is beyond me.

ROBERT. He may be along later. I hope Uncle Alec can make it.

MARTHA. I dislike having to involve him. But what choice do I have? (*tries on a necklace*) I suppose I'd better telephone. He's probably forgotten.

ROBERT. I'm glad he's coming

MARTHA . Good for awkward silences I suppose.

ROBERT. *(handing her fur jacket which she dons)* He's the only uncle I have.

MARTHA. Thank God for that. One of him is quite enough.

(As they exeunt DSR. spot on ALEC USR. He wears a dressing gown, holds a glass of Scotch and strolls, talking on phone. He's debonair, 53 approx.)

ALEC. No trouble Martha. Delighted. *(aside)* Good Lord! *(aloud)* Of course I didn't forget. Mmm...The Old Abbey? It's not haunted is it?...Just a joke Martha. *(cross)* Of course I'll behave. *(serious)* David? No I haven't seen him. *(lightly)* But you know that husband of yours. "Here today, gone tomorrow." Sorry, another joke. *(brisk)* Probably the merger. Anyway now I can meet Bob's girl...Martha, love is what matters, not money. Yes...yes. *(nods)* Out by the coast road. No I won't get lost. *(lying)* Wouldn't miss it for the world.

(He replaces receiver, exits quickly with phone. Music. Enter DSR. TONY, fully dressed with unlighted candelabra. He comes DS. Although fully dressed, he looks shabby.)

TONY. *(To Audience)* I can only stop a moment cos they'll be here soon expecting a nice surprise. Nothing nasty like the last place I was in. Cakes that blow up in your face and naked ladies erupting from pies. *(grimaces)* That sort of thing wouldn't be right in an abbey. *(confiding)* D'you know, ever since the abbot got his brainwave we can't keep them out. It's like the plague. Every Saturday, Sunday in Autumn; Friday, Saturday, Sunday in Summer. We are deluged with bookings. Mind you, I'm not complaining. It's all right I suppose, if you don't mind being a serving lad. But honestly! The things I have to do. "Once a menial, always a menial" my Mum says. Take this letter now *(gets letter from pocket)* for one of the guests. Simple you'd think but I can't deliver it. The Rules *(intones)* "No outside interruptions by order of My Lord Abbot while the guests is celebrating". My Mum says "You know Tony what your problem is, You're too soft. You let them walk all over you". "What can I do Mum?" I says. "We need the lolly." "Tell the abbot off for one thing" she says "And when you see that footman fellow tell him" – *(stops, sees LOUIS ENTER DSR, then to Audience)* Now's my chance. *(loud)* Louis!

LOUIS. *(admires his own clothes, turns)* Yes?

TONY. Must I wear this get up?

LOUIS. You know the rules. Create an air of Autrefois, other times combined with haute cuisine. That's the Abbot's vision.

TONY. Sounds like a dream

LOUIS. That is all life is, Antoin. Simply a dream.

TONY. Yeh. O.k. Only I wish I could wear something different – like you Louis.

LOUIS. My position, Mon Cher, is of Master Chef, Valet, Chief Footman. *(TONY sniffs)* We do not choose our portion in Life. It is given. But what we do with it is our own affair *(looks at Tony's tights)* If you will not attend to your hose, Mon Vieux, tck tck.

TONY. I can't help them wrinkles. They're three sizes too big.

LOUIS. Ah! Brother Balthazar was of large stature it is true but he – *(breaks off, stares at Tony's jerkin)* What is that?

TONY. Some of the broth spilt last time *(mutters as LOUIS makes tck sounds)* Pity Old Balthazar didn't cover it with slops then I couldn't be expected to wear it. *(aloud)* Hey! A moth's been having a go at my jerkin.

LOUIS. What is a little moth in a place like this? We must ignore such things.

TONY. Yeh - but seriously Louis, them moth holes is draughty.

LOUIS. If you are dissatisfied Antoin you have only to say the word and I am sure the Abbot will find someone else to step into your shoes.

TONY. *(looks away grumpily, then)* What's for dessert?

LOUIS. *(smiles)* Ah! for a young girl between the two worlds of innocence and maturity, only one dessert is possible *(pauses)* The Lemon Soufflé.

TONY. We haven't had apple tart for a while - or ices.

LOUIS. Any fool can make those but to make the soufflé one must be an artist. Have I told you of the Great Henri? A man who had tears in his eyes when he spoke of the Lemon Soufflé.

TONY. *(mutters)* Probably lemon juice

LOUIS. Henri would say to me "If they could make their own soufflé they would not come here but pouff! They cannot. *(pauses)* No matter. *(smiles)* Not everyone is an artist like Henri."

TONY. *(teasing)* Or Louis?

LOUIS. *(dignified)* Have you no soul Antoin? I make here the food of life
(smiles proudly) My soufflé is a celebration.

(A pause.)

TONY. Can I get along then?

