

ACT IV

[Man's most pleasant invention is the lawn-mower. All the birds know this, and that is why, when it is at rest, there is always at least one of them sitting on the handle with his head cocked, wondering how the delicious whirring sound is made. When they find out, they will change their note. As it is, you must sometimes have thought that you heard the mower very early in the morning, and perhaps you peeped in negligence from your lattice window to see who was up so early. It was really the birds trying to get the note.]

On this broiling morning, however, we are at noon, and whoever looks will see that the whirring is done by Mr. Venables. He is in a linen suit with the coat discarded (the bird is sitting on it), and he comes and goes across the Comtesse's lawns, pleasantly mopping his face. We see him through a crooked bowed window generously open, roses intruding into it as if to prevent its ever being closed at night; there are other roses in such armfuls on the tables that one could not easily say where the room ends and the garden begins.

In the Comtesse's pretty comic drawing-room (for she likes the comic touch when she is in England) sits John Shand with his hostess, on chairs at a great distance from each other. No linen garments for John, nor flannels, nor even knickerbockers; he envies the English way of dressing for trees and lawns, but is too Scotch to be able to imitate it; he wears tweeds, just as he would do in his native country where they would be in kilts. Like many another Scot, the first time he ever saw a kilt was on a Sassenach; indeed kilts were perhaps invented, like golf, to draw the English north. John is doing nothing, which again is not a Scotch accomplishment, and he looks rather miserable and dour. The Comtesse is already at her Patience cards, and occasionally she smiles on him as if not displeased with his long silence. At last she speaks:]

COMTESSE. I feel it rather a shame to detain you here on such a lovely day, Mr. Shand, entertaining an old woman.

JOHN. I don't pretend to think I'm entertaining you, Comtesse.

COMTESSE. But you ARE, you know.

JOHN. I would be pleased to be told how?

[She shrugs her impertinent shoulders, and presently there is another heavy sigh from JOHN.]

COMTESSE. Again! Why do not you go out on the river?

JOHN. Yes, I can do that. [He rises.]

COMTESSE. And take Sybil with you. [He sits again.] No?

JOHN. I have been on the river with her twenty times.

COMTESSE. Then take her for a long walk through the Fairloe woods.

JOHN. We were there twice last week.

COMTESSE. There is a romantically damp little arbour at the end of what the villagers call the Lovers' Lane.

JOHN. One can't go there every day. I see nothing to laugh at.

COMTESSE. Did I laugh? I must have been translating the situation into French.

[Perhaps the music of the lawn-mower is not to JOHN's mood, for he betakes himself to another room. MR. VENABLES pauses in his labours to greet a lady who has appeared on the lawn, and who is MAGGIE. She is as neat as if she were one of the army of typists [who are quite the nicest kind of women], and carries a little bag. She comes in through the window, and puts her hands over the COMTESSE's eyes.]

COMTESSE. They are a strong pair of hands, at any rate.

MAGGIE. And not very white, and biggish for my size. Now guess.

[The COMTESSE guesses, and takes both the hands in hers as if she valued them. She pulls off MAGGIE's hat as if to prevent her flying away.]

COMTESSE. Dear abominable one, not to let me know you were coming.

MAGGIE. It is just a surprise visit, Comtesse. I walked up from the station. [For a moment MAGGIE seems to have borrowed SYBIL'S impediment.] How is--everybody?

COMTESSE. He is quite well. But, my child, he seems to me to be a most unhappy man.

[This sad news does not seem to make a most unhappy woman of the child. The COMTESSE is puzzled, as she knows nothing of the situation save what she has discovered for herself.]

Why should that please you, O heartless one?

MAGGIE. I won't tell you.

COMTESSE. I could take you and shake you, Maggie. Here have I put my house at your disposal for so many days for some sly Scotch purpose, and you will not tell me what it is.

MAGGIE. No.

COMTESSE. Very well, then, but I have what you call a nasty one for you. [The COMTESSE lures MR. VENABLES into the room by holding up what might be a foaming glass of lemon squash.] Alas, Charles, it is but a flower vase. I want you to tell Mrs. Shand what you think of her husband's speech.

[MR. VENABLES gives his hostess a reproachful look.]

