The Hothouse

by

Harold Pinter
Author’s Note

I wrote The Hothouse in the winter of 1958. I put it aside for further deliberation and made no attempt to have it produced at the time. I then went on to write The Caretaker. In 1979 I re-read The Hothouse and decided it was worth presenting on the stage. I made a few cuts but no changes.

HAROLD PINTER

Characters

ROOTE, in his fifties

GIBBS, in his thirties

LAMB, in his twenties

MISS CUTTS, in her thirties

LUSH, in his thirties

TUBB, fifty

LOBB, fifty
The Hothouse was first presented at Hampstead Theatre, London, in April 1980 in a production directed by Harold Pinter.

Locations

ROOTE's office
A stairway
A sitting room
A soundproof room
LOBB's office in the Ministry
Act One
ROOTE's office. Morning.
ROOTE is sitting at his desk, examining some papers.
GIBBS is at the filing cabinet, examining some papers.

Silence

Gibbs.

ROOTE

Yes, sir?

GIBBS

Tell me...

ROOTE

Yes, sir?

GIBBS

How's 6457 getting on?

ROOTE

6457, sir?

GIBBS

Yes.

ROOTE

He's dead, sir.

GIBBS
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE

Dead?

GIBBS

He died on Thursday, sir.

ROOTE

Thursday? What are you talking about? What’s today?

GIBBS

Saturday, sir.

ROOTE

Saturday . . . Well, for goodness sake, I had a talk with him, when was it? (Opens his desk diary.) Recently. Only the other day. Yesterday, I think. Just a minute.

GIBBS

I hardly think yesterday, sir.

ROOTE

Why not?

GIBBS

I supervised the burial arrangements myself, sir.

ROOTE

This is ridiculous. What did he die of?

GIBBS

I beg your pardon, sir?

ROOTE

If he’s dead, what did he die of?

ACT ONE

GIBBS

Heart failure, sir.

ROOTE stares at him, then consults the diary.

ROOTE

Wait . . . here we are. Got it. Conversation with 6457 ten o’clock Friday morning. That was yesterday. Well, what do you make of that?

GIBBS moves to the desk and looks over ROOTE’s shoulder at the diary.

GIBBS

If I may, sir . . .

ROOTE

What?

GIBBS

If I may point out, sir, there seems to be a slight discrepancy . . .

ROOTE

Discrepancy! I’m damn sure there’s a discrepancy! You come and tell me that a man has died and I’ve got it down here that I had a conversation with him yesterday morning. According to you he was in his grave. There does seem to be a slight discrepancy, I agree with you.

GIBBS

I meant . . . about the dates, sir.

ROOTE

Dates? What dates?
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS
In your diary, sir. I must point out that you are in fact referring to Friday, the 17th. (He indicates a date on the page.) There, sir. Yesterday was Friday the 24th. (He turns the pages forward and indicates a date.) Here, sir. You had a conversation with 6457 on the 17th. He died on the 23rd. (Indicates a date.) Here.

ROOTE
What! (He turns the pages back.) Good Lord, you’re right. You’re quite right. How extraordinary. I haven’t written a single thing down in this diary for a whole week.

GIBBS
You’ve held no interviews with any of the patients, sir, during the last week.

ROOTE
No, I haven’t, have I? Why not?

GIBBS
You decided on the ... 18th, sir, that you would cancel all interviews until further notice.

ROOTE (slowly)
Oh yes. So I did.

Pause. ROOTE sits still.

GIBBS
For the sake of accuracy, sir, I’d like, if I may, to point out to you what is apparently another discrepancy.

ROOTE
Another one?

ACT ONE

GIBBS
Yes, sir.

ROOTE
You’re very keen this morning, aren’t you, Gibbs?

GIBBS
I do try to keep my powers of observation well exercised, sir.

ROOTE
Don’t stand so close to me. You’re right on top of me. What’s the matter with you?

GIBBS
I’m so sorry, sir. (He steps away from the desk.)

ROOTE
There’s plenty of room in here, isn’t there? What are you breathing down my neck for?

GIBBS
I do apologise, sir.

ROOTE
Nothing’s more irritating.

GIBBS
It was thoughtless of me, sir.

Pause

ROOTE
Well, what ... what was this other discrepancy, anyway?
GIBBS (flatly)
It was not 6457, sir, whom you interviewed on the 17th.

ROOTE
Gibbs.

GIBBS
Sir?

ROOTE
One question.

GIBBS
Sir.

ROOTE
Are you taking the piss out of me?

GIBBS
Most decidedly not, sir.

Slight pause

ROOTE
All right. You have just said it was not 6457 I interviewed on the 17th. What evidence have you got to support your contention?

GIBBS
The figures in your diary, sir.

ROOTE
Figures?

ACT ONE

GIBBS
One figure, sir. If I may . . . (He bends over the desk.) . . . this one.

ROOTE
Which one?

GIBBS
This one. It's not a seven, sir. It's a nine.

ROOTE
Nine?

GIBBS
Nine, sir. The number is 645 . . . 9.

ROOTE
Good God, so it is. Nine. Well, it's not a very clear nine, is it?

GIBBS
It was in fact 6459 whom you interviewed, sir.

ROOTE
Must have been. That's funny. I wonder why I thought it was seven. (He rises abruptly.) The whole thing's ridiculous! The system's wrong. (He walks across the room.) We shouldn't use these stupid numbers at all. Only confuses things. Why don't we use their names, for God's sake? They've got names, haven't they?

GIBBS
It was your predecessor who instituted the use of numbers, sir.
How do you know?

GIBBS

So I understand, sir.

ROOTE

You weren't even here then.

GIBBS

No, sir.

ROOTE

I was.

GIBBS

Quite, sir.

ROOTE

I was standing where you're standing now. I can tell you that. Saying yes sir, no sir and certainly sir. Just as you are now. I didn't bribe anyone to get where I am. I worked my way up. When my predecessor ... retired ... I was invited to take over his position. And have you any idea why you call me sir now?

GIBBS

Yes, sir.

ROOTE

Why?

GIBBS

Because you called him sir then, sir.

ACT ONE

ROOTE

Right!

Pause

But sometimes I think I've been a bit slow in making changes. Change is the order of things, after all. I mean it's in the order of things, it's not the order of things, it's in the order of things.

Slight pause

Still, I sometimes think I could have instituted a few more changes—if I'd had time. I'm not talking about many changes or drastic changes. That's not necessary. But on this numbers business, for instance. It would make things so much simpler if we called them by their names. Then we'd all know where we were. After all, they're not criminals. They're only people in need of help, which we try to give, in one way or another, to the best of our discretion, to the best of our judgement, to help them regain their confidence, confidence in themselves, confidence in others, confidence in ... in ... in the world. What? They're all people specially recommended by the Ministry, after all. They're not any Tom, Dick or ... or ... or ... Harry.

He stops, brooding.

I often think it must depress them ... somewhat ... to have a number rapped at them all the time. After some of them have been here a few years they're liable to forget what names their fathers gave them. Or their mothers.

Pause
One of the purposes of this establishment is to instil that confidence in each and every one of them, that confidence which will one day enable them to say 'I am... Gubbins', for example. Not easy, not easy, agreed, but it makes it doubly difficult if they're constantly referred to as 5244, doesn't it? We lose sight of their names and they lose sight of their names. I sometimes wonder if it's the right way to go about things.

**GIBBS**

Would you like me to place further consideration of this matter on the agenda, sir?