LOUIS. The music. Play what we have chosen.

TONY. I've been practising all day

LOUIS. Bon! And the music in the minstrel's gallery?

TONY. All arranged

LOUIS. That's all. *(turns to go, stops)* Oh no the wine. *(slowly)* We will have
Entre Deux Mers.

TONY. Yes Louis.

LOUIS. Remember I myself will serve The Soufflé.

(LOUIS exits DSL.)

TONY. *(To audience)* Romantic, that's what he is. Engagement parties! I've
seen it all. One minute they're in here getting engaged, the next
they're back getting married - to someone else *(smiles)* Louis don't
do it half right though. He has style. Only I don't hold with this Jack
Be Nimble caper in and out the cloisters, up and down the stairs
(turns to go) His cooking is a real treat if you can take the rest of it.
Funny, they seem to lap it up, the lot. Honestly! The things some
people are prepared to swallow!

*(TONY exits DSR. with candelabra. During music, fade to working light. As lights
come up, GUESTS drink mead from goblets, awkward with each other. TONY
hovers. LOUIS bows.)*

LOUIS. *(smiles, then)* Here you will find refreshment for the body and soul.
If you require something, you have only to ask.

(He takes charter from TONY, gives it to EMILY. She's twittering.)

EMILY. *(reads)* You can choose where the feast commences. Rose
Garden; Hall of Golden Apples; Main Hall; Hall of Mistletoe; Library;
(in disbelief) Dungeon.

ALEC. What a choice!

MARTHA. (to ROBERT) I don't mind where it is as long as we start.

EMILY. (reads) Do not enter the crypt or cloisters or linger on the winding stair (ALEC laughs) After the last remove.

ROBERT. What?

SUE. It's a medieval word for courses

EMILY. (reads) The Lord Abbot begs the favour of a song from the fairest among you.

ROBERT. That's you Sue.

EMILY. Susie doesn't know many songs, do you Dear?

ROBERT. (quickly) Let's choose. What about the Dungeon?

EMILY. (prim) I don't think I'd like to eat there.

ALEC. Look let's take them as they're written on the thingamabob.

MARTHA. Are we going to be on the move all night?

LOUIS. (takes charter from EMILY, smiles) Come, I will lead you to the Rose Garden. (turns to move off SR.)

ALEC. (to MARTHA) looks as if like we're in for a night of Musical Chairs.

MARTHA. What are we eating?

LOUIS. (turns back to them) That is already chosen. Come!

(LOUIS exits SR. TONY exits US.)

EMILY. I do hope you don't mind all the wandering about.

ALEC. Like lost souls. (laughs) Reminds me of our Safari dinner.

ROBERT. (to SUE) All Mother had to do was make the soup.

ALEC. Then off to the Marketing Manager for the main course.

ROBERT. (darkly) And Uncle Alec's for dessert. (laughs with Alec)

MARTHA. (frosty) Yes.

EMILY. (timid) I think Louis is waiting.

ALEC. Come on! We don't want to end up in the Dungeon.

(They laugh, then exeunt SR. TONY enters USC. and watches them go.)

TONY. Rose Garden First Remove. Oh well! Could be worse. Last time they chose the folly near the stream. Everything stone cold by the time it got there. Some people can't ever get enough. Keep stuffing themselves. Honey and oatcakes on sunny afternoons is alright I suppose. Tricky in the heat though. Wasps. Always some snag. What a life! Killing myself feeding people's illusions!

(During above TONY sets up table with spoons, pitcher of mead, goblets. Music. Fade to working light as rose bush replaces coat stand. TONY exits, GUESTS enter. Music fades. Lights on GUESTS eating hors d'oeuvres. Birdsong in background.)

ALEC. *(looks around)* What a perfect choice.

MARTHA. Nice roses

ALEC. *(sniffs)* The air is almost spring like.

(SUE inhales, smiles. ALEC plucks a rose for her.)

ALEC. Allow me...For the fairest.

SUE. *(smiling, takes rose)* Thank you *(puts it in her hair)* Mr...?

ALEC. Call me Alec. After all we're going to be related. When is the happy day?

SUE. We 're not sure.

EMILY. I'd love an August wedding but *(airily)* there are so many things to be arranged.

MARTHA. *(quickly)* Robert's father and I *(breaks off)*

EMILY. Oh I'm so looking forward to meeting him.

ALEC. *(eats)* Delicious! I can't bear that frozen stuff.

EMILY. When you're out all day, sometimes you have to make do with frozen. *(to MARTHA)* Can I tempt you? *(She takes large helping. Others refuse. To SUE)* You're not eating yours. *(sighs)*

ROBERT. *(eats)* What is it?

EMILY. It's most unusual.

MARTHA. It could be fish

ALEC. We must ask for the recipe. (*takes more food*) Mmm.

ROBERT. Uncle Alec fancies himself as a chef if you call fruit salad cooking.