VENABLES. Eh--ah--Shand will prefer to do that himself. I promised the gardener--I must not disappoint him--excuse me--

COMTESSE. You must tell her, Charles.

MAGGIE. Please, Mr. Venables, I should like to know.

[He sits down with a sigh and obeys.]

VENABLES. Your husband has been writing the speech here, and by his own wish he read it to me three days ago. The occasion is to be an important one; and, well, there are a dozen young men in the party at present, all capable of filling a certain small ministerial post. [He looks longingly at the mower, but it sends no message to his aid.] And as he is one of them I was anxious that he should show in this speech of what he is capable.

MAGGIE. And hasn't he?

[Not for the first time MR. VENABLES wishes that he was not in politics.]

VENABLES. I am afraid he has.

COMTESSE. What is wrong with the speech, Charles?

VENABLES. Nothing--and he can still deliver it. It is a powerful, well-thought-out piece of work, such as only a very able man could produce. But it has no SPECIAL QUALITY of its own--none of the little touches that used to make an old stager like myself want to pat Shand on the shoulder. [The COMTESSE's mouth twitches, but MAGGIE declines to notice it.] He pounds on manfully enough, but, if I may say so, with a wooden leg. It is as good, I dare say, as the rest of them could have done; but they start with such inherited advantages, Mrs. Shand, that he had to do better.

MAGGIE. Yes, I can understand that.

VENABLES. I am sorry, Mrs. Shand, for he interested me. His career has set me wondering whether if I had begun as a railway porter I might not still be calling out, 'By your leave.'

[MAGGIE thinks it probable but not important]

MAGGIE. Mr. Venables, now that I think of it, surely John wrote to me that you were dissatisfied with his first speech, and that he was writing another.

[The COMTESSE's eyes open very wide indeed.]

VENABLES. I have heard nothing of that, Mrs. Shand. [He shakes his wise head.] And in any case, I am afraid--[He still hears the wooden leg.]

MAGGIE. But you said yourself that his second thoughts were sometimes such an improvement on the first.

[The COMTESSE comes to the help of the baggage.]

COMTESSE. I remember you saying that, Charles.

VENABLES. Yes, that has struck me. [Politely] Well, if he has anything to show me--In the meantime--

[He regains the lawn, like one glad to escape attendance at JOHN'S obsequies. The COMTESSE is brought back to speech by the sound of the mower--nothing wooden in it.]

COMTESSE. What are you up to now, Miss Pin? You know as well as I do that there is no such speech.

[MAGGIE's mouth tightens.]

MAGGIE. I do not.

COMTESSE. It is a duel, is it, my friend?

[The COMTESSE rings the bell and MAGGIE's guilty mind is agitated.]

MAGGIE. What are you ringing for?

COMTESSE. As the challenged one, Miss Pin, I have the choice of weapons. I am going to send for your husband to ask him if he has written such a speech. After which, I suppose, you will ask me to leave you while you and he write it together.

[MAGGIE wrings her hands.]

MAGGIE. You are wrong, Comtesse; but please don't do that.

COMTESSE. You but make me more curious, and my doctor says that I must be told everything. [The COMTESSE assumes the pose of her sex in melodrama.] Put your cards on the table, Maggie Shand, or--[She indicates that she always pinks her man. MAGGIE dolefully produces a roll of paper from her bag.] What precisely is that?

[The reply is little more than a squeak.]

MAGGIE. John's speech.

COMTESSE. You have written it yourself!

[MAGGIE is naturally indignant.]

MAGGIE. It's typed.

COMTESSE. You guessed that the speech he wrote unaided would not satisfy, and you prepared this to take its place!

MAGGIE. Not at all, Comtesse. It is the draft of his speech that he left at home. That's all.

COMTESSE. With a few trivial alterations by yourself, I swear. Can you deny it?

[No wonder that MAGGIE is outraged. She replaces JOHN's speech in the bag with becoming hauteur.]

MAGGIE. Comtesse, these insinuations are unworthy of you. May I ask where is my husband?

[The COMTESSE drops her a curtsey.]

COMTESSE. I believe your Haughtiness may find him in the Dutch garden. Oh, I see through you. You are not to show him your speech. But you are to get him to write another one, and somehow all your additions will be in it. Think not, creature, that you can deceive one so old in iniquity as the Comtesse de la Briere.