**ROOTE (sharply)**

Certainly not. We can't.

**GIBBS**

Can't, sir?

**ROOTE**

You know damn well we can't. That was one of the rules of procedure laid down in the original constitution. The patients are to be given numbers and called by those numbers. And that's how it's got to remain. You understand?

**GIBBS**

Perfectly, sir.

**ROOTE sits at the desk. Pause. GIBBS goes to the filing cabinet.**

**ROOTE**

A death on the premises?

**GIBBS**

Sir?
Not darkheaded, sir.

Pause

Tall?

Certainly not small.

Pause

Quite a sharp sort of face?

Yes.

Pause

Yes, he had a sharp sort of face, didn’t he?

I should say it was sharp, sir, yes.

Limped a bit?

Oh, possibly a trifle, sir.

Yes, he limped. He limped on his left leg.

His left, sir?

Well, one of them. I’m sure of it.

Yes, he had a slight limp, sir.

Yes, of course he did.

Pause

He had a slight limp. Whenever he walked anywhere ... he limped. Prematurely grey, he was. Prematurely grey.

Pause

Yes, I remember him very well.

Pause

He’s dead, you say?

Yes, sir.

Then why wasn’t I told? It’s your job to keep me informed of all developments in this building, no matter how slight, no matter how trivial. I demand an answer. Why wasn’t I told?
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS
You signed the death certificate, sir.

ROOTE stares at him.

ROOTE
Did he get a decent burial?

GIBBS
Oh, very decent, sir.

ROOTE
I don’t see why I wasn’t invited. Who said the last words over him?

GIBBS
There were no last words, sir.

ROOTE (appalled)
No last words?

ROOTE rises, walks to the window, looks out.

Snowing. Isn’t it the patients’ exercise time?

GIBBS
Not today, sir.

ROOTE
Why not?

GIBBS
It’s Christmas day, sir.

ACT ONE

ROOTE goes back to the desk and sits.

ROOTE
All right, that’s all for now. Bear everything in mind.

He examines some papers. GIBBS does not move. ROOTE looks up.

What is it? What are you waiting for?

GIBBS
You asked me a question earlier, sir, which I haven’t yet had a chance to answer.

ROOTE
Haven’t had a chance? What do you mean? That I’ve been talking too much or something?

GIBBS
Not at all, sir. We simply passed on to another topic.

ROOTE (regarding him)
Gibbs.

GIBBS
Sir?

ROOTE (confidentially)
Between ourselves, man to man, you’re not by any chance taking the old wee-wee out of me, are you?

GIBBS
Most assuredly not, sir. By no means. I merely felt it incumbent upon me to answer any questions you put to me, or to do
my best to do so. You are dependent upon me for certain information and I feel it in the line of duty to supply you with it, especially when it is by specific request.

ROOTE
Stop mouthing! This has been a most exhausting morning. If the morning’s like this what’s the rest of the day going to be like? There’s no system, that’s the trouble. Look. The next time I ask you a question answer it and we won’t waste so much time fiddling about. Things are getting much too slack around here.

Pause

Well, come on, what was this question?

GIBBS
You asked me, sir –

ROOTE
Wait!

He leans forward on the desk.

(Quietly.) Before you go on, Gibbs, let me say one thing. Be sure that what you say is accurate. You are about to quote a question you say I put to you. I don’t know what you’re going to say, but immediately you’ve said it I shall know whether I said it, or whether I didn’t. I shall know.

GIBBS
Yes, sir.

ACT ONE

ROOTE
I didn’t get this job for nothing, I can assure you. I shall know. Have no doubt whatsoever on that point.

GIBBS
No, sir.

ROOTE
Stick to the facts, man, and we won’t go far wrong.

GIBBS
Yes, sir.

Pause

ROOTE
Well, what was this question?

GIBBS
You asked me how 6459 was getting on, sir.

Pause

ROOTE (expressionless)

Did I?

GIBBS
To be quite accurate, sir, it was 6457 you inquired after, but, of course, 6457 is dead. We agreed, after examining certain discrepancies, that it was 6459 you were referring to.

Pause

ROOTE (expressionless)

Did we?
THE HOTHOUSE

The lights fade on the office. They go up on the sitting room. MISS CUTTS and LAMB enter the sitting room.

LAMB

That was fun, I must say. You know you really play extraordinarily well, Miss Cutts.

CUTTS

Do I?

LAMB

Oh, excellent. I enjoyed it immensely.

MISS CUTTS sits. LAMB goes to the coffee machine.

LAMB

Black or white?

CUTTS

Black.

LAMB (chuckling)

I must say I got the surprise of my life, you know, when you came up to me this morning and asked me if I played table tennis. What I mean is, considering we’ve never spoken to each other before.

He gives her a coffee.

It was really very nice of you. Do you play often?

CUTTS

Not often.

ACT ONE

LAMB

Well, it’s a damn good piece of luck that our rotas coincide at this time of the morning, isn’t it? It’ll be something to look forward to, a game of ping-pong. I haven’t played for ages.

Pause. He sits with his coffee.

Do you like it here?

CUTTS

Oh, I do. It’s so rewarding.

LAMB

Your work?

CUTTS

Terribly rewarding.

LAMB

You’ve been here some time, of course?

CUTTS

Mmn. Oh yes.

LAMB

What about Mr. Roote? How do you get on with him?

CUTTS

Oh, such a charming person. So genuine.

LAMB

Yes, I’m sure he is. I haven’t really ... spoken to him yet. Although I expect I will be meeting him, very soon now.
He stands, walks about.

I only wish I had a bit more to do. I'm a very energetic sort of chap, you know. Tremendous mental energy. I'm the sort of chap who's always thinking - you know what I mean? Then, when I've thought about something, I like to put it into action. I mean, I think a lot about the patients, you see.

Pause

You have quite a bit to do with them, I suppose?

Mmmn-hmmn.

Lush walks quickly into the sitting room.

Lush

Have you seen Gibbs?

Lamb

Gibbs?

Lush goes.

What a curious thing. Did you hear that, Miss Cutts? That was Lush. He asked if we'd seen Gibbs.

Miss Cutts is leaning back in her chair, her eyes half closed.

Cutts

Mmmn?

Lamb

Lush. Popped his head in the door just now. Asked if we'd seen Gibbs.

And have we?

Lamb

I haven't.

Pause

You know, I . . . I haven't really got used to this place.

Pause

Do you know what I mean? I wouldn't say this to anyone else but you, of course. The fact is, I haven't made much contact with any of the others. Hogg said good morning to me in a very nice way about a week ago when I bumped into him near the gym, but I haven't seen him since. (With sudden briskness.) No, you see, what happened was this - the Ministry said to me, I was working in one of their other departments at the time, doing something quite different - well, anyway, they called me up and they said to me - 'You've been posted'. Well, I'd heard about this place, of course. I was delighted. But . . . but what exactly is the post, I said. You'll learn that when you get down there, they said, but we think you've got the right qualifications.

Pause

That's what they said. That was over a year ago.

Pause

And I've never learned who the man was I took over from; and I've never found out why he left, either. Anyway I'm
pretty sure he wasn’t doing the job I’m doing. Or if he was doing the same job he wasn’t doing it in exactly the same way. The whole rota’s been altered since he left, for a start. He couldn’t have been doing my rota, and if he wasn’t doing my rota he can hardly be said to have been doing my job. Rotas make all the difference.

