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## **SILVER LINING**

### **By John Chambers**

#### CHARACTERS

Ken Elworth (middle aged). A Cheshire Farmer.  
Muriel Elworth (middle aged). A Farmer's Wife  
Bernard Allman (30-ish). Farm Hand and Road Sweeper  
Christine Markham (early 20s). Newly qualified Vet

#### SETTING

A single open set representing the farm kitchen (where Muriel and Ken cook, eat and sit), the farm yard, and a cow shed (shippin, pronounced 'shippin'). Also an embankment to one side - tree roots, moss and grass, and entrance to fox hole. There is barely any distinction between the set areas, ie. life flows naturally between them. A five bar gate might pull across the stage to delineate a lane in front of it. So - no set changes and no blackouts, unless specified. Lighting obviously important in signifying times of day, season and mood.

The action takes place on a Cheshire farm, Autumn 1967 to Spring 1968.

#### ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

AUTUMN 1967. EARLY MORNING.

BERNARD ALLMAN ENTERS, PUSHING HIS HANDCART. THERE'S A PORTABLE RADIO HANGING ON ONE OF THE HANDLES OF HIS CART. HE'S THE PARISH ROAD SWEEPER, AS WELL AS HELPING OUT ON KEN AND MURIEL ELWORTH'S FARM PART TIME. BERNARD ALWAYS HAS AN OLD GAS MASK BAG OVER HIS SHOULDER - IT CONTAINS BUTTIES, BACCY, AND A FEW TOOLS. HE DOES A BIT OF BRUSHING. WHISTLES AND HUMS TO HIMSELF, THEN HIS HUMMING BECOMES SINGING - 'HI HO SILVER LINING'. HE'S ENGROSSED IN HIS WORK AND OCCASIONALLY TAKES IN THE VIEW. HE SEES A FOX, WHICH GIVES HIM PLEASURE. HE WATCHES.

BERNARD: I'm just getting started and you're off 'ome to bed. Are you tired, lad - you're dragging that brush. (CHUCKLES) Mind I'll be dragging mine by knocking off time, I will. You'll have to move faster than that in a fortnight or so. You'll have to run 'til that golden red coat's black wi' sweat and slutch. I can see your breath now - dancin' - aye, dancin' in this sunlight. Then it joins up with

the mist that's settled itself over Ken and Mrs. Elworth's field. It's nice light this time of mornin'. 'Soft', you might say. I hope you've not been after 'is 'ens. 'E'll not be pleased if you 'ave, won't Ken. He won't be pleased at all, Reynard lad. Will 'e 'eck. Anything but. An' now you're stoppin' - sniffin' the air. You can smell what time of year it is. Smell what time of day it is, I dare say. An' little puffs of that breath join the mist and it's gone. Like you will be before most folks are up. Ey up, you've seen me. I'll keep still, lad - and you're still. Still as that mist. I bet you're thinkin' - 'There's Bernard Allman - he's out early. What's he doing gawpin' at me. I'll stare 'im out.' (PAUSE) 'No, bugger 'im, I'll trot on.' (BEAT) 'Course trottin' 'll be no good in a fortnight or so. You'll have to fly lad. There'll be no time to be still, Reynard. But you're not thinking about that now. It's only us beggars that look ahead. Your belly's full with a bit of luck. (PAUSE) I do 'ope you've not 'ad any of Ken and Mrs. Elworth's 'ens. You know Ken's got a twelve bore and a two two. Still more likely you've just 'ad a field mouse or summat. An' I would 'ave 'eard if Ken 'ad been shootin'. That's right. Get off 'ome. Snuggle up under the roots of that elm by Mitchell's Bank... I've not told no one about it - in a fortnight the world and 'is wife 'll know. They will that... But now it's a secret, between thee and me.

AND THE FOX HAS GONE. BERNARD GETS ON WITH HIS BRUSHING, SINGING 'HI HO SILVER LINING'.

MURIEL COMES UP BEHIND HIM, PUSHING HER OLD BIKE. SHE'S BEEN TO THE VILLAGE SHOP AND HAS GROCERIES IN THE BASKET ON THE FRONT.

MURIEL: You sound 'appy, Bernard.

BERNARD: 'Ow do, Mrs. Elworth - did you see him?

MURIEL: Ken?

BERNARD: Yon fox.

MURIEL: I heard him kicking up a racket last night.

BERNARD: Be courting his young lady.

MURIEL: If Ken sees him he says he'll put a stop to it.

BERNARD: That's what I told 'im, 'Get off home', I said '- and leave Ken and Mrs. Elworth's 'ens alone.'

MURIEL SMILES.

MURIEL: There's some (A LOT) berries on that hawthorn.

BERNARD: There is that.

MURIEL: Be a bad winter then.

BERNARD: They reckon... Anyway, you an' Ken'll be alright. I did you a pile of logs when I was up yesterday.

MURIEL: I saw them... Keep us goin' this winter an' next. 'Ave you got some?

BERNARD: Oh aye, yes. Ken let me fill me 'andcart, so me an' me mother'll be snug as bugs, we will.

MURIEL: How is she?

BERNARD: Oh, she's alreet - no trouble to no one. Sits there, pokin' the fire all day, from me comin' out in the morning at six to gettin' in at dinner time, to me goin' out after me dinner to me comin' in after I've been to give you a lift, when I get back for me tea. Just sits, pokin' the fire. Never reads a paper. She won't switch telly on - waits for me, so I switch it on when I get in for me tea and I do 'er 'ers. No trouble to no one she isn't.

MURIEL: Ken won't have a telly.

BERNARD: Too busy, I dare say. (HE SPOTS SOMETHING IN THE SKY) They're comin' back.

MURIEL: (LOOKS)

BERNARD: Geese. Be heading for Redesmere or somewhere.

MURIEL: If it's warmer here it must be damn cold where they've come from.

BERNARD: It must that. You hear 'em squarkin' when they're flappin' over at neet. I wonder when I'm lyin' in me pit what they're sayin' to one another. Front one's sayin', 'Come on you lot, stay in the 'V'. We've come a damn long way but we're nearly there, nearly there. I'll lead, stir up the air so you float like a plastic bag on a windy day. I'll lead, but you lads and lasses'll have to stay up behind me, stay in the V - or we'll never get to Redesmere or some such place. (SMILES) 'You'll 'ave to stay on that pond on Ken and Mrs. Elworth's Farm.' Wouldn't they Mrs. Elworth - and hope you give 'em some of that pie crust you make to keep 'em goin' over the winter. But we better whisper it or none of 'em would bother with Redesmere. They'd stay wi' you an' Ken on your pit til next spring they would.

MURIEL: They say 'bird-brained', but they see more than we ever do.

BERNARD: They do an' all - I'm lucky if I get as far as Macclesfield.

KEN ENTERS AS MURIEL AND BERNARD WATCH THE GEESE DEPART.

KEN: 'Ave you got me smokes?

MURIEL: (NODS) I wouldn't have gone to Mrs. Tylers when she opened for the papers otherwise. She thought I was crackers.

KEN: You shouldn't have forgot 'em yesterday.

MURIEL STARTS TO GET THEM FROM THE BASKET, BUT WHILE SHE DOES...

BERNARD: Have one of mine, Ken lad. (GETS A ROLL UP TIN FROM HIS BAG) Only a roley.

KEN: I don't like roll ups...

BERNARD: I was forgettin'.

KEN: 'Specially when you put dimps in 'em.

BERNARD: Only mine, Ken lad, I only put my dimps in... an' yours, but I mean you won't catch owt off yours that you 'aven't got already.

KEN: There's nowt wrong with me.

BERNARD: There you are then.

KEN: I'm not so sure about you though.

MURIEL: Don't be awful, Ken.

KEN: Give us the damn Park Drive then...

SHE HANDS KEN FAGS.

BERNARD: I was thinkin'...

KEN: Parish Council'd be happier if you did a bit more brushin' while you were thinkin'.

BERNARD: They would, Ken lad, they would an' all.

MURIEL: What were you thinkin' Bernard?

KEN: Don't damn well encourage 'im.

BERNARD: (GETTING A HALF SMOKED ROLL-UP FROM HIS TIN) Some of this baccy. Some of this baccy - well it could be with me for all of me life.

KEN AND MURIEL LOOK AT HIM.

BERNARD: (EXPLAINS) Might only be shred of it, but every time I roll up, then dimp it, then make it into a new roll-up so to speak. I'm not sayin' it would 'appen, I'm sayin' it could 'appen...

MURIEL: What you talkin' about, Bernard love?

BERNARD: When...

KEN: (TO MURIEL) 'Adn't you better go an' get breakfast on?

BERNARD: (CONTINUES) ...the same shred of baccy could be in all me cigarettes. You don't waste none. That little leaf, if he were always in the bit I dimp, would be stuck in me trap all them years. Makes you think, dun't it.

KEN: Aye - I'm glad I'm not that bit of baccy.

MURIEL: (TICKING KEN OFF) I'll go and get your breakfast on.

BERNARD: And you know the only bit of baccy I'll waste - if I snuff it so to speak, and I've got a smoke on, that'll be the only bit of baccy I don't use - it'll be wasted...

KEN: (UNIMPRESSED. TURNS TO GO) I'll see you for milkin' Bernard.

BERNARD: Yes, Ken lad, four o'clock sharp... (A THOUGHT) Ey, did you see 'im, Ken lad?

KEN: Who?

BERNARD: Reynard.

KEN: Bloody 'Reynard'. I'll give 'im bloody Reynard. I'll pepper his arse with lead shot if I see 'im.

BERNARD: That's what I told him.

MURIEL: It wouldn't please Sir Anthony Selswick.

BERNARD: It wouldn't, not with the season starting in a fortnight.

KEN: Aye well, it's alright for Sir Anthony bloody Selswick and his cronies. They might have time for careering round the parish three days a week, done up like big bloody jessies. I dunna.

MURIEL: It still wouldn't please him.

BERNARD: It wouldn't...

KEN: (GOES) Four o'clock.

KEN INTO SHIPPON AND OFF.

BERNARD: (HAS A THOUGHT) But if it burns right down, right down after I've died like, still in me mouth, then it won't be wasted... not that I'll get the pleasure of it. I wouldn't mind passin' on though, havin' a nice smoke... A bit of your apple pie, Mrs. Elworth and a nice smoke - I'd be in paradise before I signed off.

MURIEL: I think that's a compliment, Bernard.

BERNARD: Oh aye, course it is - I wouldn't want you to think... nay I didn't.

MURIEL: I know, I know. (MOVES TO PUT BIKE OFF NEAR SHIPPON)

BERNARD: So long as you know.

MURIEL: See you later.

BERNARD PUTS HIS BRUSH ON HIS CART, SWITCHES ON HIS RADIO. IT DOESN'T DO ANYTHING. HE SHAKES IT - NO SOUND.

BERNARD: Ever Ready an' all.

PUTS RADIO BACK ON HANDLE OF HIS CART AND MOVES ON SINGING, 'YOU'RE EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE BABY, THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE AT - AND IT'S OBVIOUS'. (STRESSING THE 'OBVIOUS')

HE EXITS.

ELWORTH'S KITCHEN. TEA TIME.

MURIEL WASHES SOME CLOTHES BY HAND. IT'S HARD WORK.  
KEN COMES IN - SHE MOVES FROM SINK AS HE GIVES HIS HANDS A  
CURSORY WASH AS HE HAS DONE SINCE HE USED TO PLAY OUT IN  
THE SAME FIELDS AND HIS MOTHER TOLD HIM TO WASH HIS  
HANDS.

KEN: What's forrit?

MURIEL: Shepherd's pie.

SHE WIPES HER HANDS, GOES TO STOVE, AND POURS HIM A MUG  
OF TEA. KEN DRIES HIS HANDS. SHE HANDS HIM THE MUG OF TEA.

THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE AND ACTION SHOULD BE SLOW, EVEN-  
PACED, WITHOUT EMOTION. MOST STATEMENTS PUNCTUATED BY  
LONG, LONG PAUSES. THE TALKING AND PASSING OF  
INFORMATION IS PART OF THE RHYTHM OF THE LIFE ON THE FARM.  
TO THE OUTSIDER IT IS DULL, UNINTERESTING, BUT WE SHOULD  
FEEL THAT IT IS CRUCIAL TO KEN AND MURIEL'S EMOTIONAL AND  
PRACTICAL SURVIVAL.