ALEC. My piece de resistance! Fruit salad avec a dash of whatever there is in the drinks cupboard.

MARTHA. Like one of those nameless liquers you usually bring back from Bulgaria.

ALEC. Slivovitz.

MARTHA. (*with distaste*) So that's what it was.

ALEC. (*to EMILY*) Do you like Slivovitz?

EMILY. I don't think I know it.

MARTHA. Don't bother.

EMILY. Is it that bad?

(*Laughter. ALEC offers mead. MARTHA refuses*)

ALEC. Oh come on Martha. It isn't every day Bob introduces us to his heart's delight and such a lovely girl. (*To EMILY*) Almost as pretty as her mother.

EMILY. Actually Susie takes after her father. Gillie was the image of me.

SUE. (*quickly*) More salt anyone?

ALEC. It doesn't need it. (*to EMILY*) Who's Gillie?

SUE. My twin sister

EMILY. I always thought it would be lovely to have a double wedding.
SUE. Mummy please.

ROBERT. Hmm. Let's drink to (*glances at SUE*) Our mothers.

SUE. (*tense*) Yes.

(*THEY ALL drink except MARTHA and EMILY, who starts to weep.*)

ALEC. Whatever happened in the past, tonight -

EMILY. She had such lovely china blue eyes. (*as EMILY weeps, MARTHA looks upset*)

ALEC. You must dry your pretty eyes and look to the future.

(*EMILY rises and flees from the table, exits.*)

MARTHA. Alec! How could you?

ALEC. I was only trying to be kind.

SUE. It's all right. Honestly it's...

ALEC. What happened? (*ignores MARTHA'S glare*)

SUE. My sister died....We were twins.

ALEC. How?

MARTHA. Sh! Alec!

SUE. I was too young to remember. I only know what my mother -

(*EMILY returns to the table. An embarrassed pause.*)

EMILY. I'm sorry.

ALEC. It seems I have upset you. I apologise.

MARTHA. He should think before he speaks.

EMILY. (*with a brave smile*) That's all right.

(*LOUIS enters DSL., bows slightly.*)

LOUIS. If you are ready, I will lead you to the Minstrel's Gallery.

ALEC. Sounds delightful. Ladies, after you.

(*LOUIS exits DSR. followed by MARTHA, EMILY, and ALEC.*)

ROBERT. Sorry about Uncle Alec

SUE. Mummy can't forget the past - so she tries to make me into the Gillie she lost - her perfect little girl.

ROBERT. (*pauses*) But that's absurd. You're yourself.

SUE. Try telling my mother that.

ROBERT. What happened?

SUE. One day when we were nearly five – Gillie died. That's what Mummy says. I can hardly remember.

ROBERT. I'm sorry Love.

SUE. All I hear about is sweet, clever little dainty Gillie! You know it almost feels as if it's my fault she died.

ROBERT. You mustn't let yourself think like that. *(gentle)* Come here. *(kisses her)*

SUE. I wonder if was a mistake to come here.

ROBERT. You're shivering. *(kisses her and the rose falls)*

SUE. Just nerves. Probably the exams.

ROBERT. *(picks up rose, gives it to her)* For the fairest

(She takes rose, smiles. Exeunt laughing DSR. TONY enters DSL., inspects letter from pocket, drinks mead from jug, spilling some on his tunic, mops it up, shrugs. Fade to working light. TONY removes rose bush, puts tray of mead and goblets on side table, exits DSL. Music as we see in dim light LOUIS with lighted candelabra, followed by MARTHA, EMILY, ALEC USC. They could be standing on the table placed behind centre curtain, heads and shoulders appearing above curtain [or holding pole with banner & looking down over it]. Lights come up gently, music in B/G. MARTHA is breathless.)

EMILY. It was a bit of a climb wasn't it?

ALEC. *(looks out front at Musicians)* But worth every step eh Martha?
(She glares) Just listen.

(Music louder, then fades during next part.)

LOUIS. My Lord Abbot is of the opinion that music softens the heart.

ALEC. *(drinks)* I'd like to meet this Abbot fellow. *(EMILY smiles)*

LOUIS. *(as he exits)* You might glimpse him on the winding stair.

EMILY. I'm sorry about all this wandering about. *(to MARTHA)* Bob –

MARTHA. *(interrupts)* Robert.

EMILY. Robert seems so very nice.

ALEC. And talented. Used to paint a lot. *(EMILY looks surprised)*

MARTHA. He has a great head for business. He does the design marketing & packaging.

EMILY. Like the new twirly bit on the strawberry creams?

MARTHA. My favourite.

EMILY. Mine too.

ALEC. I prefer a mixed assortment.

(Music, E.G. "Music for a while will all your cares beguile".)

EMILY. *(nostalgic)* I remember getting a Howard's Valentine Box all done up with pink ribbon. *(dreamy)* I still have that little box on my dressing table.