Pause

I mean, my job, for instance. I have to see that all the gates are locked outside the building and that all the patients’ doors are locked inside the building. It gives me exercise, I’ll say that. It takes me two hours and six minutes, approximately, to try every gate and every door, then I can stand still for ten minutes, then off I go again. I have the regulation breaks, of course. Breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner. Of course. Still, I feel a bit whacked when my shift’s over, I must admit. But as I said it gives me time to think — not when I’m testing the locks, of course — but in between locks — it gives me time to think, and mostly I think about the patients. I get some very good ideas while I think, honestly. As a matter of fact, I hear one receives a little token of esteem, sometimes — I mean after a certain period. I’ve got a feeling that mine’s almost due.

Pause

Perhaps it might even be promotion.

Pause

Quite frankly, I can’t make much progress with this job I was allocated. There’s not enough scope. I wish I could deal with the patients — directly. I’ve thought out a number of schemes, you know, ideas, for a really constructive, progressive approach to the patients — in fact, I’ve sent them in to the office. Haven’t heard anything yet. I think possibly what’s happening is that on the evidence of these schemes I sent in they’re considering promotion. Look, I want to ask you, these schemes of mine — you know, the ones I’ve sent in to the office — do you think that was the right place to send them, or should I have handed them in personally to someone? The point is, who?

Pause

You’re the only friend I’ve got here, to be quite frank. I don’t seem to be able to ... reach the others. Don’t know why. After all, I share their interests. I was a very popular boy at school, too.

The lights fade on the sitting room. They go up on the office. ROOTE and GIBBS are in the same positions.

ROOTE (deliberately)

Well, how is 6459 getting on?

GIBBS

She’s given birth to a boy, sir.

Pause

ROOTE

She . . . has . . . what?

GIBBS

Given birth, sir.

ROOTE

To . . . a what?
THE HOThOUSE

GIBBS

A boy, sir.

PAUSE

ROOTE

I think you've gone too far, Gibbs.

GIBBS

Not me, sir, I assure you.

ROOTE leans across the desk.

ROOTE

Given birth?

GIBBS

Yes, sir.

ROOTE

To a child?

GIBBS

Yes, sir.

ROOTE

On these premises?

GIBBS

On the fourth floor, sir.

ROOTE rises, leans over the desk to GIBBS, about to speak, unable to speak, turns, leaves the desk, walks heavily across the room.

ACT ONE

ROOTE

Sex?

GIBBS

Male.

ROOTE sinks on to the sofa.

ROOTE

This has made my morning. It really has made my morning.

He takes a pair of glasses out of his pocket, puts them on and looks across the room to GIBBS.

I'm dumbstruck. Quite thunderstruck. Absolutely thunderstruck! This has never happened before. Never! In all the years I've been here, in all the years my predecessor was here. And I'm quite certain never before him. To spend years and years, winter after winter, trying to perfect the working of an institution so fragile in its conception and execution, so fragile the boundary between the achievement of one's aspirations and their collapse, not only one's own aspirations; rather the aspirations of a whole community, a tradition, an ideal; such a delicately wrought concept of participation between him who is to be treated and him who is to treat that it defies analysis; trying to sustain this fine, fine balance, finer than a... finer than a... far, far finer. Year after year, and so refined the operation that the softest breath, the breath of a... feather... can send the whole thing tottering into chaos, into ignominy, to the death and cancellation of all our hopes. Goodness gracious.

He stands.
As my predecessor said, on one unforgettable occasion: "Order, gentlemen, for God's sake, order!" I remember the silence, row upon row of electrified faces, he with his golden forelock, his briar burning, upright and commanding, a soldier's stance, looking down from the platform. The gymnasium was packed to suffocation, standing room only. The lucky ones were perched on vaulting horses, hanging without movement from the wallbars. "Order, gentlemen," he said, "for the love of Mike!" As one man we looked out of the window at Mike, and gazed at the statue - covered in snow, it so happened, then as now. Mike! The predecessor of my predecessor, the predecessor of us all, the man who laid the foundation stone, the man who introduced the first patient, the man who, after the incredible hordes of patients, or would-be patients, had followed him through town and country, hills and valleys, waited under hedges, lined the bridges and sat six feet deep in the ditch, opened institution after institution up and down the country, rest homes, nursing homes, convalescent homes, sanatoria. He was sanctioned by the Ministry, revered by the populace, subsidised by the State. He had set in motion an activity for humanity, of humanity and by humanity. And the keyword was order.

*He moves to face GIBBS.*

I, Gibbs, have tried to preserve that order. A vocation, in fact. And you choose Christmas morning to come and tell me this. *(Whipping off his glasses.)* I tell you quite frankly I smell disaster.

*He pockets his glasses and perches on the desk.*

GIBBS

With respect, sir, I can't see that the matter is of such extreme significance.

ACT ONE

ROOTE

You can't? Have we ever, to your knowledge, given birth to a child on these premises before?

GIBBS

Not to my knowledge, sir.

ROOTE

Therefore we have no yardstick. As a mathematician you will appreciate that we have nothing to measure this event by so that we can with ease assess its implications.

GIBBS

I am not a mathematician, sir.

ROOTE

Well, you look like one!

*He rises, clicking his fingers.*

Right! There's work to be done. Find the culprit. Who is he?

GIBBS

That, sir, we have not yet been able to ascertain.

ROOTE

Why not? Have you asked the patient?

GIBBS

Yes, sir.

ROOTE

What did she say?
GIBBS
She was ... noncommittal, sir. She said she couldn't be entirely sure since most of the staff have had relations with her in this last year.

ROOTE
Most of the staff?

GIBBS
According to her statement, sir.

ROOTE sits, rubs his mouth.

ROOTE
Which one is 6459?

GIBBS
She's a woman in her thirties –

ROOTE
That means nothing to me, get on with it, what does she look like? Perhaps I know her.

GIBBS
Oh, there's no doubt that you know her, sir.

ROOTE
What does she look like?

Pause

GIBBS
Fattish.

ACT ONE

ROOTE
Darkheaded?

GIBBS
Not fairheaded, sir.

Pause

ROOTE
Small?

GIBBS
Certainly not tall.

Pause

ROOTE
Quite a sensual sort of face?

GIBBS
Quite sensual, yes, sir.

ROOTE
Yes.

Pause

ROOTE
Yes, she's got a sensual sort of face, hasn't she?

GIBBS
I should say it was sensual, sir, yes.

ROOTE
Wobbles when she walks?
And you say a number of the staff have had relations with this woman, do you?

GIBBS

Apparently, sir.

ROOTE (standing)

Well, one of them's slipped up, hasn't he? One of them's not been using his head! His know-how! Common or garden horseness! I don't mind the men dipping their wicks on occasion. It can't be avoided. It's got to go somewhere. Besides that, it's in the interests of science. If a member of the staff decides that for the good of a female patient some degree of copulation is necessary then two birds are killed with one stone! It does no harm to either party. At least, that's how I've found it in my experience. (With great emphasis.) But we all know the rule! Never ride barebacked. Always take precautions. Otherwise complications set in. Never ride barebacked and always send in a report. After all, the reactions of the patient have to be tabulated, compared with others, filed, stamped and if possible verified! It stands to reason. (Grimly.) Well, I can tell you something, Gibbs, one thing is blatantly clear to me. Someone hasn't been sending in his report!

GIBBS

Quite, sir.

Pause

ROOTE

Who?

GIBBS sits on the sofa and puts his hand to his mouth.

GIBBS

I think I know the man.
THE HOTHOUSE
ROOTE
Who?