KEN: Them new beasts are givin' some milk.

MURIEL: That's good.

KEN: Least they'll pay for their keep.

MURIEL: Good...

MURIEL GETS SHEPHERD'S PIE OUT OF THE OVEN. KEN SITS,  
MURIEL SERVES FOR THEM BOTH.

MURIEL: Not a bad bit of mince. 'E's a good butcher, Taylor.

PAUSE.

KEN: Bloody 'inge is goin' on shippon door again...

PAUSE.

MURIEL: There'll be a hinge on them old doors leaning against the sty.

KEN: (NODS) I'll have a look.

THEY EAT.

MURIEL: You goin' to the Arms tonight.

KEN: I'll go for one later. Will you want some crisps?

MURIEL: Cheese an' Onion if they've gorrem.

KEN: I'll ask 'im.

PAUSE.

MURIEL: Plain if they aven't.

KEN: I'll ask.

PAUSE.

MURIEL: Dinner alright?

KEN: Aye...

PAUSE.

MURIEL: 'E is, 'e's a good butcher.

KEN: 'E's not bad, Taylor.

LONGER PAUSE.

MURIEL: It's a nuisance about shippon door.

KEN: It's only the hinge - I'll get 'old of one.

PAUSE.

MURIEL: Try that door propped up by the whatsit.

KEN: Aye, sty - aye...

THEY EAT IN SILENCE.

MURIEL: D'you think 'e'll have Cheese an' Onion...

KEN: 'E might...

LONG PAUSE.

MURIEL: I think I'll 'ave plain.

KEN: 'E'll 'ave plain... bound to...

FINISHES EATING AND STANDS.

KEN: I'll change me shirt.

MURIEL: It's pie - blackberry, when you've changed.

KEN: (NODS) I'll 'ave a look at 'em (THE COWS) when I've 'ad it. Then I'll go an' 'ave one... last orders.

MURIEL: Right.

PAUSE.

KEN: I'll see if 'e's got any.

MURIEL: (NODS) I'll have plain, definite.

KEN: 'E'll 'ave plain... I don't know about Cheese an' Onion.

MURIEL: I fancy plain.

KEN: I'll change me shirt then.

MURIEL: It's on the chair.

KEN GOES UPSTAIRS. MURIEL SITS, ELBOWS ON THE TABLE, SIPPING HER TEA. SHE'S DIMLY AWARE THAT SHE MIGHT BE ALONE FOR MOST OF ANOTHER EVENING - BUT THERE'S THE WASHING UP TO DO.

LIGHTS DOWN. SPOTLIGHT. CHRISTINE READS FROM A LARGE TEXT BOOK.

CHRISTINE: (READS) 'Aftosa - highly contagious viral disease - practically all cloven footed mammals are susceptible - characterised by vesicles on the tongue, lips and other parts of the body where the skin is thin - the udder, teats, between the toes and around the coronary band above the hoof. The virus has an affinity for epithelium, covering skin and mucous membranes. Within 24 hours it can enter the bloodstream, causing fever. During this stage virus is excreted in saliva, milk, urine, faeces. Secondary

vesicles rupture leaving raw and painful surfaces. Strict quarantine measures, and as there is no effective treatment for infected animals, prompt destruction is indicated...

SHE IS PENSIVE AS SHE CLOSES THE BOOK.

THE FARM YARD. LATE AFTERNOON.

BERNARD AND KEN HAVE FINISHED MILKING, THEY ROLL A COUPLE OF HEAVY, FULL CHURNS TO NEAR THE GATE.

BERNARD: D'you 'ear it, this mornin' on wireless?

KEN: What do I want to be listenin' to the wireless for?

BERNARD: Six o'clock it's on - farmin' programme.

KEN: What you tellin' me for?

BERNARD: It's very good - 'elps you keep up with what's goin' on.

KEN: I keep up with what's goin' on by doin' it. Not sittin' on me arse listenin' to some feller talkin' about it.

BERNARD: I weren't sittin' on me arse. I 'ook my little wireless - hi-fidelity, it is, hi-fidelity and I got it from a jumble sale for two bob. Two bob... blinkin' batteries cost more than wireless. Two shillings for hi-fidelity. I 'ook it on the 'andle on me 'an'cart, so's I can listen. Push an' listen or brush an' listen... I like gettin' out early, brushin'. Get it done with, then I can give the likes of you a lift, Ken.

KEN: You're doin' precious little, 'givin' me a lift'. Just bloody rabbitin' on about bloody hi-fiwhatsit.

BERNARD: 'delity. You should get one - a nice little hi-fidelity wireless. You could carry it round with you.

KEN: Aye, then maybe I wouldn't 'ave to listen to you, would I.

BERNARD: (LAUGHS) No, you wouldn't, Ken. You blinking wouldn't that, would you?

KEN: Well, go on, what d'you 'ear then?

BERNARD: When was that, Ken lad?

KEN: You daft bugger, on your wireless.

BERNARD: Allsorts. 'Ave you 'eard them Archers. That Walter Gabriel's a lad an all. (CHUCKLES) It's all about farmers - the Archers. 'The everyday story of what they call country folk'. (SINGS THEME TUNE)

KEN: (SNAPS) I 'ave got a wireless. I've got one in the 'ouse. Just 'cos I don't trail it round wi' me.

BERNARD: I didn't know you listened to the wireless, Ken.

KEN: I don't.

BERNARD: Well, I don't know...

THEY GET ON WITH THEIR WORK.

BERNARD: (STOPS) What did you ask me?

KEN: Never mind.

BERNARD: (STARTS WORKING, THEN STOPS) It's come back to me. That feller.

KEN LOOKS.

BERNARD: You know, the feller on farming programme... Well, 'e was sayin', there was an outbreak of what's it - Foot an' Mouth... aye... bloody Foot an' Mouth near Oswestry or some such place.

KEN: Aye, well, bloody Oswestry i'n't 'ere.

BERNARD: It's not, Ken lad. It isn't... it's past Crewe, you know.

KEN: Gerraway.

BERNARD: So that poor feller will be 'avin' to put his stock down, won't 'e, Ken.

KEN: I s'pose 'e will.

BERNARD: Damn shame, int'it.

KEN: Aye.

BERNARD: All that work - gone. All for nowt. A life time's work. Seein' your beasts sufferin', 'avin' to put the lot down... a damn terrible shame.

KEN: It 'appens.

BERNARD: Aye...

THEY WORK.

MURIEL COMES OUT WITH A BREW CAN.

MURIEL: Brew's up.

BERNARD STOPS WORKING FIRST.

BERNARD: You alright, Mrs. Elworth.

MURIEL: Yes, thank you, Bernard. Are you alright, pet?

BERNARD: I am, Mrs. Elworth. I'm not bad at all. Just been havin' a nice chat with Ken -  
aven't we, Ken?

MURIEL: You're a proper chatter-box, aren't you, Ken.

KEN LOOKS.

MURIEL POURS THE TEA INTO TIN MUGS.

MURIEL: Says on wireless there's Foot and Mouth in Shropshire.

BERNARD: Well, begger me, small world in't'it, Ken. It was on my radio too, Mrs.  
Elworth. Aye, Shropshire, Ken, that were it. You like the wireless, do you  
Mrs. Elworth?

MURIEL: (NODS) It can spread can't it.

BERNARD: It's a long way off - Shropshire. I was tellin' Ken, It's a good way past  
Crewe.

KEN: We run a good farm 'ere.

BERNARD: You do, Ken.

MURIEL: It can spread though.

BERNARD: They say it can, Mrs. Elworth.

KEN: Aye, well, it won't spread 'ere. It never touched this place in 1923 when the old feller 'ad it. 'e ran a good farm.

BERNARD: They do say 'e did, Ken. I've 'eard more than one say that. 'E ran a very good farm. That's where you must 'ave got it from. In your blood you might say.

KEN: Aye, well, we'll be alright then.

MURIEL: I hope it doesn't spread round 'ere.

KEN: I've told you - we'll be alright.

MURIEL: I 'ope so.

KEN: I've told you.

BERNARD: Nice brew this is, Mrs. Elworth.

MURIEL: Thanks, Bernard.

BERNARD: A very nice brew.

MURIEL: Thanks.

BERNARD: I like a brew.

THEY DRINK.

BERNARD: Look at that...

KEN RELUCTANTLY CAN'T HELP LOOKING AT WHAT BERNARD'S TALKING ABOUT. HE CAN'T SEE ANYTHING. BERNARD RAMBLES ON. THE LIGHT WILL SLOWLY BECOME A SUNSET RED.

BERNARD: This time o' year I always notice. Looks as if they've bin scratched agin the sky. Or drawn on with a dead sharp pencil. But more scratched on - etched you might say.

SEES KEN AND MURIEL AREN'T FOLLOWING.

BERNARD: Them trees along that brow. Black as a witches 'at agin a grey sky. Y'allus know you'll not be goin' far after yer tea when trees look like that agin the sky - etched.

KEN: You're bloody etched.

BERNARD: (CARRIES ON) An' the sun - just... like... sits in the trees. Dunnit Ken, look, dunnit. The sun looks as if it's just sittin' in them trees. Sittin' there like a big fat woman with a bright red face, smilin'. Sittin' there thinkin' to 'erself, 'Ee, it's nice sittin' in these trees. I think I'll stay 'ere for the neet. Just sit 'ere at the end of Ken Elworth's field. Peepin' through the window while they 'ave their tea. This'll do me,' she's sayin'. 'This is where I'll bide - There'll be no need to put your electric light on tonight, Ken, don't draw the curtains Mrs Elworth. I'm sittin' at the top of yon field and I'll stay 'ere til mornin'...' Be alright that, wouldn't it, Ken.

KEN: (SPELL BROKEN) You carry on like that, they'll have you in Arclid or some such place.

A CAR APPROACHES.

MURIEL: I don't know that car.

BERNARD: It's a Morris Minor.

CHRISTINE ARRIVES. SHE'S LOOKING AROUND THE AREA AND ISN'T ON A SPECIFIC VISIT. SHE SLIPS WITH APPARENT EASE INTO POLITE FRIENDLINESS.

CHRISTINE: Hello there...

KEN WON'T GIVE ANY STRANGER THE BENEFIT OF A SECOND GLANCE. BERNARD'S REGARDS HER WITH PLEASANT AMAZEMENT - LIKE AN ALIEN WHO HE'S PLEASED TO SEE. MURIEL IS WELCOMING AS CHRISTINE OFFERS HER HAND.

CHRISTINE: Christine Markham.

MURIEL: Pleased to meet you.

BERNARD: You've gorra Morris Minor.

CHRISTINE: Yes.

UNEASY PAUSE.

CHRISTINE: How are you?

BERNARD: Not three bad.

CHRISTINE: (LAUGHS) Good.

BERNARD: Are you alreet?

CHRISTINE: Not three bad.

BERNARD: (LAUGHS) D'you hear that, Ken, 'Not three bad.' (TO CHRISTINE) That's alreet then.

MURIEL: I've not seen you round here.

CHRISTINE: No... I'm from Cheadle Hulme.

BERNARD: Cheadle 'ulme - that's near Stockport, Ken.

KEN: Debtors retreat in't it.

BERNARD: Nay, Ken lad... Wilmslow - that's Debtor's retreat.

MURIEL: Are you lost?

CHRISTINE: Lost?

KEN: You've either come visitin' or you're lost, and we're not expectin' no one till the milk wagon comes.

CHRISTINE: I'm not trespassing am I?

MURIEL: Course not.

CHRISTINE: Good. I'm working in the area - well, just started - I thought I'd have a look round.

KEN: Very nice if you've got the time. (MOVING OFF) Come on, Bernard - they'll be meckin' cheese if we don't get our skates on.

BERNARD: (FOLLOWING) That wouldn't do now, would it. (TO CHRISTINE, IMPRESSED) A Morris Minor. Must be a good job - ey, Mrs. Elworth. I wish the Parish'd give me a Morris Minor - still the 'an'carts more suitable for my line of business.

KEN: (CALLS) For Christsake, Bernard, you're like an owd woman goin' on.

BERNARD: I am, Ken lad.

KEN EXITS BY SHIPPIN, BERNARD FOLLOWS.

BERNARD: (STILL IMPRESSED) A Morris Minor...

HE GOES.

CHRISTINE: (TO MURIEL) It's mum's runabout. Dad said I better use it.

