

ACT III

Room partly darkened, a table with a lamp on it, and an empty chair. From room next door faint and occasional sounds of the tossing or talking of the invalid.

Enter DOCTOR GRIMTHORPE with a rather careworn air, and a medicine bottle in his hand. He puts it on the table, and sits down in the chair as if keeping a vigil.

Enter CONJURER, carrying his bag, and cloaked for departure. As he crosses the room the DOCTOR rises and calls after him.

DOCTOR. Forgive me, but may I detain you for one moment? I suppose you are aware that--[he hesitates] that there have been rather grave developments in the case of illness which happened after your performance. I would not say, of course, because of your performance.

CONJURER. Thank you.

DOCTOR. [Slightly encouraged, but speaking very carefully.] Nevertheless, mental excitement is necessarily an element of importance in physiological troubles, and your triumphs this evening were really so extraordinary that I cannot pretend to dismiss them from my patient's case. He is at present in a state somewhat analogous to delirium, but in which he can still partially ask and answer questions. The question he continually asks is how you managed to do your last trick.

CONJURER. Ah! My last trick!

DOCTOR. Now I was wondering whether we could make any arrangement which would be fair to you in the matter. Would it be possible for you to give me in confidence the means of satisfying this--this fixed idea he seems to have got. [He hesitates again, and picks his words more slowly.] This special condition of semi-delirious disputation is a rare one, and connected in my experience with rather unfortunate cases.

CONJURER. [Looking at him steadily.] Do you mean he is going mad?

DOCTOR. [Rather taken aback for the first time.] Really, you ask me an unfair question. I could not explain the fine shades of these things to a layman. And even if--if what you suggest were so, I should have to regard it as a professional secret.

CONJURER. [Still looking at him.] And don't you think you ask me a rather unfair question, Dr. Grimthorpe? If yours is a professional secret, is not mine a professional secret too? If you may hide truth from the world, why may not I? You

don't tell your tricks. I don't tell my tricks.

DOCTOR. [With some heat.] Ours are not tricks.

CONJURER. [Reflectively.] Ah, no one can be sure of that till the tricks are told.

DOCTOR. But the public can see a doctor's cures as plain as....

CONJURER. Yes. As plain as they saw the red lamp over his door this evening.

DOCTOR. [After a pause.] Your secret, of course, would be strictly kept by every one involved.

CONJURER. Oh, of course. People in delirium always keep secrets strictly.

DOCTOR. No one sees the patient but his sister and myself.

CONJURER. [Starts slightly.] Yes, his sister. Is she very anxious?

DOCTOR. [In a lower voice.] What would you suppose?

[CONJURER throws himself into the chair, his cloak slipping back from his evening dress. He ruminates for a short space and then speaks.]

CONJURER. Doctor, there are about a thousand reasons why I should not tell you how I really did that trick. But one will suffice, because it is the most practical of all.

DOCTOR. Well? And why shouldn't you tell me?

CONJURER. Because you wouldn't believe me if I did.

[A silence, the DOCTOR looking at him curiously.]

[Enter the DUKE with papers in his hand. His usual gaiety of manner has a rather forced air, owing to the fact that by some vague sick-room associations he walks as if on tip-toe and begins to speak in a sort of loud or shrill whisper. This he fortunately forgets and falls into his more natural voice.]

DUKE. [To CONJURER.] So very kind of you to have waited, Professor. I expect Dr. Grimthorpe has explained the little difficulty we are in much better than I could. Nothing like the medical mind for a scientific statement. [Hazily.] Look at Ibsen.

[Silence.]

DOCTOR. Of course the Professor feels considerable reluctance in the matter. He points out that his secrets are an essential part of his profession.

DUKE. Of course, of course. Tricks of the trade, eh? Very proper, of course. Quite a case of noblesse oblige [Silence.] But I dare say we shall be able to find a way out of the matter. [He turns to the CONJURER.] Now, my dear sir, I hope you will not be offended if I say that this ought to be a business matter. We are asking you for a piece of your professional work and knowledge, and if I may have the pleasure of writing you a cheque....