GIBBS (thoughtfully)
Yes, it's suddenly come to me. How absurd I didn't realise it before.

ROOTE
Who, for God's sake?

GIBBS
I'd prefer to have the matter verified, sir, before I ... bring him before you.

ROOTE
All right. But find him. The good name of this establishment depends on it.

ROOTE sits at the desk.

GIBBS
What shall I do about the baby, sir?

ROOTE
Get rid of it.

GIBBS
The mother would have to go with it, sir.

ROOTE
Why?

GIBBS
Can't live without the mother, sir.

ACT ONE
ROOTE
Why not?

GIBBS
The mother feeds it, sir.

ROOTE
I know that! Do you think I'm an idiot? My mother fed me, didn't she?

GIBBS
Mine fed me, sir.

ROOTE
But mine fed me!

Pause

I remember.

Pause

Isn't there a wet nurse in the house? If there's a wet nurse in the house the baby can go with the wet nurse and the mother can stay here.

GIBBS
There's no wet nurse among the staff, sir.

ROOTE
I should hope not. I'm thinking about the understaff, the kitchen staff, the cleaning staff. Find out if there's a wet nurse among the understaff and get the thing in motion.
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS
Don’t you think the mother might miss the baby, sir?

ROOTE
I won’t miss it. Will you miss it?

GIBBS
No, sir. I won’t miss it.

ROOTE
Then why should the mother miss it?

*They stare at each other. There is a knock on the door.*

ROOTE
Who is it?

CUTTS
Me.

ROOTE
Gibbs, find that father. Come in!

Enter MISS CUTTS.

CUTTS (to GIBBS)
Hullo.

GIBBS
I’ll keep you in touch with developments, sir.

ROOTE
That’s very thoughtful of you.

GIBBS goes out. ROOTE rises, goes to the sofa and stretches out on it.

ACT ONE

ROOTE
I’m exhausted.

CUTTS
You know, I think that man’s frightened of me.

ROOTE
Rubbish.

CUTTS
He never speaks to me. He never says a single word to me. And not only that, he never … he never looks at me. I can only think I must frighten him in some way.

ROOTE
What do you mean, never speaks to you? He’s obliged to speak to you. You’re working together, aren’t you?

CUTTS
Oh yes, he talks shop to me. We discuss the patients, naturally. We were discussing one of the patients … only yesterday. But he never speaks to me socially.

ROOTE
Which patient?

MISS CUTTS eases herself onto the sofa.

CUTTS
Or do you think he’s taken with me? Do you think that he just finds me too attractive to look at?

ROOTE
Which patient were you discussing?
THE HOTHOUSE

ACT ONE

CUTTS
Oh, but you do. I know you do.

ROOTE
What do you mean, I do? I tell you I don't.

Pause. MISS CUTTS leans back.

CUTTS (dreamily)
I bet she feels very feminine now.

ROOTE (vacantly, staring into space)
She's always been feminine.

CUTTS
Do you think I'm feminine enough, darling? Or do you think I should be more feminine?

ROOTE is still abstracted.

Darling. You don't think I'm too masculine, do you? I mean, you don't think I could go even further? Do you?

ROOTE (absently, muttering)
Yes, yes why not?

CUTTS
You do think I should be more feminine?

ROOTE
What?

CUTTS
But you always say I'm feminine enough!
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE

You are feminine enough.

CUTTS

Then if I'm feminine enough why do you want me to be more feminine?

ROOTE

I don't, I don't.

CUTTS

But you said you did!

ROOTE

I don't, I don't!

CUTTS (at a great pace)

Because it would be awful if you really thought that I was letting you down in the most important aspect of the relationship between any man and any woman —

ROOTE

You're quite feminine enough!!

Pause

CUTTS

You really mean it?

ROOTE

Yes. (He runs his hand through his hair.) I've had the most wearing morning. On top of everything else one of the patients has died.

ACT ONE

ROUTE

Died?

ROOTE

Dead.

CUTTS

Oh my poor sweet, and I've been nasty to you.

She kisses him.

Let me massage you. Come into the bedroom. Let me do your neck.

ROOTE

Yes. Do my neck.

They go into the bedroom.
The lights go down on the office. They go up in the sitting room.

GIBBS is alone in the room, sitting at the low table, playing patience, very deliberately.

LUSH appears at the head of the stairway and descends. Suddenly a long sigh is heard, amplified.

LUSH stops. GIBBS, about to place a card, stops. A long keen is heard, amplified.

LUSH looks up. GIBBS, card in hand, looks up. A laugh is heard, amplified, dying away.

Silence.

LUSH descends the steps, enters the room.

LUSH

Hullo, Charlie.
THE HOTHOUSE

He closes the door and comes to the table. GIBBS, after a glance at him, places another card. LUSH, inspects the state of the game. GIBBS scatters the cards.

How's tricks, Charlie? (Pause.) What you been doing with yourself? (Pause.) Mmm? (Pause.) Having a nice Christmas?

GIBBS
What do you want?

LUSH
What do you think of the weather?

GIBBS collects the cards and puts them into a card case.

GIBBS
You want something. What is it?

LUSH
I don't want anything, Gibbs. I've got something to report, that's all.

GIBBS
What is it?

LUSH
Don't get tense, Gibbs. After all, we're all buddies, aren't we? We're all in the game together.

GIBBS
You want to report something. What is it?

LUSH
Actually I want to ask you something first.
GIBBS sits back and folds his arms.

Who’s going to carry the can? Miss Cutts? Do you think she’s the father? We’re all terribly excited, you know. Can’t think what to call it. The kid’s got to have a name, after all. What do you think yourself? I think something that’ll remind him of this establishment when he grows up, don’t you? His birthplace. Of course, it depends on the father’s name, doesn’t it? I mean, the father might like the boy to be named after him. You know, if the father’s name was John then the boy would be named John too. Do you see what I mean? The same name as the father. What’s your name by the way?

GIBBS

You know, Lush, I don’t know how you’ve lasted here. You’re incompetent, your unwholesome and you’re offensive. You’re the most totally bloody useless bugger I’ve ever come across.

LUSH

I can see you’re in one of your moods today, Gibbs, so I suppose I’d better report to you what I came to report to you.

GIBBS

What is it?

LUSH

The mother of 6457 came to see me today.

GIBBS

The mother of 6457?

LUSH

Yes, you know. The one who died. He died last Thursday. From heart failure.

ACT ONE

GIBBS

His mother?

LUSH

Yes.

GIBBS

How did she get in?

LUSH

That’s what baffled me. It did. It quite baffled me. How on earth did she get in? I wondered. How did she do it? Why wasn’t she stopped? Why did no-one demand her credentials? It baffled me. Then — in a flash! — the answer came. She’d been hiding all night in the shrubbery, waiting for Tubb to leave his cubby-hole and take a leak, which eventually he did, and then she just darted in, like a shot off a shovel. Simple. We really tend to overlook the simple cunning of the simple. Would you like her description?

GIBBS

No. What did she want?

LUSH

She wanted to know how her son was getting on. She said that when her son came here she was told he needed peace and expert attention and that she would be hearing from us in due course, and that in fact it was now a year since she had seen him and she wanted to know how he was getting on.

GIBBS

What did you say?