MURIEL: Very nice.

CHRISTINE: Your herd - Jersey's aren't they?

MURIEL: That's right.

CHRISTINE: They're lovely animals.

MURIEL: I know. Ken's pride and joy. D'you want a brew - a cup of tea.

CHRISTINE: I'd love to - really...

MURIEL: I just thought...

CHRISTINE: I've got to go to a *briefing* meeting... wouldn't do to be late in my first week.

MURIEL: Course not.

CHRISTINE: Maybe when I'm passing again.

MURIEL: Not many folk come by - the track doesn't lead anywhere.

CHRISTINE: Still, I'm sure I'll see you again. (OFFERS HER HAND) Very nice to meet you.

MURIEL IS SURPRISED AT THE FORMALITY OF THE PLEASANTRIES.  
SMILES AS CHRISTINES MOVES OFF.

MURIEL: The kettles always on if you're up this road.

CHRISTINE: Thanks.

SHE GOES.

MURIEL: (MORE TO HERSELF) I'm always ready for a cuppa - and a good old natter...

KEN AND BERNARD ROLL A COUPLE OF CHURNS OUT OF THE SHIPPIN.

BERNARD: (TO MURIEL) Morris Minor's gone then.

MURIEL: She had a meetin'.

KEN: Bloody meetin'.

BERNARD: Cheadle 'ulme, ey.

KEN: What about it?

BERNARD: I've bin through there.

KEN: When?

BERNARD: On a train.

KEN: When 'ave you bin on a train?

BERNARD: I've bin on trains... Course I've bin on trains.

KEN: When?

BERNARD: I went to Manchester - Ear, Nose and Throat 'ospital. Have me whatsits drained. You come back through Stockport, you know. You look down from the train. All them lights. You get the benefit with the train bein' high up.

KEN: It's a right dump, bloody Stockport.

MURIEL: When 'ave you bin?

KEN: Had me rupture done at Stepping Hill 'ospital.

BERNARD: It looks nice at night though. You're high up. Then after a bit, you're out in the country, and you see all the houses and farms wi' their curtains shut and their lights on. And everyone's warm and safe, and that's where you'll be soon, you know that much... Me mother says the funniest things sometimes.

KEN: That's where you get it from.

BERNARD: It must be. When it's a reet raw neet, wi' the wind tryin' to prize 'is way in. You know, when spots of rain find their road down the chimney, but nowhere near enough to put fire out. Just enough to spit and sizzle. She says, 'I wouldn't mind bein' out, lookin' in.' I say, 'What d'you mean, Ma?' I know what she means because she's said it above more than a few times. But I ask her what she means, cos you would do. I mean no one'd say owt

to anybody if we di'n't 'ave these ways, would they. 'I'd see a light through our curtains,' she says, 'and I'd know thee and me were snug as bugs.' 'Not if you're stood out there, ma, you wouldn't.' Laugh. Ee, we do laugh. 'I wouldn't, our Bernard,' she says, 'I'd be frozen and piss wet through.'

MURIEL: I know what she means. I like seein' folks' lights on when the curtains are shut. It's funny... that farmer in Oswestry... if you went past his house on the train I bet you'd think, 'I bet they're as snug as bugs'. You'd not know what was goin' on, would you...

KEN: You would in the cold light of day, when there was nowt in 'is fields.

## ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

LIGHTING CHANGE. MURIEL AND KEN EXIT TO THE HOUSE. THE SUNSET RED CHANGES TO SOMETHING COLDER.

BERNARD IS NOW ALONE - AT A DISTANCE FROM FARM, SITS ON BANK.

BERNARD: I don't know whether anyone's told you, Reynard, but the hunt's been banned. Aye. I didn't think you'd mind. Don't want the plague spreadin'. But it is... It's that feller in Shrewsbury's neighbours now. An' then a farm in the village. An' another. An' another. An' farms near Tarporley, Nantwich, Northwich, Middlewich. Aye, Cheshire farms now. That side of Crewe now this. Blokes I've seen at Chelford market are on the tele and their pictures are in the papers. Yet, you'd go past on a train and you still wouldn't know the difference. You'd still see them snug lights in the windows.

BERNARD REMAINS WHERE HE IS - IN A SENSE LOOKING OVER THE FARM.

LIGHTS UP ON KITCHEN. MURIEL IS GETTING DINNER READY.

A KNOCK ON THE OUTSIDE DOOR.

MURIEL: (CALLS) No need to knock.

A PAUSE. ANOTHER KNOCK. MURIEL NOT EXPECTING ANY OTHER CALLER, GOES TO THE DOOR AND OPENS IT. IT'S CHRISTINE. SHE'S CARRYING A BLACK BAG.

CHRISTINE: Mrs. Elworth...

MURIEL: Yes...

CHRISTINE: We met in the lane.

MURIEL: Oh that's right - 'Christine Markham'. Come in.

CHRISTINE IN.

MURIEL: I wasn't expecting anyone at this time.

CHRISTINE: No, I'm sorry.

MURIEL: Oh, it's alright. You've come for that brew.

AND SHE'S PUTTING THE KETTLE ON BEFORE CHRISTINE REPLIES.

MURIEL: I didn't think we'd see you again.

CHRISTINE: It's a lovely kitchen.

MURIEL: (SURPRISED) Give over.

CHRISTINE: A real country kitchen.

MURIEL: Is it?

CHRISTINE: Old fashioned...

MURIEL: (PUT OUT) It does us.

CHRISTINE: No, I didn't mean it was... it's really nice.

MURIEL: It's just a kitchen.

UNEASY SILENCE.

CHRISTINE: Is Mr. Elworth about?

MURIEL: In't shippon... So how's that job of yours?

CHRISTINE: Busy.

MURIEL: What was it now?

CHRISTINE: (BEAT) A vet.

MURIEL: Never... you don't look old enough...

CHRISTINE: You aren't the first that's said that.

MURIEL: We're with Mr. Barnstable so I can't offer you any work. Not that we have much call for one. Ken doesn't reckon much to him - says he doesn't see why he should pay owd Barnstable ten bob for stickin' his hand up a cow's... bum.

CHRISTINE: I'm working for the ministry.

MURIEL: Government is that.

CHRISTINE NODS.

MURIEL: Very good... there'll be a pension with it.

CHRISTINE: (LAUGHS) Pension.

MURIEL FEELS STUPID.

CHRISTINE: It's just a short term contract.

MURIEL: I'll see to the tea.

KEN COMES IN, PREOCCUPIED. HE DOESN'T CLOCK CHRISTINE FOR A MOMENT.

CHRISTINE: Hello, Mr. Elworth.

KEN: (PUZZLED) Yes...

HE CAN'T COMPREHEND WHAT SHE'S DOING THERE AND SEEKS AN EXPLANATION OFF MURIEL.

MURIEL: You remember...

CHRISTINE: Christine Markham...

KEN IS NON PLUSSED.

CHRISTINE: We met in the lane.

KEN: Oh aye...

MURIEL: We're having a brew - your tea won't be long.

KEN STANDS THERE.

CHRISTINE: I'm sorry to call at this time.

MURIEL: We don't mind.

KEN: Are you lost again.

MURIEL: Had you better wash your hands, Ken.

KEN NODS, GOES TO WASH HIS HANDS, ALL THE TIME HAVING A CRAFTY LOOK AT CHRISTINE. SHE'S UNEASY.

CHRISTINE: Jersey's aren't they, Mr. Elworth - your herd.

KEN: Aye.

CHRISTINE: I noticed the other day.

MURIEL: Course you'll know all about cows - being a vet.

KEN CLOCKS THIS.

MURIEL: Aren't you drying them?

KEN WIPES HIS HANDS ON HIS TROUSERS.

KEN: We go to owd Barnstable when we need a vet.

MURIEL: I said.

CHRISTINE: I've been drafted in.

KEN: Aye, well, Barnstable'll do us.

MURIEL: Miss Markham's government, Ken.

KEN: I know nowt about that.

MURIEL: Ministry...

CHRISTINE: I better explain.

KEN: We're alright for vets...

CHRISTINE: It's the epidemic.

MURIEL: I know, terrible isn't it. Half of Cheshire now, they say.

CHRISTINE: (NODS) ...I was taking a year out after I qualified...

MURIEL: How d'you mean - a year out?

CHRISTINE: A year off.

KEN: (LAUGHS) A year off!

MURIEL: I bet you wouldn't mind an afternoon never mind a year, would you, Ken?

CHRISTINE: But with the epidemic...

MURIEL: They've drafted you in.

KEN: Aye, well, we're alright for a vet.

CHRISTINE: And I've been allocated this area...

MURIEL: He runs a good farm does Ken.

KEN GOES BACK TO WASHING HIS HANDS.

CHRISTINE: So I'll need to check your herd - just routine.

MURIEL: Better safe than sorry. Have your tea first. They're in the shippin - Ken'll show you. Won't you, Ken.

NO REPLY.

MURIEL: He'll be wanting his tea.

BERNARD COMES IN - FRIENDLY AS EVER, BUT SOMETHING'S BOTHERING HIM.

KEN: It's like bloody Crewe station. Folks comin' an' goin'.

BERNARD: It is an' all. (TO CHRSTINE) I saw that Morris Minor outside. I thought I bet whosits 'ere - unless Ken's laid out for a Morris Minor.

KEN: What would I want with a bloody Morris Minor.

BERNARD: That's what I thought...

MURIEL: Miss Markham's a vet, Bernard.

BERNARD: (TO KEN, SLIGHTLY CONSPIRATORIAL BUT FOR EVERYONE'S BENEFIT) You've seen 'em then.

KEN IGNORES HIM.

MURIEL: What's that Bernard?

BERNARD: I'd seen 'em an' I wondered - so I thought I'd come an' say in case Ken hadn't. But with whosit 'ere 'e must've. In't that reet, Ken... What's the verdict then?

KEN: You're bloody crackers, that's the verdict.

BERNARD LAUGHS.

CHRISTINE: (STANDS TO GO) I'll just give them the once over. Let you good people have your meal... I'll stick my head in after I've inspected them.

MURIEL: I'll put the porch light on.

CHRISTINE: I've got my flash light.

KEN: (SUDDENLY) Bloody flash light! Government issue is it. Like those bloody wellies and that bloody anorak or whatever they call 'em.

MURIEL: Ken!

BERNARD: Aye - anorak.

CHRISTINE: I'll just check them.

KEN: (CUTS IN) You're not my vet.

MURIEL: She's government, Ken.

KEN: She can bugger off back to Cheadle 'ulme.

MURIEL: Stop it, Ken. (TO CHRISTINE) He's not used to company.

KEN: I'm not used to kids bloody marchin' in like they own the shop.

CHRISTINE: I only want to...

KEN: (CUTS IN) Go on, get lost.

HE SHOWS CHRISTINE THE DOOR. UNUSED TO THIS RECEPTION SHE GOES WITHOUT PROTEST.

KEN: And don't come back. (TURNS TO MURIEL) What's forrit...

LIGHTS DOWN ON KITCHEN. LIGHTS UP ON SHIPPON, BUT ONLY A LANTERN

LATER THAT NIGHT, AND KEN'S ALONE IN THE SHIPPON, JUST LIT BY A LANTERN. HE TENDS TO A SICK COW WHICH LIES IN THE STRAW.

KEN: Come on old lass. Come on... don't let me down now. If I shut me eyes, put me 'ands on you. Go on, drain any life out of me. Suck any goodness, if you can find any. Slow down, slow down. My ticker's bumpin', thumpin' away. Beatin' fast enough for both of us now. So you can slow down. You don't 'ave to to get in a state... let me do the worryin'. You just rest. Look you're in the best straw. Best clean straw. All curled up... so you'll be alright. I'm not a bad un. I'm not. Put it this way, owd lass, I treat you as good as any folk I know. Ask Muriel. Ask 'er... she'll tell you. She'll tell you alright... (RUEFUL) I dare say you know me better than any folk I've ever met. I dunna 'ave to use fancy talk for you to know what I want, I don't. We come out of the same mire thee and me. (BEAT) Come on beauty - tek my strength. Get reet... 'Why get reet for a miserable old twat with a stick?' That's what you're thinkin', in't it. Don't think that of me... I'm nowt without you. Nowt without you and the rest.

MURIEL ENTERS, SLOWLY. KEN IS IMMEDIATELY AWARE OF HER PRESENCE.