CONJURER. I thank your Grace, I have already received my cheque from your secretary. You will find it on the counterfoil just after the cheque you so kindly gave to the Society for the Suppression of Conjuring.

DUKE. Now I don't want you to take it in that way. I want you to take it in a broader way. Free, you know. [With an expansive gesture.] Modern and all that! Wonderful man, Bernard Shaw!

[Silence.]

DOCTOR. [With a slight cough, resuming.] If you feel any delicacy the payment need not be made merely to you. I quite respect your feelings in the matter.

DUKE. [Approvingly.] Quite so, quite so. Haven't you got a Cause or something? Everybody has a cause now, you know. Conjurers' widows or something of that kind.

CONJURER. [With restraint.] No; I have no widows.

DUKE. Then something like a pension or annuity for any widows you may--er--procure. [Gaily opening his cheque-book and talking slang to show there is no ill-feeling.] Come, let me call it a couple of thou.

[The CONJURER takes the cheque and looks at it in a grave and doubtful way. As he does so the RECTOR comes slowly into the room.]

CONJURER. You would really be willing to pay a sum like this to know the way I did that trick?

DUKE. I would willingly pay much more.

DOCTOR. I think I explained to you that the case is serious.

CONJURER. [More and more thoughtful.] You would pay much more.... [Suddenly.] But suppose I tell you the secret and you find there's nothing in it?

DOCTOR. You mean that it's really quite simple? Why, I should say that that would be the best thing that could possibly happen. A little healthy laughter is the best possible thing for convalescence.

CONJURER. [Still looking gloomily at the cheque.] I do not think you will laugh.

DUKE. [Reasoning genially.] But as you say it is something quite simple.

CONJURER. It is the simplest thing there is in the world. That is why you will not laugh.

DOCTOR. [Almost nervously.] Why, what do you mean? What shall we do?

CONJURER. [Gravely.] You will disbelieve it.

DOCTOR. And why?

CONJURER. Because it is so simple. [He springs suddenly to his feet, the cheque still in his hand.] You ask me how I really did the last trick. I will tell you how I did the last trick. I did it by magic.

[The DUKE and DOCTOR stare at him motionless; but the REV. SMITH starts and takes a step nearer the table. The CONJURER pulls his cloak round his shoulders. This gesture, as of departure, brings the DOCTOR to his feet.

DOCTOR. [Astonished and angry.] Do you really mean that you take the cheque and then tell us it was only magic?

CONJURER. [Pulling the cheque to pieces.] I tear the cheque, and I tell you it was only magic.

DOCTOR. [With violent sincerity.] But hang it all, there's no such thing.

CONJURER. Yes there is. I wish to God I did not know that there is.

DUKE. [Rising also.] Why, really, magic....

CONJURER. [Contemptuously.] Yes, your Grace, one of those larger laws you were telling us about.

[He buttons his cloak up at his throat and takes up his bag. As he does so the REV. SMITH steps between him and the door and stops him for a moment.

SMITH. [In a low voice.] One moment, sir.

CONJURER. What do you want?

SMITH. I want to apologize to you. I mean on behalf of the company. I think it was wrong to offer you money. I think it was more wrong to mystify you with medical language and call the thing delirium. I have more respect for conjurer's patter than

for doctor's patter. They are both meant to stupify; but yours only to stupify for a moment. Now I put it to you in plain words and on plain human Christian grounds. Here is a poor boy who may be going mad. Suppose you had a son in such a position, would you not expect people to tell you the whole truth if it could help you?

CONJURER. Yes. And I have told you the whole truth. Go and find out if it helps you.

[Turns again to go, but more irresolutely.]

SMITH. You know quite well it will not help us.

CONJURER. Why not?

SMITH. You know quite well why not. You are an honest man; and you have said it yourself. Because he would not believe it.

CONJURER. [With a sort of fury.] Well, does anybody believe it? Do you believe it?