[There can be but one reply from a good wife to such a charge, and at once the COMTESSE is left alone with her shame. Anon a footman appears. You know how they come and go.]

FOOTMAN. You rang, my lady?

COMTESSE. Did I? Ah, yes, but why? [He is but lately from the ploughshare and cannot help her. In this quandary her eyes alight upon the bag. She is unfortunately too abandoned to feel her shame; she still thinks that she has the choice of weapons. She takes the speech from the bag and bestows it on her servitor.] Take this to Mr. Venables, please, and say it is from Mr. Shand. [THOMAS--but in the end we shall probably call him JOHN--departs with the dangerous papers; and when MAGGIE returns she finds that the COMTESSE is once more engaged in her interrupted game of Patience.] You did not find him?

[All the bravery has dropped from MAGGIE's face.]

MAGGIE. I didn't see him, but I heard him. SHE is with him. I think they are coming here.

[The COMTESSE is suddenly kind again.]

COMTESSE. Sybil? Shall I get rid of her?

MAGGIE. No, I want her to be here, too. Now I shall know.

[The COMTESSE twists the little thing round.]

COMTESSE. Know what?

MAGGIE. As soon as I look into his face I shall know.

[A delicious scent ushers in the fair SYBIL, who is as sweet as a milking stool. She greets MRS. SHAND with some alarm.]

MAGGIE. How do you do, Lady Sybil? How pretty you look in that frock. [SYBIL rustles uncomfortably.] You are a feast to the eye.

SYBIL. Please, I wish you would not.

[Shall we describe SYBIL'S frock, in which she looks like a great strawberry that knows it ought to be plucked; or would it be easier to watch the coming of JOHN? Let us watch JOHN.]

JOHN. You, Maggie! You never wrote that you were coming.

[No, let us watch MAGGIE. As soon as she looked into his face she was to know something of importance.]

MAGGIE [not dissatisfied with what she sees]. No, John, it's a surprise visit. I just ran down to say good-bye.

[At this his face falls, which does not seem to pain her.]

SYBIL [foreseeing another horrible Scotch scene]. To say good-bye?

COMTESSE [thrilling with expectation]. To whom, Maggie?

SYBIL [deserted by the impediment, which is probably playing with rough boys in the Lovers' Lane]. Auntie, do leave us, won't you?

COMTESSE. Not I. It is becoming far too interesting.

MAGGIE. I suppose there's no reason the Comtesse shouldn't be told, as she will know so soon at any rate?

JOHN. That's so. [SYBIL sees with discomfort that he is to be practical also.]

MAGGIE. It's so simple. You see, Comtesse, John and Lady Sybil have fallen in love with one another, and they are to go off as soon as the meeting at Leeds has taken place.

[The COMTESSE's breast is too suddenly introduced to Caledonia and its varied charms.]

COMTESSE. Mon Dieu!

MAGGIE. I think that's putting it correctly, John.

JOHN. In a sense. But I'm not to attend the meeting at Leeds. My speech doesn't find favour. [With a strange humility] There's something wrong with it.

COMTESSE. I never expected to hear you say that, Mr. Shand.

JOHN [wondering also]. I never expected it myself. I meant to make it the speech of my career. But somehow my hand seems to have lost its cunning.

COMTESSE. And you don't know how?

JOHN. It's inexplicable. My brain was never clearer.

COMTESSE. You might have helped him, Sybil.

SYBIL [quite sulkily]. I did.

COMTESSE. But I thought she was such an inspiration to you, Mr. Shand.

JOHN [going bravely to SYBIL'S side]. She slaved at it with me.

COMTESSE. Strange. [Wickedly becoming practical also] So now there is nothing to detain you. Shall I send for a fly, Sybil?

SYBIL [with a cry of the heart]. Auntie, do leave us.

COMTESSE. I can understand your impatience to be gone, Mr. Shand.

JOHN [heavily]. I promised Maggie to wait till the 24th, and I'm a man of my word.

MAGGIE. But I give you back your word, John. You can go now.

[JOHN looks at SYBIL, and SYBIL looks at JOHN, and the impediment arrives in time to take a peep at both of them.]

SYBIL [groping for the practical, to which we must all come in the end]. He must make satisfactory arrangements about you first. I insist on that.