MURIEL: How is she?

KEN: Poorly.

MURIEL: What a shame...

KEN NODS.

MURIEL: (KNEELS DOWN BY COW) Come on, old lass, you're goin' to be alright. Come on now.

KEN: Bloody 'ell, it's only a cow.

MURIEL: I don't like seein' 'em suffer, no more than you do.

KEN: There's no use goin' soft ovver'um.

MURIEL: Should I get the vet out?

KEN: 'e'll charge double at this time.

MURIEL: What's up with her?

KEN SHRUGS.

MURIEL: Suppose it's...

KEN: Go on, say it.

MURIEL: You know what I'm on about.

KEN: Well, if it is, there's nowt 'e can do about it, is there.

MURIEL: But all the others.

KEN: I know, I bloody know.

MURIEL PUTS HER HAND ON KEN'S SHOULDER. BUT HE MOVES AWAY, COMING FORWARD. SHE RETURNS TO THE KITCHEN AND SITS. KEN FOLLOWS SLOWLY.

LIGHTS DOWN.

THE EMBANKMENT

CHRISTINE, ALONE IN THE LANE, TOWARDS EMBANKMENT. SHE'LL LOOK OCCASIONALLY AT ELWORTH'S. SHE'S WORRIED. SHE SEES SOMETHING AND IS ENGROSSED. IT'S THE FOX.

SHE DOESN'T SEE BERNARD ENTER.

BERNARD: I thought it'd be thee.

CHRISTINE: Oh, hello.

BERNARD: When I saw that Morris Minor parked up. I thowt 'I bet it's her'. And here you are. Large as life.

CHRISTINE: I've seen a fox.

BERNARD: Aye well, you would. (TO FOX) I've told you the world an' 'is wife'll know where you are Reynard. (TO CHRISTINE) 'E's a lad, 'e is. (GETS SOMETHING OUT OF HIS BAG. HALF OF THIS IS ADDRESS TO CHRISTINE, HALF TO 'REYNARD') Me mother sent you some bits - a bit of cake, and some pie she left... she dunt eat a lot. So you get it eaten up - don't forget you're feedin' five or six now I shouldn't wonder. 'Course I'll have to wait a while before I see owt of 'em... Anyroad I'll not let on to anyone where you are - aside from me Ma - but she'll say nowt - she dun't see no one from one day to the next... and this lady vet 'ere - she'll not harm you 'cos she's a vet. Oh, and I told Mrs. Elworth, but she'll not let on neither. She's good-'earted Mrs. Elworth (FOR CHRISTINE'S BENEFIT) - well, Ken is too. Done me many a good turn, has Ken... but I won't tell 'im. Anyroad - he's got enough on his plate. He gets upset. Well, any man would... (DIRECT TO CHRISTINE) wouldn't they.

CHRISTINE: I've got to see them.

BERNARD: Appen 'e'll come round... they need seein'... don't think bad of him if 'e dun't like the idea.

CHRISTINE MOVES TOWARDS FARM. BERNARD LAYS FOOD BY FOX HOLE.

BERNARD: You're best off down there, safe and sound - in the dark...

BERNARD GOES OFF.

KEN EMERGES FROM KITCHEN, GUN UNDER HIS ARM.  
MURIEL SITS IN THE KITCHEN GLOOM.  
KEN PULLS THE GATE ACROSS, THEN SEES CHRISTINE.

KEN: What's brought you back...

CHRISTINE: I've got to see the cattle, Mr. Elworth.

KEN: Piss off. (LOOKS BACK TOWARDS THE HOUSE GUILTILY)

CHRISTINE: I'm authorized...

KEN: Authorized me arse. You're hardly bloody weened. Just set one of your government issue welly bobs on this bloody muddy track and we'll soon see who's bloody authorized.

CHRISTINE: It's to protect other farmers' animals.

KEN: The only farm animals you know are lead buggers - for playin' on a big soft carpet in a big warm house.

CHRISTINE: I don't blame you for thinking that - you're probably right.

KEN A BIT SURPRISED.

CHRISTINE: I know I'll never know half what you know, Mr. Elworth. But it's the job... you know what the Ministry's like - I've only just started but you should see the forms I've got...

KEN: Bloody government.

CHRISTINE: I know. (BEAT) So if we could just look at them. (PUTS HER HAND ON THE GATE) ...you could tell me what you think.

SHE SLOWLY PUSHES THE GATE OPEN. KEN PUTS HIS FOOT THERE.

KEN: I've not authorized you.

CHRISTINE: I can show you the letter.

KEN: I've not authorized you.

CHRISTINE: Please, Mr. Elworth.

KEN: It's not a question of please and thank you.

CHRISTINE: If your herd's o.k. I'll leave you in peace. If not, well...

KEN: I'm the only one as'll decide that.

CHRISTINE: I can call the police.

KEN: Yer bloody what?

CHRISTINE: It's the last thing I'd want to do.

KEN: It's the last thing you'd ever do - tart or no tart.

CHRISTINE: You're giving me no option.

KEN: Bloody 'option'. I wouldn't give you the shit from under me finger nails - never mind a bloody 'option'. And by callin' the p'lice you mean that

brainless bugger P.C. Ronald Tilson, do you? Well what do you think that moon faced sod'll do, ey? Bully Tilson. Drunken Tilson. I knocked 'is block off when he was 16 'n' I'll do it again if he comes past where you're standin'. Bloody Ronald Tilson, the shiny arsed bugger. What's Ronald Tilson got that gives him the right to tell me what's what. Bugger all, that's what, oh aye - an' a uniform wi' shiny buttons an' a brokken down bike - all bloody government issue. Bloody Government issue. Tell us summat... Where does Government get it all? Does Prime Minister make the coats, sit down at a machine and bloody 'run them up'? Does 'e buggery. Does Sir Anthony Selswick - 'im who's never missed a Young Farmers Do, does 'e tap the rubber and mould the wellies. (LOOKS BACK) Does 'e buggery - and that's swearing. So you can go back to the government and tell 'em to stick their forms, anor-bloody-raks, boots, welly-bobs and bikes up their arses. Reet? (BEAT) Reet?

CHRISTINE: You're refusing to let me see them then, Mr. Elworth.

KEN: Give her a cream bun.

MURIEL OUT OF HOUSE.

MURIEL: (PEERS INTO THE DUSK) Is that you, Ken?

KEN: Aye.

MURIEL: Have we got company?

KEN: No.

MURIEL: I thought I heard you talking.

KEN: When do we have bloody company.

MURIEL SEES CHRISTINE.

MURIEL: You've come back.

CHRISTINE: I've got to see the herd, Mrs. Elworth.

MURIEL: It's late.

CHRISTINE: I did come before.

KEN: Listen to the pair of you carryin' on like the Mother's Union - she's not seein' 'em - I've told her flat - that's that.

MURIEL: I s'pose she'll have to, Ken.

KEN: You can s'pose what you like.

CHRISTINE: I was saying to Mr. Elworth - I'll have to go to my superiors.

KEN: You can go to the Lord Christ Almighty.

MURIEL: Ken.

KEN: Because if he's the bugger that's struck down my cows 'e can make them reet again.

CHRISTINE: Are they infected, Mr. Elworth?

KEN: (TURNS TO GO) Bugger off - I've got work to do.

KEN GOES TO KITCHEN.  
LIGHTS FADE DOWN.

THE KITCHEN.

KEN SEATED, MURIEL STANDS.  
KEN IS BROODING.  
MURIEL HESITATES BEFORE SPEAKING.

MURIEL: I think she understands.

KEN: Who?

MURIEL: Miss Markham.

KEN: 'Miss Markham'. She knows nowt. Only what a good draw she's on, robbin' farmers.

MURIEL: She din't make the cows poorly.

KEN: (IGNORES THIS. GRUMBLES ON) Goin' on like a bloody teacher. Treatin' me like a bloody kid. Aye well, I bloody told her. In no uncertain terms. Piss off.

MURIEL: There's no need for that.

KEN TUTS.

MURIEL: I think she does understand though.

KEN: I couldn't care less.

MURIEL: She'll know what they mean to you.

KEN: Does she live with 'em from six in the mornin' to last thing at neet. Are they allus there when she looks out o' t' window? 'as she sat up all neet motherin' 'em like you - on sackin' next to that stove.

MURIEL: We've pulled more than a few through, 'aven't we.

KEN NODS.

MURIEL: Remember that little dog we had. Little Jack. He used to lie agin new born calves, keepin' 'em warm.

KEN: Aye.

MURIEL: Little Jack.

KEN: What bloody difference does it matter what the mad little bugger was called. 'E was bloody crazy.

MURIEL: He wasn't.

KEN: 'E bloody was. 'E'd not let go of something - you'd tell him, you'd bawl at him and bawl at him, you'd kick the little sod - and that's swearing. But would 'e let go, would 'e let go. Would 'e buggery.

MURIEL: 'E was a terrier.

KEN: 'E was a crazy swine - and 'e wouldn't let go. 'E wouldn't listen. 'E was like you.

MURIEL: 'E 'ad that boot of yours. (CHUCKLES) Ran off into the yard. Chewed it.

KEN: That's what I mean. I said 'Drop that boot,' I bloody shouted, 'Drop that boot, you little bugger.' Would 'e drop it, would 'e buggery. I 'ad to kick the little sod in the end.

MURIEL: He dropped it then... then got your other'n an' ran up the field. (LAUGHS)

KEN: See what I mean - you're like that bloody dog.

MURIEL: (FONDLY) Little Jack.

KEN: You won't let go...

MURIEL: You thought the world of that little feller...

KEN: Couldn't stand the yappin' little welp.

MURIEL: 'An 'e thought the world of you. Didn't matter how much you larrapped 'im - always agin you. Always pricked his ears up when 'e 'eard top field gate go and you were comin' in for your baggin.

KEN: 'E was bloody crazy. A good ratter - I'll give him that. He'd've seen them foxes off. He'd've seen that bloody woman off an' all.

THEY LAPSE INTO SILENCE.

MURIEL: What we goin' to do, Ken love.

KEN SHRUGS.

MURIEL: If the cows 'ave got it - Ministry'll need to know. It's the law. It's the law of the land, Ken.

KEN: (SNAPS) Just like that bloody dog. You won't let go. (HE PICKS UP HIS GUN) You know what happened to him.

KEN GOES TO SHIPPON AREA.

CHRISTINE ENTERS AND STANDS WATCHING.

A GUN SHOT AND FLASH... THEN ANOTHER... THEN ANOTHER... ANOTHER... EACH FLASH ILLUMINATES A FACE - CHRISTINE'S, MURIEL'S, KEN POISED OVER A SLUMPED ANIMAL GUN RAISED, BERNARD ON THE EMBANKMENT. SOMETIMES MORE THAN ONE CHARACTER IS ILLUMINATED. AND ON AND ON GO THE SHOTS. THEN IN THE HALF LIGHT KEN LOWERS THE GUN.

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

THE FARM YARD

KEN COMES OUT OF THE HOUSE. BERNARD'S WORKING, MENDING THE GATE. ON THE GATE THERE'S A SIGN, 'FOOT AND MOUTH - KEEP OUT'. ALSO AN OFFICIAL TYPED NOTICE. THERE'S AN OLD ZINC TUB WITH DISINFECTANT IN IT.

KEN: There's no use mending that, there's nowt to go through it.

BERNARD: It's a bad do, Ken lad. In't it. All that work. An' you a good farmer like you are. I were sayin' to Tommy Smallwood in the Arms.

KEN: Bloody rabbitin' like a pair of owd women were you. 'Ken Elworth 'ad to shoot all 'is beasts.' Summat to gas about int'it.

BERNARD: Nay, Ken lad, there was no pleasure in it...

KEN SCEPTICAL.

BERNARD: (CONT.) It's like the grave in there.

KEN: The 'ole bloody parish is like a grave. One big ash pile and bloody lime pit. The stink of burnt meat 'angin' in the air. And if it's not that, it's disinfectant clawin' at your throat.

BERNARD: I know, it's like owd Mother Nature or summat sayin' - 'I've tecken your beasts an' I'm not goin' to let you forget it.' (BERNARD SEES THIS ISN'T HELPING KEN!) Are you in there tonight?

KEN: What for?

BERNARD: You always go in - last orders.

KEN: I don't 'ave to go, do I.

BERNARD: Course not, Ken lad. Do you ecky thump. Cheer yoursel' up, you could, though.