LUSH

I said — A year? You haven’t seen him for a year? But that’s
ridiculous. Didn’t you come down for Mother’s Day, or Thanksgiving Day, or for the annual summer picnic for patients, staff, relatives and friends? Weren’t you invited to the Halloween Feast, the May Dance, the October Revival, the Old Boys and Girls supper and social? Dancing on the lawn, cold buffets on the flat roof, midnight croquet, barbecued boar by the lake? None of this? I never knew about it, she said. What? I said. The autumn art exhibition, the monthly concert of orchestral music in the bandroom, the half-yearly debate on a selected topic, held traditionally in the men’s changing room? The pageant? The unveiling? The Festival of One-Act Plays, judged by Miss Daisy Cutts, L.R.M.B., A.C.A., our dramatic instructor? You came down, I said, for none of these activities and ceremonies through which we from time immemorial engage and channel our patients’ energies? Oh dear, she said, I was never told. Obviously a clerical error, I said, I shall have it looked into. But, I said, it is a shame that you haven’t seen him, since he is now departed from us.

GIBBS

What?!

LUSH

He was moved some time ago, I said, to a convalescent home. But I thought this was a convalescent home, said 6457’s mother. *He laughs.* Silly woman. A convalescent home? I countered, no, no, no, not at all, not at all, whatever gave you that idea? This is a rest home. Oh, said 6457’s mother. I see. Well, wasn’t he getting enough rest here that they had to send him to a convalescent home? Ah, Mrs 6457, I said, it’s not quite so simple as that. It’s not quite so simple as that. In a rest home, you see, you do not merely rest. Nor, in a convalescent home, do you merely convalesce. No, no, in both institu-

tions, you see, you are obliged to work and play and join in daily communal activity to the greatest possible extent. Otherwise the concepts of rest and convalescence are rendered meaningless. Don’t for a moment either imagine that the terms rest and convalescence are synonymous. No, no, no, no. They represent, you see, stages. Sometimes one must rest first and then convalesce. Sometimes the reverse. Either course, of course, is only decided after the best interests of the patient have been taken into account. So, I continued, you can rest assured that if your son was moved from here to another place it was in his best interests, and only after the most extensive research into his case, the wealth and weight of all the expert opinion in this establishment, where some of the leading brains in this country are concentrated; after a world of time, care, gathering and accumulating of mass upon mass upon mass of relevant evidence, document, affidavit, tape recordings, played both backwards and forwards, deep into the depth of the night; hours of time, attention to the most minute detail, unstinting labour, unflagging effort, scrupulous attachment to the matter in hand and meticulous examination of all aspects of the question had determined the surest and most beneficial course your son’s case might take. The conclusion, after this supreme example of applied dedication, was to send your son to a convalescent home, where we are sure he will be content.

Pause

I also pointed out that we had carte blanche from the Ministry. She left much moved by my recital.

Pause

GIBBS

Thank you for your report, Mr. Lush.
THE HOTHOUSE

LUSH

No congratulations?

GIBBS consults his watch and picks up the internal telephone, which is on the table.

GIBBS

Will you excuse me?

LUSH

I'll excuse you for the time being, Gibbs.

He goes out.

GIBBS (into the phone)

22, please. (Pause.) Sir? Gibbs here. I'd like to speak with Miss Cutts, if I may, with reference to that matter we were discussing earlier. Thank you. (Pause.) Miss Cutts? I believe you know a man called Lamb. He's on the staff. Yes. I would be obliged if you would collect him and bring him to number one interviewing room. When I join you, perhaps you would be so kind as to go to IA control room. I shall be glad of your participation. Thank you.

He replaces the receiver.
The lights fade on the sitting room.
Stage in darkness.
The lights go up on the left stage area, including a stairway.
The soundproof room is disclosed.
MISS CUTTS, followed by LAMB, appears at the foot of the stairway. They ascend. MISS CUTTS is wearing a white coat.

ACT ONE

LAMB

But what do you think it's all about? I mean, he wanted to see me particularly, did he?

CUTTS

Oh yes. Particularly.

LAMB (stopping)

But he didn't say why?

CUTTS

No, he didn't say why.

LAMB

You know, I can't help thinking, I know it's very silly of me, but I can't help thinking this is something to do with my promotion. Do you think he's read my schemes? I mean, why else would he send for me when I was on duty? I'm sure he knows my rota as well as I do. It was my ten minute break when you caught me, did you realise that? Damned lucky, otherwise I might have been at the other end of the building.

CUTTS

Yes.

LAMB

What's he like, Mr Gibbs, to speak to? I mean, what sort of a person is he?

CUTTS

Oh, he's a charming person. So genuine.
ACT ONE

LAMB
Oh, I really mean it, quite sincerely.

GIBBS
Good. I've heard a great deal about you, you know.

LAMB
Really?

GIBBS
Yes, there's quite a lot I'd like to talk to you about, when we have the time. But in the meanwhile I wonder ... if you'd give me a helping hand?

LAMB
I'd be quite delighted!

GIBBS
That's the spirit! (With no undue emphasis.) Miss Cutts, could you come down, please?

LAMB
Er ... what did you say?

GIBBS
I beg your pardon?

LAMB
Did you ... did you speak to Miss Cutts just now?

GIBBS
Yes, I asked her to come down.

LAMB
But ... where from?
GIBBS

From room 1A. Just up a few stairs there.

LAMB

But ... did she hear you?

GIBBS

Oh yes.

LAMB

How?

GIBBS (laughing)

Oh, there's a hidden mike in the room. I'm sorry. You didn't know that. It's just been switched on.

LAMB (laughing)

Oh, I see.

Pause

Curious kind of room, isn't it?

GIBBS

It's a soundproof room.

Enter MISS CUTTS. She is carrying earphones and two electrodes.

Ah, Miss Cutts. Now, Lamb, what I'd like is for you to help us with some little tests. Will you do that?

LAMB

Tests? I'd be delighted. That's what I hoped I'd be doing when I first came down here.

GIBBS

Really? Good.

LAMB

What kind of tests are they?

GIBBS

Experiments.

LAMB

Oh, I see.

GIBBS

Well, we have a very willing subject, Miss Cutts.

CUTTS

We do.

GIBBS

Oh by the way, Lamb, Merry Christmas.

LAMB

Thanks. Merry Christmas to you. And to you, Miss Cutts.

CUTTS

Thank you. And to you. (To GIBBS.) And to you too.

GIBBS

And to you. (Briskly.) Now - perhaps you would fit the electrodes to Mr. Lamb's palms.

LAMB

Electrodes?
THE HOTHOUSE

ACT ONE

CUTTS

Could I have your hand, Mr. Lamb?

MISS CUTTS attaches the first electrode to LAMB's hand.

GIBBS

Yes. They're attached as you can see, with a little plastic clip, to the palm of the hand.

CUTTS

Now the other one.

She attaches the second electrode.

LAMB

What are they . . . what are they for, exactly?

GIBBS

They're electric. You don't feel anything, of course. Best thing to do is forget all about them.

CUTTS

Now I'm going to plug in.

She bends at the wall, where, through a hole, three leads protrude. She picks up two and returns to LAMB.

GIBBS

Now she's going to plug in. You see the little socket on each of those electrodes? They're for the plug. (He watches MISS CUTTS plug in.) That's right. First plug in A, then plug in B. Right. Now you're plugged in.

LAMB

Oh, you've ... got to be plugged in, have you?

GIBBS (with a chuckle)

Oh yes, got to be plugged in. The leads go right through the wall and up to the control room, you see. We're plugged in the other end.

LAMB

You?

GIBBS (laughing)

No, no, not me. You. Into the receiving set.