MAGGIE [with no more imagination than a hen]. Thank you, Lady Sybil, but I have made all my arrangements.

JOHN [stung]. Maggie, that was my part.

MAGGIE. You see, my brothers feel they can't be away from their business any longer; and so, if it would be convenient to you, John, I could travel north with them by the night train on Wednesday.

SYBIL. I--I----The way you put things---!

JOHN. This is just the 21st.

MAGGIE. My things are all packed. I think you'll find the house in good order, Lady Sybil. I have had the vacuum cleaners in. I'll give you the keys of the linen and the silver plate; I have them in that bag. The carpet on the upper landing is a good deal frayed, but---

SYBIL. Please, I don't want to hear any more.

MAGGIE. The ceiling of the dining-room would be the better of a new lick of paint---

SYBIL [stamping her foot, small fours]. Can't you stop her?

JOHN [soothingly]. She's meaning well. Maggie, I know it's natural to you to value those things, because your outlook on life is bounded by them; but all this jars on me.

MAGGIE. Does it?

JOHN. Why should you be so ready to go?

MAGGIE. I promised not to stand in your way.

JOHN [stoutly]. You needn't be in such a hurry. There are three days to run yet. [The French are so different from us that we shall probably never be able to understand why the COMTESSE laughed aloud here.] It's just a joke to the Comtesse.

COMTESSE. It seems to be no joke to you, Mr. Shand. Sybil, my pet, are you to let him off?

SYBIL [flashing]. Let him off? If he wishes it. Do you?

JOHN [manfully]. I want it to go on. [Something seems to have caught in his throat: perhaps it is the impediment trying a temporary home.] It's

the one wish of my heart. If you come with me, Sybil, I'll do all in a man's power to make you never regret it.

[Triumph of the Vere de Veres.]

MAGGIE [bringing them back to earth with a dump]. And I can make my arrangements for Wednesday?

SYBIL [seeking the COMTESSE's protection]. No, you can't. Auntie, I am not going on with this. I'm very sorry for you, John, but I see now--I couldn't face it---

[She can't face anything at this moment except the sofa pillows.]

COMTESSE [noticing JOHN'S big sigh of relief]. So THAT is all right, Mr. Shand!

MAGGIE. Don't you love her any more, John? Be practical.

SYBIL [to the pillows]. At any rate I have tired of him. Oh, best to tell the horrid truth. I am ashamed of myself. I have been crying my eyes out over it--I thought I was such a different kind of woman. But I am weary of him. I think him--oh, so dull.

JOHN [his face lighting up]. Are you sure that is how you have come to think of me?

SYBIL. I'm sorry; [with all her soul] but yes--yes--yes.

JOHN. By God, it's more than I deserve.

COMTESSE. Congratulations to you both.

[SYBIL runs away; and in the fulness of time she married successfully in cloth of silver, which was afterwards turned into a bed-spread.]

MAGGIE. You haven't read my letter yet, John, have you?

JOHN. No.

COMTESSE [imploringly]. May I know to what darling letter you refer?

MAGGIE. It's a letter I wrote to him before he left London. I gave it to him closed, not to be opened until his time here was ended.

JOHN [as his hand strays to his pocket]. Am I to read it now?

MAGGIE. Not before her. Please go away, Comtesse.

COMTESSE. Every word you say makes me more determined to remain.

MAGGIE. It will hurt you, John. [Distressed] Don't read it; tear it up.

JOHN. You make me very curious, Maggie. And yet I don't see what can be in it.

COMTESSE. But you feel a little nervous? Give ME the dagger.

MAGGIE [quickly]. No. [But the COMTESSE has already got it.]

COMTESSE. May I? [She must have thought they said Yes, for she opens the letter. She shares its contents with them.] 'Dearest John, It is at my request that the Comtesse is having Lady Sybil at the cottage at the same time as yourself.'

JOHN. What?

COMTESSE. Yes, she begged me to invite you together.

JOHN. But why?

MAGGIE. I promised you not to behave as other wives would do.

JOHN. It's not understandable.