SMITH. [With great restraint.] Your question is quite fair. Come, let us sit down and talk about it. Let me take your cloak.

CONJURER. I will take off my cloak when you take off your coat.

SMITH. [Smiling.] Why? Do you want me to fight?

CONJURER. [Violently.] I want you to be martyred. I want you to bear witness to your own creed. I say these things are supernatural. I say this was done by a spirit. The Doctor does not believe me. He is an agnostic; and he knows everything. The Duke does not believe me; he cannot believe anything so plain as a miracle. But what the devil are you for, if you don't believe in a miracle? What does your coat mean, if it doesn't mean that there is such a thing as the supernatural? What does your cursed collar mean if it doesn't mean that there is such a thing as a spirit? [Exasperated.] Why the devil do you dress up like that if you don't believe in it? [With violence.] Or perhaps you don't believe in devils?

SMITH. I believe.... [After a pause.] I wish I could believe.

CONJURER. Yes. I wish I could disbelieve.

[Enter PATRICIA pale and in the slight négligée of the amateur nurse.]

PATRICIA. May I speak to the Conjuror?

SMITH. [Hastening forward.] You want the Doctor?

PATRICIA. No, the Conjuror.

DOCTOR. Are there any developments?

PATRICIA. I only want to speak to the Conjuror.

[They all withdraw, either at the garden or the other doors. PATRICIA walks up to CONJURER.]

PATRICIA. You must tell me how you did the trick. You will. I know you will. O, I know my poor brother was rude to you. He's rude to everybody! [Breaks down.] But he's such a little, little boy!

CONJURER. I suppose you know there are things men never tell to women. They are too horrible.

PATRICIA. Yes. And there are things women never tell to men. They also are too horrible. I am here to hear them all.

CONJURER. Do you really mean I may say anything I like? However dark it is? However dreadful it is? However damnable it is?

PATRICIA. I have gone through too much to be terrified now. Tell me the very worst.

CONJURER. I will tell you the very worst. I fell in love with you when I first saw you.

[Sits down and crosses his legs.]

PATRICIA. [Drawing back.] You told me I looked like a child and....

CONJURER. I told a lie.

PATRICIA. O; this is terrible.

CONJURER. I was in love, I took an opportunity. You believed quite simply that I was a magician? but I....

PATRICIA. It is terrible. It is terrible. I never believed you were a magician.

CONJURER. [Astounded.] Never believed I was a magician...!

PATRICIA. I always knew you were a man.

CONJURER. [Doing whatever passionate things people do on the stage.] I am a man. And you are a woman. And all the elves have gone to elfland, and all the devils to hell. And you and I will walk out of this great vulgar house and be

married.... Every one is crazy in this house to-night, I think. What am I saying? As if you could marry me! O my God!

PATRICIA. This is the first time you have failed in courage.

CONJURER. What do you mean?

PATRICIA. I mean to draw your attention to the fact that you have recently made an offer, I accept it.

CONJURER. Oh, it's nonsense, it's nonsense. How can a man marry an archangel, let alone a lady. My mother was a lady and she married a dying fiddler who tramped the roads; and the mixture plays the cat and banjo with my body and soul. I can see my mother now cooking food in dirtier and dirtier lodgings, darning socks with weaker and weaker eyes when she might have worn pearls by consenting to be a rational person.

PATRICIA. And she might have grown pearls, by consenting to be an oyster.

CONJURER. [Seriously.] There was little pleasure in her life.

PATRICIA. There is little, a very little, in everybody's. The question is, what kind? We can't turn life into a pleasure. But we can choose such pleasures as are worthy of us and our immortal souls. Your mother chose and I have chosen.

CONJURER. [Staring.] Immortal souls!... And I suppose if I knelt down to worship you, you and every one else would laugh.

PATRICIA. [With a smile of perversity.] Well, I think this is a more comfortable way. [She sits down suddenly beside him in a sort of domestic way and goes on talking.] Yes. I'll do everything your mother did, not so well, of course; I'll darn that conjurer's hat--does one darn hats?--and cook the Conjurer's dinner. By the way, what is a Conjurer's dinner? There's always the goldfish, of course....