MARTHA. Where are the children?

ALEC. *(looks off-stage)* Here they are. How well they look together.

EMILY. *(looking off stage)* Come and listen to the music.

(MUSIC louder. ROBERT & SUE join others USC., their heads above curtain.)

ALEC. *(raises goblet)* To the happy pair.

(The mothers raise goblets, drink. Hold pose as music (30 secs) fade to working light. As music plays, exeunt. TONY hangs Golden Apples on coat stand, puts WEDDING PAIR (cardboard) behind screen/curtain SR., fixes chairs, etc. Lights mellow)

TONY. *(surveys table etc.)* Here we go again.

(TONY EXITS SR. napkin over shoulder as LOUIS ENTERS through curtain US. with lit candelabra, followed by MARTHA, ALEC.)

LOUIS. Here is the Hall of Golden Apples where apples like golden promises hang from the bough.

ALEC. *(coming through opening)* Golden apples of the sun.

MARTHA. *(follows ALEC)* Don't be silly Alec. They're false

LOUIS. But a strong wind and pouff! The apples fall too soon and like golden promises unfulfilled lie there. *(pauses)* And perish.

(EMILY, SUE & ROBERT have come through opening USC. SUE startles.)

EMILY. How pretty! Like dream apples.

LOUIS. Like those from an old tree in the Abbey garden. *(pauses)* Whoever picked an apple from that tree would know the future.

EMILY. *(pauses)* Lovely idea having golden apples in here...so pretty.

LOUIS. Enjoy your feast. *(smiles)* And listen to the lute.

(LOUIS exits with candelabra)

ALEC. Ah! Music, the food of love! *(goes to apples)* I wonder if these apples are magic.

EMILY. It would be a shame to touch them.

(TONY brings food. They sit at table with daggers, flagons etc. in these places: SUE, ROBERT, MARTHA, EMILY, ALEC.)

ROBERT. Mmm, it smells delicious.

MARTHA. I'm ready for this.

ALEC. *(to MARTHA)* You haven't done badly so far.

(They eat.)

EMILY. Can everyone manage with their daggers?

ALEC. So tender it hardly needs cutting.

MARTHA. I like things well done.

ALEC. *(as TONY brings flagon)* Ah! some of your delectable wines. *(reads label)* Entre Deux Mers. *(politely refuses TONY's help)*

TONY. As you wish Sire.

(TONY bows clumsily and withdraws.)

ALEC. Sue, when Robert was five I gave him a kite. I'll never forget the look in his eyes. The kite flying up, up in the air.

ROBERT. *(laughs)* I thought it was gone forever. Then at Christmas you gave me paints *(smiles)* I made a picture of it so I could look at it always.

ALEC. *(pours wine)* You should have taken that Art scholarship.

ROBERT. I wanted to.

MARTHA. Don't be ridiculous. What about the business?

(TONY brings lute, sits. Music during the following)

ALEC. Whither the next remove?

MARTHA. Why are you talking like that?

ALEC. Just entering into the spirit of things.

MARTHA. You're being ridiculous.

ALEC. In changed surroundings you sometimes have to speak a different language.

MARTHA. *(mutters)* You're just trying to embarrass me.

ALEC. Part of your trouble Martha is you never bothered to learn another language. You expect everyone to speak yours.

(MUSIC comes to a close. EMILY claps, then OTHERS clap. TONY bows, withdraws as LOUIS enters with lighted candelabra.)

LOUIS. I will lead you to the Main Hall.

(LOUIS exits USC. MARTHA, peeved, follows. ROBERT glances at ALEC briefly, then follows. EMILY exits after them USC.)

EMILY. *(as she follows others)* Come along Susie.

ALEC. What do you like to be called?

SUE. Sue.

ALEC. Your mother calls you Susie.

SUE. That's because she thinks I'm still her little girl.

ALEC. And are you?

SUE. No. I never was. But she likes to think so.

ALEC. *(as THEY pass "apple tree")* Why don't you pick one?

SUE. It seems a shame to touch them.

ALEC. That 's exactly what your mother said.

SUE. Did she?

(A pause.)

ALEC. *(looking at apples)* Don't you want to know the future?

SUE. I...I don't know.

ALEC. That doesn't sound like a lady in love.

SUE. *(looks away)* It's just all this "celebration". It's a bit...

ALEC. Overwhelming?

MARTHA. *(off-stage)* Alec! Alec!

ALEC. Oh Lord! That's Martha. Look, what you need is a breath of fresh air.

SUE. That'd be nice.

ALEC. *(Exiting USC.)* See you by the garden door in a few minutes.

SUE. *(smiles)* All right.

(SUE hesitates, picks an apple. Lights change. Discordant music. As she steps back amazed, screen/curtain is disturbed. Afraid, she clutches screen/curtain SR. Cardboard wedding pair is revealed, looking out front. She stares, drops curtain (fixes screen). Wedding pair is hidden. TONY enters DSL.)