LAMB

Oh, I see.

GIBBS

Let's move your chair out a bit, shall we?

LAMB

Yes. (He rises. GIBBS moves the chair.) Oh, what are these . . . what are these electrodes for, exactly?

GIBBS

They measure electrical potential on the skin.

LAMB

Oh.

GIBBS

Engendered by neural activity, of course.

LAMB

Oh, of course.

GIBBS

Electrical impulses, in a word. You can imagine how
important they are and yet how little we know about them. Right. Now the earphones.

MISS CUTTS attaches the earphones.

LAMB

Earphones?

GIBBS

Yes, same principle. Plugged in at the socket on your head, plugged in at the other end in our control room. (Cheerily.) Don't worry, they're nice long leads, all of them. Plenty of leeway. No danger of strangulation.

LAMB (laughing)

Oh yes. Good.

GIBBS

By the way, your predecessor used to give us a helping hand occasionally, too, you know. Before you came, of course.

LAMB

My predecessor?

CUTTS

Could you just keep still a second, Mr Lamb, while I plug in the earphones?

LAMB is still. She plugs.

Thank you.

GIBBS

Comfortable?

ACT ONE

LAMB

Yes, thank you. My predecessor, did you say?

GIBBS

Yes, the chap you took over from.

LAMB

Oh! Did he really? Oh, good. I've often wondered what he did, exactly. Oh, good, I'm... glad I'm following in a tradition.

They all chuckle.

Have you any idea where he is now?

GIBBS

No, I don't think I do know where he is now. Do you know where he is, Miss Cutts?

CUTTS

No, I'm afraid I don't.

GIBBS

No, I'm afraid we don't really know. He's not here, anyway. That's certain. Now what I want you to do is to sit perfectly still. Relax completely. Don't think about a thing. Just rest your arms on your knees. That's right. Now you see that yellow board over there, it's a nice big one, you can see that in the middle of that board is a red bulb. Ignore it. It might go on and off at regular or irregular intervals. Take no notice. Sit perfectly still. Quite comfortable?

LAMB

Yes, thanks.
GIBBS

Jolly good. Don’t go to sleep, will you? We’re awfully grateful to you, old chap, for helping us.

LAMB

It’s a pleasure.

MISS CUTTS and GIBBS go out.
LAMB sits. Silence. He shifts and concentrates. The red light flicks on and off. Silence. Suddenly a piercing highpitched buzz-hum is heard. LAMB jolts rigid, his hands go to his earphones, he is propelled from the chair, falls, stands, falls, rolls, still clutching his earphones, crawls under the table. The sound ceases. Silence. The red light is still flickering. LAMB peeps up from under the table. He crawls out, stands. He twitches, and emits a short chuckle.

The voice of MISS CUTTS is heard.

CUTTS

Would you say you were an excitable person?

LAMB looks up.

LAMB

Not ... not unduly, no.

The voice of GIBBS is heard.

GIBBS

Would you say you were a moody person?

ACT ONE

LAMB

Moody? No, I wouldn’t say I was moody – well, sometimes occasionally I –

CUTTS

Do you ever get fits of depression?

LAMB

Well, I wouldn’t call them depression, exactly –

GIBBS

Would you say you were a sociable person?

LAMB

Well, that’s not a very easy question to answer, really. I try, I certainly try to be sociable, I mean I think it should be the aim of any one interested in human nature to try to mix, to better his understanding of it. I –

CUTTS

Do you find yourself unaccountably happy one moment and unaccountably unhappy the next?

LAMB

It’s strange you should say that because –

GIBBS

Do you often do things which you regret in the morning?

LAMB

Regret? Things I regret? Well, it depends what you mean by often, really. I mean, when you say often –

CUTTS

Are you often puzzled by women?
THE HOTHOUSE

LAMB

Women?

GIBBS

Men.

LAMB

Men? Well, I was just going to answer the question about women –

GIBBS

Do you often feel puzzled?

LAMB

Puzzled?

GIBBS

By women.

LAMB

Women?

GIBBS

Men.

LAMB

Uh – now just a minute, I ... do you want separate answers or a joint answer?

CUTTS

After your day’s work, do you ever feel tired, edgy?

GIBBS

Pretty?

ACT ONE

CUTTS

Irritable?

GIBBS

At a loose end?

CUTTS

Morose?

GIBBS

Frustrated?

CUTTS

Morbid?

GIBBS

Unable to concentrate?

CUTTS

Unable to sleep?

CUTTS

Unable to eat?

GIBBS

Unable to remain seated?

CUTTS

Unable to stand upright?

GIBBS

Lustful?

CUTTS

Indolent?
On heat?

Randy?

Full of desire?

Full of energy?

Full of dread?

Drained?

Of energy?

Of dread?

Of desire?

Pause

Well, it's difficult to say, really—

The piercing buzz-hum is heard again. LAMB jolts rigid, his hands to his earphones, he is propelled from the chair, falls, stands, falls, rolls, clutching his earphones, crawls under the table. The sound ceases. Silence. The red light flicks on and off.

LAMB peeps out, crawls from under the table, notices the light, stands, uncertainly, emits a very weak chuckle.

He watches the red light, which, for a few seconds, increases in intensity.

Are you virgo intacta?

What?

Are you virgo intacta?

Oh, I say, that's rather embarrassing. I mean, in front of a lady—

Are you virgo intacta?

Yes, I am, actually. I'll make no secret of it.

Have you always been virgo intacta?

Oh yes, always. Always.

From the word go?
LAMB

Go? Oh yes. From the word go.

GIBBS

What is the law of the Wolf Cub Pack?

LAMB

The cub gives in to the Old Wolf, the cub does not give in to himself.

GIBBS

When you were a boy scout were you most proficient at somersault, knots, leap frog, hopping, skipping, balancing, cleanliness, recitation or ball games?

LAMB

Well, actually, I never became a boy scout proper. I was a wolf cub, of course, but I never became a boy scout. I don’t know why, actually. I’ve forgotten ... to be frank. But I was a cub.

CUTTS

Do women frighten you?

GIBBS

Their clothes?

CUTTS

Their shoes?

GIBBS

Their voices?

CUTTS

Their laughter?

ACT ONE

GIBBS

Their stares?

CUTTS

Their way of walking?

GIBBS

Their way of sitting?

CUTTS

Their way of smiling?

GIBBS

Their way of talking?

CUTTS

Their mouths?

GIBBS

Their hands?

CUTTS

Their legs?

GIBBS

Their toes?

CUTTS

Their thighs?

GIBBS

Their knees?

CUTTS

Their eyes?
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS

Their

Drumbeat

CUTTS

Their

Drumbeat

GIBBS

Their

Cymbalbang

CUTTS

Their

Trombone chord

GIBBS

Their

Bass note

Pause

LAMB

Well, it depends what you mean by frighten –

GIBBS

Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night?

LAMB

Sometimes, yes, for a glass of water.

ACT ONE

GIBBS

Do you ever feel you would like to join a group of people in which group common assumptions are shared and common principles observed?

LAMB

Well, I am a member of such a group, here, in this establishment.

GIBBS

Which establishment?

LAMB

This one.

GIBBS

Which establishment?

LAMB

This one.

GIBBS

You are a member of this establishment?

LAMB

Of course.

Silence

(Looking up.) Mmnn?

Any more questions?

I'm quite ready for another question.
I'm quite ready.

I'm rather enjoying this, you know.

Oh, by the way, what was that extraordinary sound?

It gave me quite a start, I must admit.