KEN LOOKS.

BERNARD: 'Ave a game of arrers... or bones.

KEN: Oh aye, all me damn stocks nowt but a pile of charcoal in yon field an' I'm s'posed to worry about whether I've got a double five.

BERNARD: There's allus skittles.

KEN: Nah, it's alright. I'll stay at 'ome.

BERNARD: You're lucky that way with Mrs. Elworth.

BEAT.

KEN: I wanted a word, Bernard.

BERNARD: What's that, Ken lad... I've done nowt wrong 'ave I?

KEN: No, nowt like that.

BERNARD: That's alreet then, I mean you're bound to worry - in case you've done summat wrong. But I've done nowt wrong so that's alreet then.

KEN: Yeh, well... there's no work for you.

BERNARD: I'll do this gate, then I thought I'd go an' do a bit of ditchin' along that row of beech trees. I noticed t'other day when I were brushin' Town Lane, that ditch agin field were all clagged up. I thought 'I must mention that to Ken, I must.' Tell you like.

KEN: I can do that... there's nowt else for me to do... I'm layin' you off, if you like, so to speak.

BERNARD: Oh...

KEN: No beasts so no work, Bernard.

BERNARD: I reckon you must be right there, Ken lad. You've no choice. I can see that.

SILENCE.

BERNARD: Anything you want me to do... before I go...

KEN: For Christ's sake, Bernard, just gerroff 'ome. (STUFFS A COUPLE OF GRUBBY POUND NOTES IN HIS HAND AND GOES OFF TOWARDS HOUSE.

BERNARD FOLDS MONEY NEATLY, FINISHES TIGHTENING A SCREW ON GATE. PUTS HIS SCREW DRIVER IN HIS OLD GAS MASK BAG. GOES OFF.

THE YARD. A LITTLE LATER.

MURIEL IS IN THE YARD. SHE DOESN'T SEE CHRISTINE ARRIVE.  
CHRISTINE HOVERS AT THE GATE.

CHRISTINE: How are you Mrs. Elworth?

MURIEL'S SURPRISED TO SEE HER.

MURIEL: Ken's out ditching.

CHRISTINE: It's not official... (BEAT) How are things?

MURIEL: Fine... be alright when we can get new stock.

CHRISTINE: Good...

UNEASY PAUSE.

CHRISTINE: Have you got a phone I can use?

MURIEL: Phone.

CHRISTINE: I better phone in - report back.

MURIEL: To the ministry?

CHRISTINE: You can imagine what they're like.

MURIEL: You will have driven past the phone box - just where it joins Town Lane.

CHRISTINE: I mustn't have noticed.

PAUSE.

CHRISTINE: I'll drive back down there then.

MURIEL GLANCES TOWARDS THE FIELDS.

MURIEL: You might as well use ours... what harm will it do...

CHRISTINE: That's very kind - I'll leave fourpence.

MURIEL: Don't be daft... it gets used little enough... Ken never wanted to bother but it's handy once in a while when you need to call the vet...

CHRISTINE LAUGHS, NERVOUSLY. MURIEL DOESN'T.

CHRISTINE: I'll just phone in then.

THEY MOVE TO KITCHEN AND CHRISTINE DIALS A NUMBER. MURIEL HOVERS NEAR BY, THEN BECOMES CONSCIOUS THAT SHE SHOULDN'T BE LISTENING.

MURIEL: (ALMOST SIGNALLING) I'll put the kettle on.

CHRISTINE: (PUTS PHONE DOWN) No reply.

MURIEL HESITATES WITH KETTLE.

MURIEL: They must be busy.

CHRISTINE: Oh yes... it's spread into Staffordshire.

SHE LOOKS AT THE KETTLE, ALMOST WILLING MURIEL TO PUT IT ON THE STOVE. MURIEL DOES.

MURIEL: You better sit down.

CHRISTINE: It's not too much trouble?

MURIEL: There's not a lot to do.

CHRISTINE: No... How is Mr. Elworth?

MURIEL: Alright...

CHRISTINE: Good.

PAUSE.

CHRISTINE: He was upset... it's understandable.

MURIEL: (FIDDLES WITH COOKER) I'm sure we don't get full gas pressure living out here.

CHRISTINE: (STANDING) I'll get along - I shouldn't have called in unannounced.

MURIEL: You're here now.

CHRISTINE SITS. MURIEL REMAINS COOL.

MURIEL: He doesn't take kindly to people telling him what's what.

CHRISTINE: I had to see the herd.

MURIEL POURS WATER INTO TEAPOT.

MURIEL: Had you better try the phone again.

CHRISTINE: Sorry... Yes... (STANDS) I'll try again...

MURIEL: It's alright, Miss Markham - your face 'as gone the colour of a phone box.

CHRISTINE HESITATES.

MURIEL: Checking up on us, were you?

CHRISTINE: No.

MURIEL: Frightened he hadn't had them put down.

CHRISTINE: No, I saw Mr. Allman, he said.

MURIEL: You were checking' then.

CHRISTINE: No... I saw him... he mentioned it...

MURIEL MOTIONS HER TO SIT, WHICH SHE DOES.

MURIEL: It doesn't make any difference now.

POURS TEA.

CHRISTINE: I really wasn't checking.

MURIEL: Nobody comes by.

BEAT.

CHRISTINE: You said the kettle was always on.

MURIEL: That was before all this lot.

CHRISTINE: (STANDS) I'm sorry, I'll go. I shouldn't have imposed...

MURIEL: You're like a jack in the box - sit down.

CHRISTINE HESITATES.

MURIEL: Go on.

CHRISTINE SITS, MURIEL HANDS HER HER TEA.

CHRISTINE: I wanted to see if everything was alright.

MURIEL: You saw the disinfectant at the gate.

CHRISTINE: I meant you and Mr. Elworth.

MURIEL: Part of the service is it. In some government manual.

CHRISTINE: No.

MURIEL PERPLEXED.

CHRISTINE: You were upset... I wondered if there was anything...

MURIEL SITS AT TABLE WITH DRINK AND THEY LAPSE INTO SILENCE.

KEN ENTERS THE YARD, HE LOOKS BACK OBVIOUSLY HAVING SEEN CHRISTINE'S CAR.  
HE STARTS TOWARDS HOUSE, BUT STOPS CONTEMPLATING WHETHER TO GO IN.

MURIEL AND CHRISTINE, TEA FINISHED, STAND.

KEN MOVES OFF QUICKLY TO THE SHIPPON AREA AS THEY COME OUT.

CHRISTINE: Thanks for the 'cuppa'.

MURIEL: I don't know where Ken's got to.

CHRISTINE: I'll be seeing you.

MURIEL: Yes.

CHRISTINE COMES OUT INTO YARD AND OFF (TOWARDS HER CAR).  
MURIEL HAS FOLLOWED HER OUT, SHE GIVES A FAINT WAVE AS SHE WATCHES THE CAR GO.  
KEN COMES OUT OF SHIPPON AND TOWARDS HOUSE.

MURIEL TURNS AND SEES HIM.

MURIEL: You just missed Miss Markham.

KEN: Who?

MURIEL: The vet.

KEN: It's no use her touting for business here...

MURIEL: She just came to see how we were doing.

KEN: Nosey bitch.

MURIEL: I think I was a bit off with her.

KEN: It's a good job I didn't see her - I'd have given her such a kick up the arse she'd have to wear her drawers for a 'at.

MURIEL: I wish we'd had some biscuits in.

KEN: (MOOCHES OFF TOWARDS HOUSE) There's some cow cake in t'shippin.  
(BEAT) What's forrit?

KEN GOES AND SITS IN KITCHEN.  
MURIEL FOLLOWS AND SITS IN THE OTHER EASY CHAIR.

IT BECOMES EVENING.  
THEY STARE AHEAD FOR AGES... AND AGES.  
KEN IS ALMOST GOING TO SAY SOMETHING... BUT DOESN'T.  
FINALLY...

MURIEL: D'you want a brew...

KEN: Are you 'aving one?

MURIEL: I wasn't going to... I might if you do.

KEN: I won't bother.

MURIEL: No, I won't.

AND THEY SIT, OCCASIONALLY THEY SHIFT POSTION. EVEN LESS  
OCCASIONALLY KEN TRACES THE OUTLINE OF SOMETHING IN THE  
AIR - PIECE OF FURNITURE OR DOOR ARCH, WITH FOOT OR  
FINGER.

A CLOCK CHIMES.  
KEN STANDS AND STRETCHES.

MURIEL: You're not going up.

KEN: Eleven... me usual.

MURIEL: It's nine.

KEN: Nine? (CHECKS CLOCK AND SITS.)

PAUSE.

KEN: I thought it was later.

MURIEL: Nights'll start drawing out in a month or two.

KEN: Aye...

ANOTHER LONG PAUSE.

MURIEL: Will you promise not to do summat if I let you in on a secret.

KEN: Depends what it is.

MURIEL: Just promise.

KEN: Don't be so bloody daft.

MURIEL: Foxes have had nippers. Bernard said.

KEN JUST SHAKES HIS HEAD.

MURIEL: It's nice for 'em. I'd love to see them. They're always nice, aren't they - little 'uns. Pups, calves, lambs. Kiddies come to that.

KEN: They don't stay like that.

MURIEL: You won't do anything - to the foxes.

KEN: Oh aye - I'll put me coat on now and go raunging all over the place after 'em.

KEN IS IRRITATED. HE JERKS HIS FOOT. THEN EXAMINES THE SOLE OF HIS BOOT WHICH IS PERHAPS LOOSE.

MURIEL: It's no good blamin' y'self.

KEN: Oo said I was? (FIDDLES WITH BOOT)

BEAT.

MURIEL: Is it my fault?

KEN: What...

MURIEL DOESN'T REPLY.

KEN: ... no one's to blame for nowt.

MURIEL: That's alright then.

KEN: That's alright then.

KEN IS AGITATED, ALL THIS IS DIRECTED AT THE BOOT.

MURIEL: I found them new boots.

KEN: What boots?

MURIEL: Them you got more than twelve months since.

KEN: Not bloody new then are they.

MURIEL: Good as.

KEN: They gimme gyp...

MURIEL: I thought they might.

KEN: Crease me...

MURIEL: There's nothing worse.

KEN: Straight across 'ere. (INDICATES FOOT) And 'ere. (INDICATES SOLE)

MURIEL: You should 'ave tecken 'em back.

KEN: After twelve months or more!

MURIEL: When you got'em.

KEN: It's too late now.

MURIEL: You should've tried 'em on.

KEN: It's too bloody late for that an' all.

MURIEL: Before you paid good money for 'em.

KEN: It's my bloody money.

MURIEL: Don't we all know it. If you've got another thirty bob to throw about, cob it in my direction - not at Timpsons.

KEN: Stuff 'em wi' Chron.

MURIEL: (NODS. BEAT.) Why didn't you try 'em on.

KEN: Too busy.

MURIEL: You could've washed your feet fust...

KEN: What d'you mean?

MURIEL: Washed 'em... and put them good socks on you never wear.

KEN: Just to put on a show for some young tart or nancy boy in Timpsons.

MURIEL: It'd 'ave saved you thirty bob.

KEN: Stuff 'em.

MURIEL: (MOUTHS) Stuff you.

KEN THINKS HE GLANCES THIS, BUT DECIDES HE CAN'T BE BOTHERED PERSUING IT. MURIEL GOES TO CUPBOARD AND GETS OUT BOOTS.

MURIEL: They're not bad these boots... for thirty bob they're not, any road.

KEN: Shurrup about boots.

MURIEL STARTS STUFFING BOOTS.

MURIEL: Me dad always reckoned if you 'ad a decent pair of boots you're half way there.

KEN: 'E was 'alf way there, 'alf way round the bloody twist.

Any road, I've got some good boots.

MURIEL: They won't last for ever.

KEN: Nowt lasts for ever.

MURIEL: No, but boots don't especially.

KEN: I'll 'ave to get some bloody new ones then, won't I.

MURIEL: Well, keep them good socks and put 'em on before you go next time.

KEN: (ANGRY) Will you shut up goin' on about bloody boots, bloody socks, and bloody Timpsons. There's more bloody important bloody things goin' on on this bloody farm. 'Ave you forgotten we've got no bloody stock.

MURIEL: (LOOKS AT CLOCK) Not half past nine...

LIGHTS DOWN.