TONY. Is something amiss My Lady?

SUE. *(unable to speak)* I...I *(looks at wedding pair in alarm)*

TONY. *(going over to screen/curtain)* What is it?

SUE. *(upset)* Who are these people?

TONY. *(surprised)* People My Lady?

SUE. Yes. *(pointing)* There.

TONY. *(looks behind screen/curtain)* There are no people. *(fixes screen)* If you don't mind me saying so Madam, you look a trifle distressed. Won't do you know. Not at your engagement party

(SUE, upset, looks at screen/curtain, then at "apple tree")

TONY. *(cheery)* Well I'd best be going. Must get everything ship-shape. *(backs off SL.)* I'll leave you to enjoy yourself.

(TONY exits DSL. Music as SUE picks up apple that's rolled DS. SHE looks at it. Fade lights and music. Then spot on ALEC and ROBERT DS. Birdsong in B/G. Fade up lights.)

ALEC. Oh it's you.

ROBERT. Thought I'd escape for a minute.

ALEC. Great minds think alike. Actually I thought you were Sue. She seems to have lost her way.

ROBERT. You'd need a map to find your way round.

ALEC. Oh I don't know. If you've a strong sense of direction it's plain sailing.

(A pause.)

ROBERT. Why don't you call any more?

ALEC. I would. Indeed I would but your mother...

ROBERT. Do you hate her?

ALEC. *(laughs)* I don't hate her. Nothing as dramatic as that. It's hard to explain. *(looks at him)* As a child Martha always took the largest slice of cake so now... *(sighs)* she's full of well fed indifference.

(SUE enters, looking pale and shocked)

ROBERT. Hallo! Hey! You look as if you'd seen a ghost.

ALEC. Are you ill? Let me call your mother.

SUE. No. I'm fine...really. Thanks.

ALEC. I wondered if you'd been spirited away.

SUE . No...nothing like that.

(A pause.)

ALEC. Well, I'll leave you two lovebirds and proceed to the next port of call *(sighs, exits DSL.)* On to more surprises!

ROBERT. What's wrong?

SUE. I've had a fright.

ROBERT. Spooks on the winding stair?

SUE. No. *(tense)* You know The Hall of Golden Apples. *(He nods)* It seems silly really. *(pauses)* I picked one of the apples.

ROBERT. *(surprised)* What?

SUE. Yes- and when I did I saw a wedding pair - only they were made of cardboard.

ROBERT. Cardboard?

SUE. Yes....stiff and staring.

ROBERT. That's nothing to be scared of.

SUE. They could be us Bob. That's what frightened me.

ROBERT. How could pieces of cardboard be us?

SUE. Don't you see, they were there - all the time while we were eating.

ROBERT. So what? *(frowning)* Maybe you imagined it.

SUE. No they WERE there. It was weird.

ROBERT. What do you mean?

SUE. That perhaps marriage... *(pauses)* As if they were a warning.

ROBERT. You're talking as if "They" were real people. Look Love you 're tired. The exams coming on and all. You're confused.

SUE . *(shivers)* Maybe you're right. I am confused. Oh God! This is meant to be a "celebration".

ROBERT. It is for your mother. She's made a big effort for you.

SUE. For herself you mean?

(As he stares at her, ALEC enters DSL.)

ALEC. So there you lovebirds still are! Come along! You can't linger here all night in the shadows whispering sweet nothings.

(Exeunt DSL. TONY ENTERS DSR. singing casually "Row Row Row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily merrily merrily merrily, Life is but a dream". He sets up the Main Hall [perhaps banners USSR. & USL.] He sets table centre for dessert.)

TONY. (*yawns*) Pooped I am. Thanks be it's almost over. Not a very united party. Splintering up it is. They're all over the place. Luckily the dessert's cold and Louis will see to it. One chore less for me. He likes people to have what they want, only some want what they can't have and others want it all at once. Makes for trouble - especially in a place like this. Can't be done. "Louis" I says, "I've only two hands." (*laughs*) Honestly the things people expect. Sometimes what they want and what they get are two different things. Oh Well!

(*LOUIS enters.*)

LOUIS. (*regal*) Bon! Now remember I myself will serve the soufflé.

TONY. It's The Lemon isn't it?

LOUIS. Oui! The perfect dessert for such a delicate moment in the life of a young girl.

TONY. How d'you make it? My Mum's always asking me for one of your recipes.

LOUIS. The secret is in the melange. How the ingredients are bound together. When you have found that secret – even once Antoin! there is exquisite satisfaction.

TONY. It's lemons, eggs and sugar isn't it?

LOUIS. Too sharp or too sweet will not do. As in life, the balance can be upset.

TONY. Yeh but how many lemons and how much sugar?

LOUIS. How much or how little is a matter of taste.