Are you all right up there?

You haven't finished your questions, have you?

I'm ready whenever you are.

Silence

LAMB sits.

_We hear the loud click of a switch from the control room._

_The microphone in the room has been switched off._

LAMB looks up.

_We see him mouthing, but hear nothing._

_The red light begins to flick on and off._

LAMB stops talking, stares at it.

_The red light gradually grows in strength, until it consumes the room._

_It flashes slowly on and off, as LAMB sits still._

Curtain
ROOTE's office. Night.
ROOTE is at his desk, examining some papers.
LUSH is at the window, looking out.

ROOTE (without looking up)
What are you looking at, Lush?

LUSH
The yard, sir.

ROOTE
Anyone about?

LUSH
Not a soul.

ROOTE
What's the weather like?

LUSH
The snow has turned to slush.

ROOTE
Ah.

Pause

Has the wind got up?

LUSH
No. No wind at all.
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE turns a page.

ROOTE (muttering)
No wind, eh? (He examines the page, then slams it onto the desk.) I can’t read a word of this! It’s indecipherable. What’s the matter with this man Hogg? Why can’t he type his reports out like everyone else? I can’t read this writing. It’s unreadable.

LUSH
His typewriter’s out of action, sir.

ROOTE
What’s the matter with it?

LUSH
It seems to have got stuck, sir.

ROOTE
Stuck?

LUSH
It just won’t move at all.

ROOTE
Well, there must be an obstacle somewhere, or something.

LUSH
It looked like rust to me.

ROOTE
Rust? What are you talking about? It’s a brand new typewriter. It’s a Ministry typewriter. We had a whole cartload sent down from the Ministry – when was it? – a couple of months ago. Brand new. I’ve still got the invoice somewhere. Rust. Never heard such rubbish. Anyway, I can’t sit here all night trying to work this out. (He puts the papers in a drawer, goes to the drinks cabinet, takes out a bottle of whisky and pours himself a drink.) I’ve had enough this week. I never leave this desk, do you know that? Sun up to sundown. Day in day out. It’s the price you have to pay for being in command, for being responsible for the whole shoot. As I am. The whole damn shoot. (He drinks.)

LUSH walks to the cabinet, collects a glass and pours himself a drink.

LUSH
You do leave this desk quite often, though, don’t you, sir?

ROOTE
What?

LUSH
I say, in point of fact, you do leave this desk quite often, don’t you?

ROOTE
When?

LUSH
When you go and visit the patients, for instance.

ROOTE
That’s purely in the line of duty. It’s not relaxation. I meant relaxation. I wasn’t talking about the line of duty.

LUSH
Oh.
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE

Anyway, I've given up visiting the patients. It's not worth it. A waste of energy.

LUSH

What an extraordinary thing to say, Mr Roote.

ROOTE

Don't Mr Roote me.

LUSH

But I never expected to hear you say a thing like that, Mr Roote.

ROOTE

I said don't Mr Roote me!

LUSH

But I always understood that you looked upon visits to the patients from the head of this establishment as one of the most important features in the running of this establishment ... Mr. Roote.

ROOTE

Listen! I give you leeway. But don't think I give you that much leeway.

LUSH

No, sir.

ROOTE

Don't think I can't squash you on a plate as easy as look at you.

ACT TWO

LUSH

Yes, sir.

ROOTE

As easy as look at you, Lush.

LUSH

Quite, sir.

ROOTE

I will not stand insubordination – at any price.

LUSH

I do sympathise, sir.

ROOTE

I was brought up to expect respect, and by Christ I'll get it.

LUSH

Yes, sir.

ROOTE

So don't give me any more lip, you understand me? Otherwise you're liable to find yourself in trouble.

LUSH

You know I harbour no illusions about my position, Colonel.

ROOTE

Don't call me Colonel!

LUSH

But you were a Colonel once, weren't you, Colonel?
I was. And a bloody good one too.

If I may say so, you still possess considerable military bearing.

Really?

Oh yes.

Well, it’s not surprising.

And the ability to be always one thought ahead of the next man.

It’s a military characteristic.

Really?

Oh yes. Of course, some of them aren’t very bright, I must admit.

Who?

Military men.
LUSH
I mean, not only are you a scientist, but you have literary ability, musical ability, knowledge of most schools of philosophy, philology, photography, anthropology, cosmology, theology, phytology, phytonomy, phytotomy -

ROOTE
Oh, no, no, not phytotomy.

LUSH
Not phytotomy?

ROOTE
I was always meaning to get round to phytotomy, of course, but... well, I've had so many other things to think about.

LUSH
Naturally.

ROOTE
But anyway, once you know something about phytonomy you're halfway there.

LUSH
Halfway where, sir?

ROOTE
To phytotomy!

Pause
Give us a drink.

LUSH fills the glasses.

ACT TWO
LUSH
Why have you given up visiting the patients?

ROOTE
I've given up, that's all.

LUSH
But I thought you were getting results?

ROOTE (staring at him)
Cheers.

LUSH
Weren't you getting results?

ROOTE (staring at him)
Drink your whisky.

LUSH
But surely you achieved results with one patient very recently. What was the number? 6459, I think.

ROOTE throws his whisky in LUSH's face. LUSH wipes his face.

LUSH
Let me fill you up. (He pours.) Yes, quite a substantial result, I should have thought.

ROOTE throws his whisky in LUSH's face. LUSH wipes his face, pours another.

But perhaps I'm thinking of 6457.

LUSH grabs ROOTE's glass and holds it above his head, with his own. Slowly he lowers his own.
CHEERS.

He drinks, and then very deliberately lowers his other arm across the desk.

ROOTE (taking the glass, in a low voice)
You're neglecting to call me sir, Lush. You're supposed to call me sir when you address me.

Pause

ROOTE suddenly takes off his jacket.

God, the heat of this place. It's damn hot, isn't it? It's like a crematorium in here. Why is it suddenly so hot?

LUSH
The snow has turned to slush, sir.

ROOTE
Has it?

LUSH
Very dangerous.

ROOTE
It's a heatwave, that's what it is. (A knock on the door.) Who is it?

Enter GIBBS.

Oh no, what is it? Business at this hour? You sit down to have a quiet drink and what happens?

ACT TWO

GIBBS
I have something to report, sir.

ROOTE
What? (GIBBS looks at LUSH.) Oh, never mind about him! What is it?

GIBBS
I don't approve of divulging official secrets to all and sundry, sir.

ROOTE
I know you don't approve! I don't approve! Nobody approves! But you've no alternative, have you?

GIBBS
Mr Lush could leave the room, sir.

ROOTE
Good God, what an impertinence! The man's my guest, do you understand that? Which is more than you bloodywell are! I've never heard of such a thing in all my life. He barges in here and tells me to chuck my own guest out of the room. Who do you think you are?

Pause

(To LUSH.) He gets on my wick sometimes—doesn't he you?

GIBBS
I ... apologise, sir, if I have been presumptuous.

ROOTE
Well, what's your business?
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS
The father has been found.

ROOTE
No?

GIBBS
Found.

ROOTE (rising)
Found? So soon? In so short a space of time? Jiminy Cricket, that's quick work, Gibbs! (Shaking hands with GIBBS.) Absolutely first class! (To LUSH.) What do you think of that, eh, for a bit of quick work?

LUSH
Remarkable.