CONJURER. [With a groan.] Carrots.

PATRICIA. And, of course, now I come to think of it, you can always take rabbits out of the hat. Why, what a cheap life it must be! How do you cook rabbits? The Duke is always talking about poached rabbits. Really, we shall be as happy as is good for us. We'll have confidence in each other at least, and no secrets. I insist on knowing all the tricks.

CONJURER. I don't think I know whether I'm on my head or my heels.

PATRICIA. And now, as we're going to be so confidential and comfortable, you'll just tell me the real, practical, tricky little way you did that last trick.

CONJURER. [Rising, rigid with horror.] How I did that trick? I did it by devils. [Turning furiously on PATRICIA.] You could believe in fairies. Can't you believe in devils?

PATRICIA. [Seriously.] No, I can't believe in devils.

CONJURER. Well, this room is full of them.

PATRICIA. What does it all mean?

CONJURER. It only means that I have done what many men have done; but few, I think, have thriven by. [He sits down and talks thoughtfully.] I told you I had mixed with many queer sets of people. Among others, I mixed with those who pretend, truly and falsely, to do our tricks by the aid of spirits. I dabbled a little in table-rapping and table-turning. But I soon had reason to give it up.

PATRICIA. Why did you give it up?

CONJURER. It began by giving me headaches. And I found that every morning after a Spiritualist séance I had a queer feeling of lowness and degradation, of having been soiled; much like the feeling, I suppose, that people have the morning after they have been drunk. But I happen to have what people call a strong head; and I have never been really drunk.

PATRICIA. I am glad of that.

CONJURER. It hasn't been for want of trying. But it wasn't long before the spirits with whom I had been playing at table-turning, did what I think they generally do at the end of all such table-turning.

PATRICIA. What did they do?

CONJURER. They turned the tables. They turned the tables upon me. I don't wonder at your believing in fairies. As long as these things were my servants they seemed to me like fairies. When they tried to be my masters.... I found they were not fairies. I found the spirits with whom I at least had come in contact were evil ... awfully, unnaturally evil.

PATRICIA. Did they say so?

CONJURER. Don't talk of what they said. I was a loose fellow, but I had not fallen so low as such things. I resisted them; and after a pretty bad time, psychologically speaking, I cut the connexion. But they were always tempting me to use the supernatural power I had got from them. It was not very great, but it was enough to move things about, to alter lights, and so on. I don't know whether you realize that it's rather a strain on a man to drink bad coffee at a coffee-stall when he knows he has just enough magic in him to make a bottle of champagne walk out of an empty

shop.

PATRICIA. I think you behaved very well.

CONJURER. [Bitterly.] And when I fell at last it was for nothing half so clean and Christian as champagne. In black blind pride and anger and all kinds of heathenry, because of the impudence of a schoolboy, I called on the fiends and they obeyed.

PATRICIA. [Touches his arm.] Poor fellow!

CONJURER. Your goodness is the only goodness that never goes wrong.

PATRICIA. And what are we to do with Morris? I--I believe you now, my dear. But he--he will never believe.

CONJURER. There is no bigot like the atheist. I must think.

[Walks towards the garden windows. The other men reappear to arrest his movement.]

DOCTOR. Where are you going?

CONJURER. I am going to ask the God whose enemies I have served if I am still worthy to save a child.

[Exit into garden. He paces up and down exactly as MORRIS has done. As he does so, PATRICIA slowly goes out; and a long silence follows, during which the remaining men stir and stamp very restlessly. The darkness increases. It is long before anyone speaks.]

DOCTOR. [Abruptly.] Remarkable man that Conjuror. Clever man. Curious man. Very curious man. A kind of man, you know.... Lord bless us! What's that?

DUKE. What's what, eh? What's what?

DOCTOR. I swear I heard a footstep.