TONY. But I want to know the exact amounts.

LOUIS. (*pained*) Have you no soul Antoin? You must always search for the full flavour. For each one it is different.

(*LOUIS moves to go off DSR. TONY comes DS.*)

TONY. (*to audience*) See what I mean? He gives me the ingredients but never tells me how. How can you possibly get the full flavour if you don't know how it's done?

LOUIS. (*turning*) To make the soufflé, one must be an artist.

(*LOUIS exits DSR.*)

TONY. (*shrugs*) It's a mystery!

(*He exits DSL. Music. As lights fade spot DSR. EMILY & MARTHA.*)

MARTHA. (*breathless*) Where can Robert have got to?

EMILY. Probably in the Main Hall. Louis has made something special for dessert. A surprise. He likes engagements best he told me. So romantic! A time of promises made and wishes coming true! (*as MARTHA puffs*) Sorry about the stairs.

MARTHA. I'll just rest a minute. (*removes shoes*)

EMILY. Do you have trouble with your feet?

MARTHA. Not my feet! My shoes.

EMILY. But they match your dress so prettily.

MARTHA. Yes I like them. But they were never quite right.

EMILY. It's hard to find something suitable.

MARTHA. (*pauses*) Do you think they're a little young?

EMILY. Yes I did think so but Martha if they're determined to marry nothing can stop them. (*pauses*) They're technically of age.

MARTHA. It came as a bit of a shock. You can appreciate my one & only.

EMILY. And mine.

MARTHA. Yes.

EMILY. If they're suited, I'm sure they'll be very happy. Which is what it's all about isn't it?

MARTHA. (*puts on her shoes, then grimly*) Yes.

EMILY. Of course Susie has her career to think of. When her father died I made sure that whatever happened she'd have something to fall back on. You can't rely on a girl getting married, especially Susie. Now if it had been Gillie, it would have been different.

MARTHA. (*looking at her slowly*) What....?

EMILY. *(ignoring her)* Well I mean she was such a pretty baby. You'd never think they were twins. *(MARTHA stares at her)* Only a slip of a thing my Gillie. So delicate. She had my build. I know she'd have been a dancer.

MARTHA. *(awkward)* Perhaps we should....

EMILY. They said it was pneumonia. I went in one morning and she'd simply melted away. Like a dream child.

MARTHA. How awful!

EMILY. I'm talking too much. It must be the wine and all that mead. *(MARTHA rises)* Shall we go then? They'll be expecting us

(As exeunt DSL. fade spot. Music plays until GUESTS appear. As music fades lights up. TONY beckons ALEC DSR. as OTHERS sit: ALEC, SUE, ROBERT, MARTHA, EMILY.)

TONY. *(whispers)* I have a message for you Sir. A letter. Only don't tell Louis. *(takes letter from pocket)*

ALEC. Why the mystery? Bring it to me later.

MARTHA. *(mutters)* Oh my feet are killing me. I hope we can have the rest of the meal in peace.

ALEC. *(to her)* Don't be a spoilsport Martha. It's good for the figure. I must have shed pounds on the winding stair. *(sits)*

(When all are seated LOUIS brings them plates of Lemon Soufflé.)

LOUIS . *(smiles)* I will leave you to enjoy the dessert.

EMILY. *(eating)* This is delicious.

MARTHA. *(tucking in)* Very good.

EMILY. We must ask Louis for the recipe.

ALEC. *(pushes his plate away)* I'm packed.

EMILY. Susie, you haven't touched yours *(SUE tries some, pushes it away)* Are you not going to try it?

ROBERT. It's very good.

EMILY. Taste it Susie.

SUE. (*upset*) Leave me alone!

ALEC. Has something upset you?

EMILY. (*gets hysterical*) It's absolutely delicious. Take it. Go on. (*SUE shakes head, EMILY tries to feed her*) Try a little bit...for Mummy.

SUE. No! (*rises*) Just leave me alone, all of you!

EMILY. (*looks at spoonful she holds, then at SUE*) Susie!

(*SUE walks to one side. ROBERT follows*)

ROBERT. What is it? (*leading her off SL.*) She's a bit upset.

EMILY. She's not herself

MARTHA. (*to ALEC*) Doesn't know her own mind.

(*ROBERT enters.*)

ROBERT. Just give her a few minutes.

EMILY. (*upset*) Oh this is awful.

(*LOUIS enters.*)

LOUIS. Is everything all right for you?

EMILY. It's my daughter. She - just stormed out – for no reason. She's behaving like a child.

LOUIS. Do not be alarmed Madame (*leading her aside*) A girl growing up is like a boat tied to moorings. She is pulled in two directions. There is sweet adventure in sailing the ocean (*looks at EMILY*) But it is a bitter tug to cast loose the moorings. What will she choose? Shelter by the shore or the deep ocean?

EMILY. Maybe I should go after her.