THE EMBANKMENT. MOONLIT.

BERNARD LOOKS AT SOMETHING (OUT OF OUR VIEW) IT'S THE VIXEN AND HER CUBS. HE CHUCKLES A FEW TIMES.

BERNARD: (ALMOST WHISPERS) I bet owd Reynard's proud - 'as he gone off to get your dinner? I only hope he's not gone after Elworth's 'ens - that's all they need. (CHUCKLES) Bygum they're right bundles they are. Rawngin' and rollin' all over the shop. You look warn out, lass, looking this way an' that. You've got your hands full there. They've got more meat on 'em than you. You're like that Olive Oyle on't tele. Me mother likes Pop-eye - reckons I should eat spinach like he does. I'll call thee 'Olive' - (LAUGHS) I'll 'ave to call owd Reynard 'Pop-eye'. Whether he'll appreciate that I do not know... And what can we call them little 'uns? (THINKS) What is is now? Sweet Pea, that's it. They're doing that much pittlin' I reckon I'll call 'em all Sweet Pea...

BERNARD STAYS WATCHING FOXES.

YARD/SHIPPON AREA. DAY TIME.

THE SHIPPON IS EMPTY. EVERYTHING HAS TO BE SCRUBBED.  
THE SHIT CARTED AWAY. KEN IS SHOVELLING IT. HE STOPS AND  
RUMINATES ON THE STEAMING PILE ON THE END OF HIS FORK.

KEN: This is you Ken lad. 'appy as a pig in it.  
Spent your life in it. Folks say it stinks, but I've never noticed.

SHOVELS A BIT MORE, THEN STOPS.  
FROM THEN ON HE'LL SHOVEL TO ACCENTUATE A POINT.

KEN: Nowt scares you, Ken lad. Why should it? My 'ouse, my shippon, my barn,  
my sty, my grass, my fences, my gate - bolted across the end of track.  
Nowt scares you Ken lad. Just shovel the shit like a good 'un. There's plenty  
of it, plenty to do. No time to let daft bloody thoughts get in your head, no  
bloody time. (SHOVELS MANURE WITH VIGOUR, THEN STOPS,  
SATISFIED. I bet I've shovelled more shit than most blokes from Crewe to  
Oswestry. Not many can say that. They bloody can't. I'm not just pressin' a  
button all day or bein' nice to folks who think they're summat special in a  
bloody shop. No Ken lad, you're likely the best shit-shoveller who ever...  
who ever... who ever shovelled shite. As long as there is shit to shovel you'll  
be alreet... (PAUSES) But say I start smellin' it - because there's no more to  
shovel.

MURIEL ENTERS BY THE GATE.  
KEN SEES HER, HALF NODS, AND GETS ON SHOVELLING BUT MORE  
RHYTHMICALLY.  
HE'LL CONTINUE THIS, STOPPING OCCASIONALLY THROUGH THE  
CONVERSATION.

MURIEL: 'ow you doin'?

KEN: All reet.

MURIEL: There's still a fair bit to do.

KEN: That's why I'm doin' it. (CONTINUES)

MURIEL: What d'you think about?

KEN LOOKS.

MURIEL: When you're shovelling?

KEN: Nowt.

MURIEL: I bet you think summat.

KEN: You'd lose your money then.

MURIEL: Course you must.

KEN: I don't think about owt.

MURIEL: Everyone thinks... when they're workin'.  
KEN: I don't.

MURIEL: Go on, tell us.

KEN: What d'you mean, 'Everyone does'?

MURIEL: Well, they do.

KEN: You don't know everyone... come to think of it, you hardly know anyone. I know more folks than you - an' I don't know many. An' them I do don't think.

MURIEL: 'ow do you know?

KEN: Cos they don't... apart from Ronnie Rostron - thinks about money all the time... and that thin-faced lad of 'is...

MURIEL: What does 'e think about?

KEN: I'm not sayin'... Only you don't get boney 'ands and starin' eyes like young Rostron unless your 'ead's full of...

MURIEL: What's up with him then?

KEN: Too much bloody thinkin'...

MURIEL: Why are 'is 'ands boney?

KEN: Wankers doom, that's why.

MURIEL: Don't be so vulgar.

KEN: Well, don't go on with yourself about what a man thinks about.

MURIEL: Do you think about that kind of thing - women and that?

KEN: No, I damn well don't.

MURIEL: (RESIGNED) No, I dare say you don't.

KEN: (CHANGES SUBJECT) I'll tell you summat - they don't treat us no better than animals. Cattle. That's what I think if you must know.

MURIEL: Who?

KEN: How the bloody 'ell do I know who. They. THEY. Every bugger but us... At bloody school they used to say I stank of cow shit. For all I know I did, but I can't smell it... Can you?

MURIEL: No, course I can't.

KEN: You can't cos you're livin' in it like me. D'you know, they're startin' raisin' cows an' pigs like they are bloody 'ens. In sheds. Batteries. So they never see the light of day. 'Factory Farming' they call it. You've got bloody big farms like Sir Anthony Selswick on one side - 'Gentleman Farmer'. 'Farmer!' - when did 'e load a barrow up with shit. 'im on one side, and there'll be bloody factories - beasts pumped up with feed, watter and any bloody other shit they can invent to bloat them, on the other. 'an you know where we'll be...

MURIEL: In the middle.

KEN: Up shit creek.

MURIEL: We'll just 'ave to move with the times.

KEN: How?

MURIEL: I don't know.

KEN: You wouldn't...

MURIEL: When your dad got that tractor, instead of the horse. 'e was movin' with the times.

KEN: A damn tractor's one thing. Fields without 'edges an' cows without bloody daylight is summat else. They'll 'ave tubes up the cows backsides next so you don't see the shit.

MURIEL: You wouldn't have to do that. (SHOVEL IT)

KEN: What the bloody 'ell would I do?

BARROW LOADED, KEN GOES OFF AGAIN.  
MURIEL SETS OFF TO GO IN, THEN STOPS.  
KEN RETURNS WITH BARROW.

MURIEL: I've bin thinkin'...

KEN: You know what thought did - followed a muck spreader and thought it was a weddin'.

MURIEL: What you've bin sayin'...

HE LOOKS.

MURIEL: Whether there's any future in cattle...

KEN: I've not said there's no future in 'em.

MURIEL: I know you've not.

KEN: Well then.

MURIEL: But I got the idea... you know... that there might not be any future in 'em.

KEN: I don't know where you got that idea from.

MURIEL: If you don't say, how am I goin' to know.

KEN: Well, just because you don't know you don't 'ave to dream things up and mek out I've said 'em.

MURIEL: You can say things without words sometimes.

KEN: And you can say things without bloody sense an' all.

MURIEL ALMOST GIVES UP, BUT DECIDES 'SOD IT - I'M GOING TO SPEAK UP'.

MURIEL: Cabbages.

KEN LOOKS.

MURIEL: Taters... turnips...

KEN: 'Ave you been at that horse linament?

MURIEL: Arable... we could go arable.

KEN: Arable. Bloody arable. You've gone bloody arable - bloody addled more like... Bloody arable.

MURIEL: We've got good land.

KEN: I know it is. I should bloody know. I've grown up on this land... I sometimes reckon I've grown out of it. No one knows this land better than me.

MURIEL: That's what I'm sayin'.

KEN: You're saying, 'Cabbages, taters and turnips.' Why don't you throw in a bunch of bloody radish for good measure.

MURIEL: We could... and lettuce... spinach.

KEN: I'm a cow man - or was. Not a bloody allotment keeper. Bloody cabbages. You'd be wantin' to give 'em names next like the bloody cows. You're bloody daft. What would it be? 'Claude bloody cabbage' and 'Tony the tater'... (SHAKES HIS HEAD) An' you think my nerves are goin'.

MURIEL: I've never said your nerves are bad.

KEN: (CONTINUES) 'op on the tractor an I'll run you up to Arclid. 'Ave we got a straight-jacket? - oh no, I'll just run an' get a feed sack an' some bailing string. Bloody cabbages. What sort of bloody farmin' is cabbages an' taters.

MURIEL: Arable.

KEN: Aye - bloody arable.

MURIEL: You don't have to milk 'em.

KEN: No, you don't 'ave to do owt - stick 'em in an' leave 'em for six months. We'd be no better off... we'd still have to...

MURIEL: Talk to one another?

KEN: You're addled... daft as a brush.

MURIEL: An' we could 'ave a little farm shop too.

KEN: I'll ring Arclid now. Tell 'em to get a padded cell ready...

MURIEL: Use the milkin' parlour. We could sell...

KEN: (TIRED OF THIS) Cabbages... taters... turnips...

MURIEL: A few nice beetroot, carrots, ey, an' sell a few eggs.

KEN: Them 'ens of yours don't lay enough to keep us in eggs.

MURIEL: We could get a few more.

KEN: (ALMOST BLURTS OUT) Or I could gerra job in Sandbach - ERF or Fodens.

MURIEL: Doin' what?

KEN: Owt - brushin' up, labourin' - owt. I'm not bothered.

MURIEL: Don't be so daft.

KEN: It's not dafter than this game. Steady money... regular hours... I'd gerrout an' all. Wouldn't 'ave to spend all day lookin' at me miserable mug then would you.

MURIEL: Neither you mine.

KEN: So it's not such a daft idea then, is it.

HE SLINGS HIS FORK IN THE BARROW, WHEELS IT TO SHIPPIN AND EXITS.

MURIEL MOVES BACK TO KITCHEN. SHE'S RESTLESS, PREOCCUPIED, SUDDENLY DECIDES TO LOOK FOR SOMETHING. SHE LOOKS UNDER A POT, MAYBE A TEA CADDY, AND FINDS A SCRAP OF PAPER, GOES TO PHONE, HESITATES, THEN DIALS.

MURIEL: (TO PHONE) Is Miss Markham there... oh it's you... you sound different... it's me... Mrs. Elworth... oh we're alright. (PAUSE) I wondered if you might be passing... no, no problems... we're alright... no, just if you're passing you're always welcome to drop in... 'up this way tomorrow'... well, five o'clock is convenient, yes... I'll be here alright... If you're busy I better ring off... I'll have the kettle on... (PUTTING PHONE DOWN) I'll get biscuits.

KEN ENTERS. HE DOESN'T LOOK AT MURIEL. GOES TO CHAIR AND FLOPS IN IT, PREOCCUPIED.

MURIEL IS ABOUT TO TELL HIM ABOUT HER PHONE CALL. SHE CAN'T.

LIGHTS DOWN.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

FARM YARD. NEXT DAY.

BERNARD ALONG, PUSHING HIS HANDCART, AS MURIEL OUT OF HOUSE.

BERNARD: You alright Mrs. Elworth.

MURIEL: 'ello, Bernard, how are you?

BERNARD: It's a beggar pushin' that 'an'cart in the snow...

MURIEL: Ow you managin'?

BERNARD: I'm fettlin, so to speak, as you might say.

MURIEL: I suppose it's a bit of a struggle...

BERNARD: Snow's covered up muck so there's no need to sweep.

MURIEL: No, I meant money-wise like. With you not gettin' what bit Ken paid you for 'elpin' us out... I'm very sorry, Ken was sorry.

BERNARD: Oh, I know 'e was. But if you've no cows to milk you don't want to be payin' someone for milkin' 'em, do you. That's 'ow I see it. That's the way I look at things. Stands to reason.

MURIEL: There's a little job you could do if you've got a bit of time.

BERNARD: (KEEN) What's that then?

MURIEL: Shippon door - it's bin hangin' on one hinge for ages. It drives me daft creekin' all night. Ken keeps saying he'll do it...

BERNARD: (KNOWING) He's a lot on his mind.

MURIEL: (NODS) There's old hinges on that door against the sty.

BERNARD: I'll do that Mrs. Elworth. It'll be my pleasure so to speak.

MURIEL: I'll pay you.

BERNARD: There's no need.

MURIEL: Course I will. I don't suppose the parish pay you much for road sweepin'.

BERNARD: Keeps me in a glass or three of mild, Mrs. Elworth. And then there's Ministry money...

MURIEL: What's that - some sort of dole?

BERNARD: It's what you might call blood money, if you get my meanin'.

MURIEL: I can't say that I do, Bernard.