COMTESSE. 'You may ask why I do this, John, and my reason is, I think that after a few weeks of Lady Sybil, every day, and all day, you will become sick to death of her. I am also giving her the chance to help you and inspire you with your work, so that you may both learn what her help and her inspiration amount to. Of course, if your love is the great strong passion you think it, then those weeks will make you love her more than ever and I can only say good-bye. But if, as I suspect, you don't even now know what true love is, then by the next time we meet, dear John, you will have had enough of her.--Your affectionate wife, Maggie.' Oh, why was not Sybil present at the reading of the will! And now, if you two will kindly excuse me, I think I must go and get that poor sufferer the eau de Cologne.

JOHN. It's almost enough to make a man lose faith in himself.

COMTESSE. Oh, don't say that, Mr. Shand.

MAGGIE [defending him]. You mustn't hurt him. If you haven't loved deep and true, that's just because you have never met a woman yet, John, capable of inspiring it.

COMTESSE [putting her hand on MAGGIE's shoulder]. Have you not, Mr. Shand?

JOHN. I see what you mean. But Maggie wouldn't think better of me for any false pretences. She knows my feelings for her now are neither more nor less than what they have always been.

MAGGIE [who sees that he is looking at her as solemnly as a volume of sermons printed by request]. I think no one could be fond of me that can't laugh a little at me.

JOHN. How could that help?

COMTESSE [exasperated]. Mr. Shand, I give you up.

MAGGIE. I admire his honesty.

COMTESSE. Oh, I give you up also. Arcades ambo. Scotchies both.

JOHN [when she has gone]. But this letter, it's not like you. By Gosh, Maggie, you're no fool.

[She beams at this, as any wife would.]

But how could I have made such a mistake? It's not like a strong man. [Evidently he has an inspiration.]

MAGGIE. What is it?

JOHN [the inspiration]. AM I a strong man?

MAGGIE. You? Of course you are. And self-made. Has anybody ever helped you in the smallest way?

JOHN [thinking it out again]. No, nobody.

MAGGIE. Not even Lady Sybil?

JOHN. I'm beginning to doubt it. It's very curious, though, Maggie, that this speech should be disappointing.

MAGGIE. It's just that Mr. Venables hasn't the brains to see how good it is.

JOHN. That must be it. [But he is too good a man to rest satisfied with this.] No, Maggie, it's not. Somehow I seem to have lost my neat way of saying things.

MAGGIE [almost cooing]. It will come back to you.

JOHN [forlorn]. If you knew how I've tried.

MAGGIE [cautiously]. Maybe if you were to try again; and I'll just come and sit beside you, and knit. I think the click of the needles sometimes put you in the mood.

JOHN. Hardly that; and yet many a Shandism have I knocked off while you were sitting beside me knitting. I suppose it was the quietness.

MAGGIE. Very likely.

JOHN [with another inspiration]. Maggie!

MAGGIE [again]. What is it, John?

JOHN. What if it was you that put those queer ideas into my head!

MAGGIE. Me?

JOHN. Without your knowing it, I mean.

MAGGIE. But how?

JOHN. We used to talk bits over; and it may be that you dropped the seed, so to speak.

MAGGIE. John, could it be this, that I sometimes had the idea in a rough womanish sort of way and then you polished it up till it came out a Shandism?

JOHN [slowly slapping his knee]. I believe you've hit it, Maggie: to think that you may have been helping me all the time--and neither of us knew it!

[He has so nearly reached a smile that no one can say what might have happened within the next moment if the COMTESSE had not reappeared.]

COMTESSE. Mr. Venables wishes to see you, Mr. Shand.

JOHN [lost, stolen, or strayed a smile in the making]. Hum!

COMTESSE. He is coming now.

JOHN [grumpy]. Indeed!

COMTESSE [sweetly]. It is about your speech.

JOHN. He has said all he need say on that subject, and more.

COMTESSE [quaking a little]. I think it is about the second speech.

JOHN. What second speech?

[MAGGIE runs to her bag and opens it.]

MAGGIE [horrified]. Comtesse, you have given it to him!

COMTESSE [impudently]. Wasn't I meant to?

JOHN. What is it? What second speech?

MAGGIE. Cruel, cruel. [Willing to go on her knees] You had left the first draft of your speech at home, John, and I brought it here with--with a few little things I've added myself.

JOHN [a seven-footer]. What's that?

MAGGIE [four foot ten at most]. Just trifles--things I was to suggest to you--while I was knitting--and then, if you liked any of them you could have polished them--and turned them into something good. John, John--and now she has shown it to Mr. Venables.