LOUIS. (*gentle*) You must let her go Madame.

EMILY. I... (*falters and looks away*)

LOUIS. To break the moorings is not, you will please understand to spit on the high sea wall that sheltered the little boat from winds and storms (*EMILY struggles with herself*) No, it is how you say... (*pauses*) A time to cut the rope. A time to let go. (*pauses*) Come and eat Madame.

EMILY. I'm not hungry.

LOUIS. Madame, you will not disappoint Louis? You will finish? No?

EMILY. I'm forgetting myself. (sits)

LOUIS. (*bows*) I will leave you to the Soufflé.

(*LOUIS exits.*)

EMILY. (*in a tiny voice*) I must get the recipe. (*awkward pause. No one can eat*) God knows I've always done my best. (*appealing*) That's all I ever wanted for her. The best.

(*SUE has ENTERED unseen by EMILY during above*)

SUE. You want more than that. You always wanted me to be twice as clever – as if I were two people. (*To others*) As a child I never knew who I was. I'd ask myself "Am I Gillie or Susie today?" There were two sets of everything, coats, pinafores, the lot. (*walks nervously*) When I wore blue, that lovely china blue, her colour -

EMILY. (*interrupts*) Oh stop it!

SUE. (*To Martha*) To match her eyes you know. I felt that in some way I was expected to be her - and I tried.

EMILY. It's not true it isn't.

SUE. Especially at Ballet. Had Gillie lived, my mother said she'd have been a dancer so I danced and I danced and I danced.

EMILY. (*shocked*) It's all in your head.

SUE. And while I danced, I knew in my heart I was a constant disappointment. (*quiet*) I couldn't measure up to expectations. (*laughs*) Sometimes I felt it would have been simpler if I'd died instead.

(*A shocked silence.*)

EMILY. (*quiet*) If Gillie (*stops suddenly*)

SUE. You can never compete with someone who's dead. They always win.

EMILY. You can't wipe out the past. (*to MARTHA*) Carry on as if they hadn't existed.

MARTHA. Of course you can't.

SUE. Mother, you must let go.

EMILY. This isn't like you Susie.

SUE. This IS me. The me that's been mummified, wrapped round and round with the suffocating gauze of a mother's love.

MARTHA. Your mother is entitled to some respect.

SUE. All my life I've lived by my mother's script, done what's expected. Now I want my own identity.

MARTHA. We're none of us free Susan.

SUE. I must be free. Don't you see that? Free to make my own choice. What I do with my life is for ME to decide.

(TONY brings letter wrapped in charter, tied with red ribbon)

ALEC. *(taking letter)* Ah! Another menu from My Lord Abbot?

TONY. *(whispers)* It's the message I mentioned.

ALEC. How odd! chasing a fellow when he's at supper

(TONY EXITS. As ALEC unties red ribbon we see the letter)

MARTHA. *(frosty)* Not just supper Alec - a "celebration"

ROBERT. Let's have more wine. No shortage of sack Uncle Alec?

ALEC. *(reads letter, is dismayed)* Eh?

EMILY. They have their own way of doing things here.

MARTHA. Yes. They're full of surprises. *(to ALEC)* What is it? *(He puts letter away)* The letter.

ROBERT. Mother please.

EMILY. *(bright)* I love getting letters. My sister, Susie's Godmother lives in Australia. *(closely watching MARTHA as ALEC gives her letter)* She's always asking me to go there. Sun, sea, no responsibility *(stops seeing MARTHA'S face)*

MARTHA. *(reads)* My dear Martha, Urgent matters call. I'll return when things blow over. Alec will explain. As ever, David *(pauses)* Alec, what is this?

ALEC. I'd rather wait till we're alone.

MARTHA. What do you mean? Has there been an accident?

ROBERT. What is it Uncle Alec?

ALEC. I'll tell you later.

EMILY. We've no secrets here. After all we're almost family.

MARTHA. Alec, will you stop treating me like a child.

ALEC. *(tense, pauses)* All right I'll give it to you straight. The firm is ruined. David is....broke.

MARTHA. What? I don't believe it.

ALEC. Here. *(gives her his letter)* Read for yourself.

EMILY. *(as MARTHA hesitates)* Will I Dear? *(as MARTHA nods, reads)* Alec, explain my absence tonight. Have to go away to sort it all out. *(glances furtively at MARTHA, reads)* Try to soften the blow like a good fellow. I'll be back when things ease off. Till then, David.

MARTHA. *(shocked)* Till then...Till when?

(A Shocked pause. EMILY comforts MARTHA.)

SUE. *(To ROBERT)* Did you know?

(ROBERT shakes his head, glances at ALEC who looks away)

EMILY. *(to ALEC)* Look what you've done. How could you? To your own sister? *(comforting her)* Poor poor Martha.

ROBERT. *(stunned)* This isn't some sort of joke is it?