BERNARD: Well, we'd be up in arms wouldn't we... well, we wouldn't but the Ministry's afeard we would be. (WHISPERS) Labour, you see. They know if it were town works - like lads on Railways in Crewe - if they were laid off for no fault of their own they'd be up in arms them lads. Up in arms, would them Railwaymen. Minister thinks us farm 'ands would be the same so 'e's payin' blood money.

MURIEL: I'm still not quite gettin' what you're gettin' at, Bernard.

BERNARD: I can tell a tale an all, can't I Mrs. Elworth, when I get goin'. Like me mother says, 'By 'eck, Bernard - if you could run as fast as you can talk you'd be at Winsford in five minutes flat. Only trouble is, you're supposed to be goin' to Congleton.' That's what she says.

MURIEL WAITS.

BERNARD: Where was I?

MURIEL: 'alf way to Winsford.

BERNARD: (CHUCKLES) No, I've got it now. I'm back on the track. On the right lines. That Miss Markham - her with the Morris Minor - she's fixed me up wi' a little job. All us 'as bin layed off like, they're payin' us to burn off the dead beasts.

MURIEL: That's terrible.

BERNARD: Aye... keeps us in a glass or three though.

MURIEL: Yes, but havin' to do that.

BERNARD: Aye... Went t'other side of Northwich yesterday... an they laid on pies.

MURIEL: I suppose someone's got to do it.

BERNARD: They 'ave Mrs. Elworth, you're right there. D'you think Ken would fancy it - I could put 'is name up.

MURIEL: (DEFINITELY NOT) I don't think so...

KEN EMERGES FROM SHIPPON. HE WATCHES FOR A MOMENT WHEN HE SEES MURIEL AND BERNARD TALKING.

BERNARD: No, I suppose 'e's got a lot on.

MURIEL: Yes, that's right.

KEN COMES OVER WITH HIS EMPTY BARROW.

KEN: What you two on about?

MURIEL: Just chattin'.

UNEASY SILENCE.

BERNARD: Eric Monks from Twemlow's lost all his beasts.

KEN: 'Ave you no good news?

BERNARD: I'll earn a few bob if I 'elp 'im load the carcasses on a wagon.

KEN: You'd sell a bloke fire lighters who was going to be cremated.

BERNARD: That Miss Markham - her with the Morris Minor - she fixed me up with the job. I bet she'd put a word in for you, Ken, if you asked.

KEN: She wouldn't give me the shite from under her finger nails - not that she's got any muck under her nails. She'll sit on her behind in a government office raspin' the buggers all day. She better not show 'er face here that's all...

KEN GOES AND STANDS, LEANING ON THE GATE, LOOKING AT SOME DISTANT POINT.

MURIEL: I bet it's hit the takin's at the Arms.

BERNARD: There's not the same, what you might call, local trade, in, there isn't.

MURIEL: It must be hitting them.

BERNARD: But like me mother says, every cloud has a sliver lining. I mean, who'd 'ave thought they'd be gettin' what you might call the tourist trade.

KEN: You bloody what?

BERNARD: Day trippers. Sight see-ers. Specially of a weekend. Couldn't get me usual seat last Sunday dinner. Wouldn't credit it, would you.

MURIEL: What have they come to look for?

KEN: Trouble. Anyone's but their bloody own.

BERNARD: They come from all over, drive all that way - from Stockport, Manchester and Stoke on Trent. Just to look, aye. There's Ford Anglias, Vauxhall Vivas, Zephyr Zodiacs, Triumph Heralds...

KEN: Bloody Morris Minors...

MURIEL: 'course, they've always come picknickin' on Sundays.

BERNARD: Not so many.

KEN: Leavin' gates open and frittin the beasts. Now they've got summat to look at. Stinkin' fires, pires of roastin' mutton, beef and pork that the buggers *won't* 'ave on their Sunday dinner plates. It gives 'em more pleasure driving all that way to watch bonfires of rottin' carcasses. The same lot will 'ave driven to where that plane crashed in Stockport.

BERNARD: There's nowt so queer as folk.

KEN: I'd drop the lot in a bloody lime pit.

HE MOVES BACK TO THE HOUSE - BORED, FRUSTRATED, DEPRESSED.

MURIEL: It's all different now, Bernard.

BERNARD: Aye... it will be. Not just a matter of drawin' the curtains on it, is it, Mrs. Elworth. Not that easy.

MURIEL: When they burn 'em - the smell stays with you. Sticks to your clothes, stings your eyes. Parafin... then scorched fur like singein' some wet gloves... then meat roastin'. Like a thousand Sunday dinners, and it makes you want to be sick. Deep down, in here. (PATS HER STOMACH) But there's nothing to sick up. Empty. (PAUSE) An' you can't smell the season. Disinfectant - that's all you can smell this year. Disinfectant.

BERNARD: Aye...

MURIEL: Everything's got to be sterile they say. It is too.

MURIEL LAPSES INTO SILENCE.

BERNARD: (GAZES TOWARDS EMBANKMENT) Have you seen Pop-eye?

MURIEL: (LOOKS. THEN) We haven't got a telly.

BERNARD: I think 'e's keepin' Olive's pantry stocked up.

MURIEL: What are you on about?

BERNARD: I'm at it again, aren't I, Mrs. Elworth - half way to Winsford. That's what I call that pair of foxes - Pop-eye and Olive Oyle. Thin as a lath Olive - it's dropped off her - feedin' those little 'uns.

MURIEL: I'm glad she's 'ad 'em.

BERNARD: Aye... Pop-eye and Olive Oyle...

MURIEL: I am glad. Glad for 'er. It'll be hard enough work. A struggle. Meekin' sure they're fed. Hopin' they don't get into trouble. You're bound to worry. What parents wouldn't. Hard work and worry. That's what it'll be. It'll be mating season when Reynard - Popeye's interested again, for all we know. Mebbe that's what it's all for. Olive won't worry about it. If she says to Pop-eye 'What's it all for?' He'd say (AS KEN) 'I dunna know. And talkin' about it won't bloody change it. Talkin' bloody changes nowt...'

BERNARD PUZZLED.  
MURIEL COLLECTS HERSELF.

BERNARD: I'll see to that door then.

MURIEL NODS, THEN GOES TO THE KITCHEN WHERE SHE SITS WITH KEN.

BERNARD OFF BY SHIPPON.

THE KITCHEN. EARLY EVENING.

MURIEL'S A BIT EDGY.  
KEN SITS IN HIS CHAIR.

MURIEL: Are you in tonight?

KEN: I live 'ere.

MURIEL: You're not goin' up to the Arms.

KEN: I've not bin for weeks. I'll not go again if they've tecken to caterin' for bloody townies.

MURIEL: Oh... (HESITATES)

KEN: Want to see the back of me do you?

MURIEL: Course not... Did I mention we've got company comin'?

KEN LOOKS.

MURIEL: Must've gone right out of me head.

SHE TAKES A BOTTLE FROM HER BASKET - IT'S A LUCOZADE BOTTLE BUT FILLED WITH SHERRY.

MURIEL: D'you want a drop?

KEN LOOKS.

KEN: What do I want with Lucozade - tastes like bloody sow's watter... and it gives you worms... it's all bloody sugar. Fizzed up sow's watter... It'll rot your teeth... And you know what fizzed up drinks are like with you... It's too damn cold to sleep with bedroom window open.

MURIEL: Don't judge a book by lookin' at the cover...

KEN LOOKS, AND GETS BACK TO THE FIRE.

MURIEL: It's sherry.

KEN LOOKS AGAIN.

MURIEL: It is, sherry. Medium sherry. Spanish, Mrs Tyler says.

KEN: She'll tell you owt.

MURIEL: It's on the barrel.

KEN: What bloody barrel?

MURIEL: Well, more of a plastic tub. 'Armodillo'. Spanish sherry.

KEN: What you on about, 'plastic tubs' and bloody sherry.

MURIEL: They sell it on draught. I said to Mrs. Tyler - 'D'you have to buy the whole barrel of that sherry?' She laughed, and said, 'Did I ump. ' They do it on draught, you see. Go on - try some... Just a sip...

KEN SIPS SHERRY AND CRINGES.

KEN: Were that mangy owd moggy of 'ers sat on't barrel?

MURIEL: (SIPS, NOT IMPRESSED) It's reasonable though... and she didn't charge me for the bottle.

KEN: I bet she was glad to get shot of it. Gnats piss.

MURIEL: Don't you want it. (GOES TO TAKE HIS GLASS)

KEN: I didn't say that... I'm not throwin' good money after bad. (SIPS AGAIN, MAKING SURE IT'S CLEAR HE DOESN'T LIKE IT) Weasels water.

MURIEL: I saw it when I went in for biscuits.

KEN: (LOOKS) What d'you mean - biscuits?

MURIEL: With company comin' - I thought I'd get some. Then I saw the barrel - Armodillo they call it.

KEN: (CUTS IN) Biscuits. Bloody biscuits... That bloody young piece from Cheadle 'ulmes comin', in't she.

MURIEL: Just on her way home.

KEN: Bloody foistin' hersel'. You should've told her to bugger off. Spoke on that phone did she. I knew it were a mistake gettin' that.

MURIEL: I telephoned her - invited her.

KEN: You can bloody uninvite her.

MURIEL: What harm will it do.

KEN: There's bloody hundreds you could've asked - though I don't know why you've got to ask anyone.

MURIEL: Company.

KEN: She's not even local.

MURIEL: She's a pleasant girl, Ken - she was bothered about us. We don't want her to think bad of us.

KEN: You mean me. An' I don't give a flyin' fart what she thinks about me.

FINDS HIS COAT AND STARTS TO GO OUT.

MURIEL: Where you off?

KEN: If my company's not good enough for you.

MURIEL: She'll be gone by the time you get back...

KEN HESITATES, THEN TAKES HIS COAT OFF.

KEN: Y'aren't gettin' shot of me that easy.

HE GETS HIS GUN OUT OF CUPBOARD, TO POLISH, AND PLONKS HIMSELF IN THE CHAIR, GUN PROPPED BETWEEN HIS LEGS.

KEN: Give us some of that Armodillo piss.

MURIEL POURS HIM SOME MORE, THEN HOVERS NERVOUSLY.

MURIEL: You won't say owt...

KEN: I knew you wanted me out.

MURIEL: So long as you aren't rude.

KEN: Rude. Bloody rude...

MURIEL: Well don't be.

KEN: I'll please me sen.

FADE LIGHTS DOWN.  
THEN UP.

MURIEL AND KEN SIT IN SILENCE. AN HOUR HAS PASSED.

MURIEL: She must've got behind with her work.

KEN: Or forgotten.

MURIEL: She'll have a lot on.

KEN TUTS DISMISSIVE.

MURIEL: I feel a bit daft askin' her now. She likely didn't like saying 'no'.

KEN: Aye well, now you know.

THEY SIT IN SILENCE.  
A KNOCK AT THE DOOR.  
MURIEL STANDS UP LIKE A SHOT.  
KEN ANXIOUS, THEN VIGOROUSLY POLISHES HIS GUN.

THE DOOR OPENS - IT'S BERNARD.

BERNARD: I've finished that door.

KEN: What door?

BERNARD: Shippon door.

KEN: (TO MURIEL) I'm not bloody 'elpless.

MURIEL: Well, it's done now.

BERNARD: I'll gerroff wam then.

KEN: Aye.

MURIEL: D'you want a drop o' sherry, Bernard love.

KEN SIGHS.

BERNARD: (IMPRESSED) Sherry. Goin' up in the world are you, Ken lad. Sherry. You'll be askin' Mrs. Elworth to cut your butties in triangles next. Sherry ey, Mrs. Elworth.

KEN: I'll be askin' you to sling your 'ook.

MURIEL: Take no notice, Bernard.

KEN: No bugger else does.

BERNARD: (MAKING CONVERSATION) Nice gun is that, Ken.

KEN: It's not a bloody ornament.

MURIEL HANDS BERNARD A SHERRY.

BERNARD: (IMPRESSED) Sherry ey, Ken. (SIPS IT) Aye, sherry.

KEN: Just bloody sup it.

BERNARD: I will, Ken. Very nice. A drop o' sherry.

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR.

MURIEL: This'll be our company.

GOING TO DOOR.

BERNARD: Company 'n' all, Ken lad - I'll polish me boots next time I come.

MURIEL OPENS DOOR TO CHRISTINE.

CHRISTINE: I'm really sorry I'm late.

BERNARD: (QUIETLY IMPRESSED) Miss Markham with the Morris Minor, Ken.