JOHN [thundering]. As my work, Comtesse?

[But the COMTESSE is not of the women who are afraid of thunder.]

MAGGIE. It is your work--nine-tenths of it.

JOHN [in the black cap]. You presumed, Maggie Shand! Very well, then, here he comes, and now we'll see to what extent you've helped me.

VENABLES. My dear fellow. My dear Shand, I congratulate you. Give me your hand.

JOHN. The speech?

VENABLES. You have improved it out of knowledge. It is the same speech, but those new touches make all the difference. [JOHN sits down heavily.] Mrs. Shand, be proud of him.

MAGGIE. I am. I am, John.

COMTESSE. You always said that his second thoughts were best, Charles.

VENABLES [pleased to be reminded of it]. Didn't I, didn't I? Those delicious little touches! How good that is, Shand, about the flowing tide.

COMTESSE. The flowing tide?

VENABLES. In the first speech it was something like this--'Gentlemen, the Opposition are calling to you to vote for them and the flowing tide, but I solemnly warn you to beware lest the flowing tide does not engulf you.' The second way is much better.

COMTESSE. What is the second way, Mr. Shand?

[JOHN does not tell her.]

VENABLES. This is how he puts it now. [JOHN cannot help raising his head to listen.] 'Gentlemen, the Opposition are calling to you to vote for them and the flowing tide, but I ask you cheerfully to vote for us and DAM the flowing tide.'

[VENABLES and his old friend the COMTESSE laugh heartily, but for different reasons.]

COMTESSE. It IS better, Mr. Shand.

MAGGIE. I don't think so.

VENABLES. Yes, yes, it's so virile. Excuse me, Comtesse, I'm off to read the whole thing again. [For the first time he notices that JOHN is strangely quiet.] I think this has rather bowled you over, Shand.

[JOHN's head sinks lower.]

Well, well, good news doesn't kill.

MAGGIE [counsel for the defence]. Surely the important thing about the speech is its strength and knowledge and eloquence, the things that were in the first speech as well as in the second.

VENABLES. That of course is largely true. The wit would not be enough without them, just as they were not enough without the wit. It is the combination that is irresistible. [JOHN'S head rises a little.] Shand, you are our man, remember that, it is emphatically the best thing you have ever done. How this will go down at Leeds!

[He returns gaily to his hammock; but lower sinks JOHN'S head, and even the COMTESSE has the grace to take herself off. MAGGIE'S arms flutter near her husband, not daring to alight.]

MAGGIE. You heard what he said, John. It's the combination. Is it so terrible to you to find that my love for you had made me able to help you in the little things?

JOHN. The little things! It seems strange to me to hear you call me by my name, Maggie. It's as if I looked on you for the first time.

MAGGIE. Look at me, John, for the first time. What do you see?

JOHN. I see a woman who has brought her husband low.

MAGGIE. Only that?

JOHN. I see the tragedy of a man who has found himself out. Eh, I can't live with you again, Maggie.

[He shivers.]

MAGGIE. Why did you shiver, John?

JOHN. It was at myself for saying that I couldn't live with you again, when I should have been wondering how for so long you have lived with me. And I suppose you have forgiven me all the time. [She nods.] And forgive me still? [She nods again.] Dear God!

MAGGIE. John, am I to go? or are you to keep me on? [She is now a little bundle near his feet.] I'm willing to stay because I'm useful to you, if it can't be for a better reason. [His hand feels for her, and the bundle wriggles nearer.] It's nothing unusual I've done, John. Every man who is high up loves to think that he has done it all himself; and the wife

smiles, and lets it go at that. It's our only joke. Every woman knows that. [He stares at her in hopeless perplexity.] Oh, John, if only you could laugh at me.

JOHN. I can't laugh, Maggie.

[But as he continues to stare at her a strange disorder appears in his face. MAGGIE feels that it is to be now or never.]

MAGGIE. Laugh, John, laugh. Watch me; see how easy it is.

[A terrible struggle is taking place within him. He creaks. Something that may be mirth forces a passage, at first painfully, no more joy in it than in the discoloured water from a spring that has long been dry. Soon, however, he laughs loud and long. The spring water is becoming clear. MAGGIE claps her hands. He is saved.]