ALEC. No joke.

ROBERT. I knew the contract was in doubt and there was talk of laying off some of the packers but this...*(He is speechless)*

MARTHA. *(to ALEC)* You've spoilt the whole evening. You were always the same Alec *(to EMILY)* When I was little he tortured me you know, teasing and provoking and my parents never knew. Now he's doing it again. It's not fair. You've ruined my dinner.

ALEC. You asked and I told you.

MARTHA. But here Alec in the middle of such a happy occasion. It's a....horrible surprise.

ALEC. I'm sorry but it wasn't exactly a surprise.

MARTHA. What do you mean?

ALEC. Anyone with their eyes open could have seen it coming.

MARTHA. If you knew why didn't you warn David?

ALEC. David! He's never listened to me.

MARTHA. Couldn't you have done something Robert? You have such a good head for business.

ROBERT. *(tense)* Dad didn't take me into his confidence.

MARTHA. *(blubbing)* He gave you every chance. Is this how you repay him?

ROBERT. Mother, I haven't sent the firm up the Swanee so stop blaming me. I'll have enough to do clearing up the mess made by my "Elders and Betters".

(MARTHA stares dumbfounded.)

ALEC. Martha, it's best if you went home. You've had a shock.

SUE. *(to herself)* Yes.

MARTHA. I'll never get over it. What about me? What about my son?

EMILY. Yes and what about Susie? What about her?

(Mothers stare at ALEC. A tense pause)

MARTHA. What's going to happen?

(TONY enters with lighted candelabra.)

TONY. Coffee is served in the Hall of Mistletoe.

SUE. Come on Mummy, let's go.

(As GUESTS exit USC. LOUIS enters, looks sadly at plates.)

LOUIS. They cannot see what is on their plates.

TONY. Shall I clear away then?

LOUIS. It is wasted. All for nothing.

TONY. Perhaps they weren't hungry. The main course was quite hefty.

LOUIS. (*irritated*) Hefty? What is hefty?

TONY. I mean filling (*pauses*) Perhaps just a bit rich for their stomicks. They didn't half like the mead you know.

LOUIS. Everyone is hungry even if he doesn't know it.

TONY. Cheer up Louis! It's only food.

LOUIS. How can you say such a thing? The Lemon Soufflé is a work of art.

TONY. Look Louis, perhaps they had business worries. I couldn't help overhearing when I brought the letter (*stops*)

LOUIS. So! You have broken the rules. Have I not told you nothing must break the spell?

TONY. How can you expect people to ignore the outside world and live in a dream?

LOUIS. Mon Cher! We must do as the Abbot wishes. They are hungry. We must feed their dreams.

TONY. Yeh I suppose so. Only it's like a mystery to me.

LOUIS. You have to find the balance.

TONY. (*aside*) Sounds like another of his recipes (*aloud*) Listen Louis I've to nip down to the pantry. Start clearing up.

LOUIS. We must keep to the rules.

TONY. There's not much choice is there?

LOUIS. We do not choose our portion in life but what we do with it is our own affair. (*TONY sniffs*) Variety Mon Cher and music. Without music the atmosphere is destroyed and if that happens then Mon Vieux so are we.

TONY. Oh Gawd! He'll be on the steps waiting for a song

LOUIS. Allons!

(Music. LIGHTS up on Hall of Mistletoe [sprigs on coat stand perhaps and remove banners]. GUESTS are drinking coffee.)

ROBERT. Where do we go from here?

SUE. *(to ROBERT)* I don't know but I must find my own way. No one else can find it for me.

ROBERT. I've been dreaming - taking the easy way out. Like Dad in a way...drifting along. *(laughs)* Howards Chocolates. A sweet soft melting mirage! *(SUE protests)* Is our life together just a dream?

SUE. I need time to think. I must know where I'm going. D'you see that?

ROBERT. Yes. Only don't be too long. I won't wait forever.

SUE. *(shivers)* This is a very disturbing place. I'll be glad to get back to reality...although...

ROBERT. Next time we won't lose our way. *(SUE looks at him with understanding)*

EMILY. *(to MARTHA)* Would you like something else?

MARTHA. I've had enough.

(An awkward pause.)

ALEC. It's been a most intriguing evening.

(TONY brings coffee, pours some for ROBERT and SUE. LOUIS enters with candelabra. ROBERT and SUE remain to one side.)

LOUIS. Is everything as you wish?

EMILY. *(quickly)* Oh yes.

(ROBERT and SUE toast each other with coffee cups.)

ALEC. You've looked after us admirably.

LOUIS. Would you like to listen to the lute?

TONY. Sire, the Abbot is waiting on the winding stair. A song would be suitable.

(Silence.)

LOUIS. Who will sing for My Lord Abbot?

(Silence as they glance at each other questioningly. Fade lights. Gently bring up music, or a song on the lute.)

(END OF PLAY)

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