Enter HASTINGS with papers.

DUKE. Why, Hastings--Hastings--we thought you were a ghost. You must be--er--looking white or something.

HASTINGS. I have brought back the answer of the Anti-Vegetarians ... I mean the Vegetarians.

[Drops one or two papers.]

DUKE. Why, Hastings, you are looking white.

HASTINGS. I ask your Grace's pardon. I had a slight shock on entering the room.

DOCTOR. A shock? What shock?

HASTINGS. It is the first time, I think, that your Grace's work has been disturbed by any private feelings of mine. I shall not trouble your Grace with them. It will not occur again.

[Exit HASTINGS.]

DUKE. What an extraordinary fellow. I wonder if....

[Suddenly stops speaking.]

DOCTOR. [After a long silence, in a low voice to SMITH.] How do you feel?

SMITH. I feel I must have a window shut or I must have it open, and I don't know which it is.

[Another long silence.]

SMITH. [Crying out suddenly in the dark.] In God's name, go!

DOCTOR. [Jumping up rather in a tremble.] Really, sir, I am not used to being spoken to....

SMITH. It was not you whom I told to go.

DOCTOR. No. [Pause.] But I think I will go. This room is simply horrible.

[He marches towards the door.]

DUKE. [Jumping up and bustling about, altering cards, papers, etc., on tables.] Room horrible? Room horrible? No, no, no. [Begins to run quicker round the room, flapping his hands like fins.] Only a little crowded. A little crowded. And I don't seem to know all the people. We can't like everybody. These large at-homes....

[Tumbles on to a chair.]

CONJURER. [Reappearing at the garden doors.] Go back to hell from which I called you. It is the last order I shall give.

DOCTOR. [Rising rather shakily.] And what are you going to do?

CONJURER. I am going to tell that poor little lad a lie. I have found in the garden

what he did not find in the garden. I have managed to think of a natural explanation of that trick.

DOCTOR. [Warmly moved.] I think you are something like a great man. Can I take your explanation to him now?

CONJURER. [Grimly.] No thank you. I will take it myself.

[Exit into the other room.]

DUKE. [Uneasily.] We all felt devilish queer just now. Wonderful things there are in the world. [After a pause.] I suppose it's all electricity.

[Silence as usual.]

SMITH. I think there has been more than electricity in all this.

Enter PATRICIA, still pale, but radiant.

PATRICIA. Oh, Morris is ever so much better! The Conjuror has told him such a good story of how the trick was done.

Enter CONJURER.

DUKE. Professor, we owe you a thousand thanks!

DOCTOR. Really, you have doubled your claim to originality!

SMITH. It is much more marvellous to explain a miracle than to work a miracle. What was your explanation, by the way?

CONJURER. I shall not tell you.

SMITH. [Starting.] Indeed? Why not?

CONJURER. Because God and the demons and that Immortal Mystery that you deny has been in this room to-night. Because you know it has been here. Because you have felt it here. Because you know the spirits as well as I do and fear them as much as I do.

SMITH. Well?

CONJURER. Because all this would not avail. If I told you the lie I told Morris Carleon about how I did that trick....

SMITH. Well?

CONJURER. YOU would believe it as he believed it. You cannot think [pointing to the lamp] how that trick could be done naturally. I alone found out how it could be done--after I had done it by magic. But if I tell you a natural way of doing it...

SMITH. Well?...

CONJURER. Half an hour after I have left this house you will be all saying how it was done.

[CONJURER buttons up his cloak and advances to PATRICIA.]

CONJURER. Good-bye.

PATRICIA. I shall not say good-bye.

PATRICIA. Yes. That fairy tale has really and truly come to an end. [Looks at him a little in the old mystical manner.] It is very hard for a fairy tale to come to an end. If you leave it alone it lingers everlastingly. Our fairy tale has come to an end in the only way a fairy tale can come to an end. The only way a fairy tale can leave off being a fairy tale.

CONJURER. I don't understand you.

PATRICIA. It has come true.

CURTAIN