MURIEL: We'd given you up...

CHRISTINE: I got called to the Selswick Estate.

KEN: (MUTTERS) You'd be at 'ome there.

MURIEL: You better come in.

BERNARD: How's that Morris Minor?

CHRISTINE: Fine.

MURIEL: A drop of sherry, Miss Markham.

CHRISTINE: Christine. Yes please.

BERNARD: Me mother likes sherry.

KEN: (MUTTERS) Why don't you bring her an' all.

CHRISTINE: I really am sorry I'm so late. I hope I've not ruined your evening.

MURIEL: Course you've not... has she, Ken.

NO REPLY.

CHRISTINE: Sir Ralph hinted there might be some long term work for me on the estate.

KEN SIGHS.

MURIEL: (HANDING SHERRY) That's nice.

BERNARD: Armadillo that sherry - 'ave you 'ad it, Miss Markham - Armadillo?

CHRISTINE: I don't think so.

BERNARD: You'll like it.

KEN: What do you know about bloody sherry.

BERNARD: Nowt, Ken lad.

KEN: Aye well then.

BERNARD: But me mother does. She sups a gill a day. Aye - I get it from Mrs. Tyler's.

MURIEL: That's where I got this.

BERNARD: That's why she's no trouble to no one. A gill a day - and she just sits pokin' the fire.

MURIEL POURS SHERRY.

MURIEL: Cheers.

CHRISTINE: Good health.

BERNARD: Aye - Armadillo.

LONG SILENCE.

MURIEL: Funny, drinkin' sherry.

KEN: Drinkin' this stuff is.

MURIEL: The smell, the taste. I wonder why they always bring it out at 'do's. All the important times of your life, there's always sherry.

KEN DRAINS HIS GLASS.

KEN: It's not for the taste - that's for definite.

MURIEL: I wonder why?

CHRISTINE: I suppose it's a social convention.

KEN: It's times folks 'ave to talk to one another. Dutch bloody courage.

MURIEL: How d'you mean?

KEN: Talkin' to buggers you don't want to. Who you've not seen since the last weddin', Christmas - or funeral.

BERNARD: Or christenin'.

KEN: In other words the last time you all 'ad the bloody sherry out. It's the only road folks can find summat to say or stick the buggers they don't like.

THEY LAPSE INTO SILENCE.

MURIEL: You like animals, do you, Miss Markham?

CHRISTINE: Yes. Very much.

KEN: (MUTTERS) You wouldn't've guessed.

CHRISTINE: (PRESSES ON) I've got a dog.

BERNARD: Gerraway.

MURIEL: What's he called?

CHRISTINE: Snuffles.

BERNARD: (LAUGHS) Snuffles.

KEN TUTS.

MURIEL: We 'ad a dog, din't we, Ken.

NO REPLY.

MURIEL: A little Jack Russell.

BERNARD: I remember him. What did you call 'im now?

MURIEL: Little Jack.

BERNARD: Aye - that's the lad.

CHRISTINE: He sounds sweet.

MURIEL: He thought the world of Ken.

BERNARD: What 'appened to Little Jack then, Ken?

KEN: I shot him.

SILENCE.

MURIEL: More sherry, Miss Markham.

CHRISTINE: I better not... driving. In fact I better get moving.

MURIEL: I've not opened the biscuits.

CHRISTINE: Mum will have dinner waiting.

MURIEL: Just one - there's Jammy dodgers an' Ginger nuts...

KEN: (EXPLODES) She doesn't want a soddin' biscuit. She's likely got a great big pantry stuffed full of fancy biscuits. Like they'll have sherry in fancy bottles - not an empty pop bottle. She's only come 'cos she's bein' polite. She feels bloody sorry for you. She thinks you're married to a bad bugger. And 'appen she's bloody right. But that's how it is. And there's nowt in our shippon, and that's 'ow it is. An' smilin' and bloody talkin' an 'avin' company an' government bloody forms and pissin' Morris Minors dun't change a bloody thing. It's us. An' tight-arses like 'er can come and look and smile an' screw their faces up as they drink that piss, an' shake hands as much as they like. But they make no difference. Or they make things worse. An' you worry what they'll think about us... you worry what *she'll* think of us.

KEN SITS.

CHRISTINE: (STRUGGLES FOR CONTROL. THEN COLD) I'm sorry... I didn't mean to intrude.

MURIEL: You've no need to apologize - I asked you...

CHRISTINE: (GOING TO LEAVE) Thank you for the sherry.

SHE EXITS.

LONG SILENCE.

MURIEL: Manners don't cost anything.

KEN: Don't they.

MURIEL: What's she goin' to think... Saying she was sorry for me.

THEY'RE ALL SURPRISED WHEN CHRISTINE RE-ENTERS, CARRYING A HEAVY TV.

CHRISTINE: (FLAT) Mummy thought you might like this.

MURIEL: What have you told her?

CHRISTINE: We've got colour.

SHE PUTS THE TV ON THE TABLE, NODS, THEN LEAVES.

KEN: (BAWLS) Take the bugger away.

BUT SHE'S GONE.

BERNARD: (LOOKS AT TV) Must be 17 inch - twice the size of ours. (BEAT. TENTATIVE) You'll be alreet with this... just switch it on. (SETS ABOUT PLUGGIN IT IN AS HE TALKS) Long neets. You switch it on an' just sit there. Where would me mother be without ours. There's football on it, Ken... An' cookin', Mrs. Elworth... not that they could teach you owt. A bit of entertainment. You'll be alreet with this - definite. You don't 'ave to worry about anything.

KEN STANDS, TAKES HIS GUN, AND GOES OUT.

MURIEL GAZES AT THE SILENT FUZZY BLACK & WHITE IMAGES ON THE TV.

BERNARD LOOKS TO MURIEL FOR A RESPONSE, BUT THERE IS NONE.

FADE LIGHTS DOWN ON KITCHEN SO IT'S JUST LIT BY THE FLICKERING TV.

THE EMBANKMENT.

KEN ENTERS WITH GUN. HE SEES FOX. LAYS HIS GUN ON GROUND AND WATCHES.

KEN: You've gorrit all weighed up. Nowt bothers you - the 'osses are in the stable and the 'ounds are stuck in their kennels, and I shouldn't wonder if Sir Ralph's clicking round yon Hall, rappin' his whip on his boots wonderin' if this winter's ever goin' to run its course. And you're lyin' there in the brown dead grass. Blinkin' at this sun that's not 'ad enough warmth all day to tek the frost off the fields. You're a cunning bugger all right. Even your coat - the colour of them leaves. I can see you though. Cocky more than cunning I'd say. I've seen you dancin' in the moon. Heard you cackling. Thought you were dancing on a grave called Cheshire, did you. Thought 'I'm alreet. There's a silver lining round my bloody cloud.' 'Selswick and his dogs are confined to barracks. And there's no movement on Elworth's farm - nowt to fear there. They can all be dead as far as I know or care. They can go the way of their bloody cows. 'I'll make hay whether the sun shines or no. They've all given up or good as.' That's what you reckon. 'I'm Lord of this manor.' I thought I were lord of this manor... You know what thowt did...

KEN RAISES HIS GUN.

KEN: You know what thowt did, Reynard...

BLACKOUT.

TWO LOUD SHOTS.

CHRISTINE: (V.O. WAILS) Oh no what have you done!

MURIEL AND BERNARD MOVE FROM KITCHEN TOWARDS  
EMBANKMENT (WHERE THEY'LL STAND A LITTLE WAY OFF KEN).

LIGHTS UP ON THE EMBANKMENT - TWILIGHT.

KEN STANDS LOOKING IN FOX'S DIRECTION AS MURIEL AND  
BERNARD ARRIVE.

KEN: I talked to him - his (BERNARD'S) mate (THE FOX).

MIMES RAISING HIS GUN AND AIMING AT THE FOX.

KEN: I put him straight. I told him you reckoned more to him for siring a brood  
than you do to me.

MURIEL: Oh give over.

KEN: Bloody sherry and fancy friends and televisions so's you can forget you're  
wed to me. Goin' on with that daft bugger about fox whelps. Well, we can  
see who's master now - see who's got the whip hand. A couple of barrels  
from my 12 bore can put paid to a fox, his wife and as many pups as you  
like.

MURIEL: And that's made a man of you, has it?

KEN: That's what it boils down to. Me not givin' you kids. Thought 'er from  
Cheadle 'ulme was some sort of daughter, did you.

MURIEL: (SHAKES HER HEAD) This winter gone, d'you know what? I started to want  
'em, children. Of me own.

KEN: You're tellin' me nowt new.

MURIEL: I didn't want them to pass the farm on to though. Neither to prove that you  
or me was in good working order down below.

KEN LOOKS AT HER.

MURIEL: You know why I wanted them. D'you know why... (BEAT) I just wanted someone to love me back. That's all. Someone to smile when they saw me. Like that girl when she turned up. Just someone smilin' - talkin' about summat I'd not seen - smilin'...

BERNARD SEES SOMETHING OVER THE BANK. HE LOOKS BACK AT KEN, THEN OVER THE BANK, THEN BACK TO MURIEL.

BERNARD: It's Sweet Pea... and another, and Olive Oyle.

MURIEL LOOKS OVER THE BANK AND THEN BACK TO KEN. THEN IN THE DISTANCE SHE SEES SOMETHING.

MURIEL: What's that, Bernard?

SHE POINTS. BERNARD LOOKS.

MURIEL: It's not the dog fox?

BERNARD: Aye, it's Pop-eye. It is.

BERNARD KEEPS WATCHING.

MURIEL LOOKS TO KEN FOR AN EXPLANATION.

KEN: You'd 'ave said I was mad if I'd killed him when there was no need. I wasn't havin' that. I'm not bloody crazy, Muriel. I'm not. I can't work it all out. Let alone talk about it. But I'm not crazy. I'm not. 'onest. Inside, in here. I'm not.

T.V. CLICKS INTO LIFE - IT'S THE END OF 'POPEYE' CARTOON.

TV: 'I go to the finish

Cos I eats my spinach

I'm Pop-eye the Sailor Man'

THEN A NEWSCASTER:

TV: 'The Ministry of Agriculture say that the Foot and Mouth epidemic is now officially over. Farmers look forward to life getting back to normal.'

KEN: I need a smile an' all, Muriel.

MURIEL: I was worried when I 'eard the shots.

KEN LAUGHS.

MURIEL: What's up?

KEN: I'm laughin'... I shot the headlights out of that Morris bloody Minor.

MURIEL: You didn't, Kenneth!

KEN: What d'you think of that, Bernard?

BERNARD: You want to know what I think, Ken lad... I'm glad it weren't owd Pop-eye or Olive... That's all I think... (LOOKS TOWARDS FOXES) That's what you think an' all, in't it Pop-eye.

KEN: You daft bugger.

BERNARD: 'E can't answer me - he's got one of Sir Ralph Selswick's pheasants in'is trap. (BEAT) Olive's not seen 'im but she's sniffin'. She knows...

MURIEL: She knows more than us when she sniffs. (BEAT) We started smellin' the shit, din't we, Ken.

KEN LOOKS.

MURIEL: We can now. It's no good denying it.

KEN: I know.

MURIEL: But it's alright.

KEN SHAKES HIS HEAD.

MURIEL: It is - it's alright. Cos the stench isn't comin' from our farm. It comes from past our gate. Over the other side of our hedges. We thought it was us. I was worried they thought it was us. An' for all your bluster, you did. But it's them - out there. And d'you know what - they can't smell it. It's right in't it, Bernard.

BERNARD: (TRYING TO UNDERSTAND) You run a good farm, Mrs. Elworth - you and Ken.

MURIEL: Course we do. It's all we do. It's what we are. (BEAT) You see that sun sittin' in them trees, Bernard?

BERNARD: Aye, with a big fat red face.

MURIEL: I started thinkin' she was grinnin' - sneerin'... She's smilin' though, in't she?

BERNARD: Course she is. She is. Smilin'.

MURIEL: In't she, Ken... Smilin'.

KEN: (A MOMENT) Aye...

MURIEL GOES TO KEN AND LINKS HIM.

ALL THREE LOOK TOWARDS THE DYING SUN.

LIGHTS DOWN APART FROM A PURPLE SUN, AND THE GREY  
FLICKER OF SILENT TV.

MUSIC: 'HI HO SILVER LINING'.

END.

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