ROOTE
You see the way I train my staff? Alacrity! First and foremost, alacrity! Get on with it, don't muck about, don't dither, pick your man and pin him to the wall. Let your nose do your thinking for you and you won't go far wrong. That's what we try to do here, cultivate the habit of split second decisions. Right? Right, Gibbs?

GIBBS
Quite, sir.

ROOTE
Right, Lush?

LUSH
Quite, sir.

ACT TWO

ROOTE
And it never fails. I'm pleased with you, Gibbs. Who is he?

GIBBS
A man called Lamb, sir.

ROOTE
Never heard of him.

ROOTE sits, pours a drink and drinks.

LUSH
Lamb? Surely not Lorna Lamb? Lorna Lamb in the dispensary department?

ROOTE
A man, not a woman, you bloody fool!

LUSH
Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't quite ... What exactly has this person done?

Pause

ROOTE
Tell him what this person has done, Mr Gibbs.

GIBBS
A child has been born to one of the patients. It was considered a matter of the first importance to locate the father. This has now been done.

ROOTE
Lamb? Who the hell's Lamb? Do I know him?
THE HOT HOUSE

GIBBS
I think it doubtful that you've ever met him, sir.

ROOTE
I don't even know what he looks like. A rapist on my own staff and I don't know what he looks like!

LUSH
Was it rape?

ROOTE
Of course it was rape. You don't think that sort of thing happens by consent, do you?

GIBBS
He's not a very important member of your staff, sir.

ROOTE
Well, if he's not important how did he get into the patient's room? You know as well as I do that only a very select handful of the personnel are allowed in the patients' rooms. How did he get in?

GIBBS
He tests the locks, sir, of all the rooms in the building. Either this particular lock was . . . not locked, or he forced it.

ROOTE
It's unbelievable, isn't it, Lush, the things that go on?

LUSH
It almost is, sir.

ROOTE
The sabotage that goes on, under your very nose. Open the window. I'm suffocating. Is that radiator hot?

ACT TWO

LUSH goes to the radiator and touches it.

LUSH
Scalding, sir.

ROOTE
That's why I'm so hot.

LUSH
The night is warm, Mr Roote. The snow has turned to slush.

ROOTE
That's about the fifth time you've said the snow has turned to slush!

GIBBS
It's quite true, sir. I noticed it myself.

ROOTE
I don't care whether it's true or not. I don't like to have a thing repeated and repeated and repeated! Anyone would think I was slow on the uptake. The snow has turned to slush. I heard it. I understand it. That's enough.

He pours a drink, drinks. LUSH opens the window.

You think I'm past my job, do you? You think I'm a bit slow? Don't you believe it. I'm as quick as a python.

LUSH
An adder.

ROOTE
What?
ROOTE
What do you mean, an adder?

GIBBS ambigous
Do you think I deserve a little tipple of whisky, sir?

ROOTE
Good God, Gibbs is being jocular. Did you hear that, Lush? He’s just made a pleasantry. Didn’t you, son? Oh, that’s better. I can feel a draught. See if you can turn that heater off. If we can’t turn it off here we’ll have to get hold of Tubb and tell him to turn it off at the mains.

LUSH bends to the radiator.

Well?

LUSH
It won’t budge. It’s stiff.

ROOTE
It’ll have to be turned off at the mains.

LUSH
It’s a very cold building, sir, it’s perishing on the upper floors.

ROOTE
I tell you it’s too bloody hot and the damned heating’s got to go off! Who’s the boss here, for Christ’s sake, you or me?

ACT TWO

LUSH
Not me.

ROOTE
I do ten times as much work as the whole lot of you put together. I deserve a bit of comfort, a bit of consideration. The heating will have to be turned off! Every single pipe of it. That’s what causes the laxity, the skiving, the inefficiency in this place. It’s overheated! Always has been. (To GIBBS.) What’s the matter with you, standing there like a tit in a trance? Tip the bottle, for the love of Mike. Deserved or undeserved.

GIBBS pours himself a glass of whisky.

What do you mean, you deserve it, anyway? You deserve nothing.

GIBBS
I meant for locating the father, sir.

ROOTE
You deserve nothing. Either of you. You’ve got a job to do. Do it. You won’t get any tulips from me. Come on, fill it up, we’ll drink a toast. Got yours, Lush?

LUSH
Just a minute.

LUSH pours a glass of whisky.

ROOTE (solemnly)
I’d like to drink a toast.
To whom, sir?

ROOTE
I'd like to drink a toast, gentlemen, to our glorious dead.

Pause

LUSH
Which ones are they, sir?

ROOTE
The chaps who died for us in the field of action.

Oh yes.

ROOTE
The men who gave their lives so that we might live. Who sacrificed themselves so that we might continue. Who helped keep the world clean for the generations to come. The men who died in our name. Let us drink to them. After all, it's Christmas. Couldn't be more appropriate.

LUSH
My glass is ready, sir.

ROOTE
Is yours ready, Gibbs?

GIBBS
It is.

ROOTE
Gentlemen, I give you a toast. To our glorious dead. (Rising.)

ACT TWO

GIBBS and LUSH

To our glorious dead.

They drink. ROOTE sits.

ROOTE
A rapist on my own staff and I don't know what he looks like. It's ridiculous. What sort of man is he?

GIBBS
Lamb, sir? Nondescript.

ROOTE
Tall?

GIBBS
No, sir. Small.

ROOTE
Tall.

GIBBS
Small.

Pause

ROOTE
Do you know him, Lush?

LUSH
I've seen him.

ROOTE
Is he fat?
Thin, sir.

Fat.

Thin.

Pause

Brown eyes?

Blue, sir.

Brown.

Blue.

Pause

Curly hair?

GIBBS and LUSH eye each other.

Straight, sir.

Curly.

Straight.

Pause

What colour teeth?

Lemon, sir.

Nigger.

Lemon.

Nigger.

Pause

Any special peculiarities?

None.

One.

None.

Pause
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE

These descriptions don't tally. Next time bring me a photograph. Or you've got a cine-camera. You could devote a half-hour film to the man. A documentary— for educational purposes. It's still stifling in here. We'll have to get hold of Tubb. It's uncommonly warm in here for this time of the year, isn't it?

LUSH

It's warm out too. The snow has turned to slush.

ROOTE rises, expostulating.

GIBBS

Shall I call Tubb on the intercom, sir?

LUSH

I tried the intercom before. It sounded a bit clogged up.

ROOTE

Clogged up? What's the matter with this place? Everything's clogged up, bunged up, stuffed up, buggered up. The whole thing's running down hill. I don't like the look of it. Let's see.

He switches on the intercom on his desk. A voice is heard.

VOICE


ROOTE switches off.

ROOTE

Yes, it does sound a little clogged up, I must admit.

He fills the glasses.

What's it all about?

LUSH

It's the Christmas raffle, held by the understaff in the understaff canteen.

ROOTE

Raffle? Did we get any tickets?

GIBBS

I was approached, sir, but on behalf of the staff declined to purchase any.

ROOTE

Did you? Well, there's a bloody big amount of unclaimed stuff down there, isn't there?

LUSH

Must be a whole pile of it.

ROOTE

Well, who gets it?

LUSH

I expect there'll be another raffle at Easter, sir.
What about that duck? You can't keep a duck until Easter! It's... it's just not sensible! There's not much I don't know about poultry. Lush, make an immediate inquiry as to what's to become of that duck.

Lush
Yes, sir. What about the two tickets to the circus?

Roote
Christmas, eh? And I haven't received one present. Not one gift, of any kind. It's most upsetting.

Lush
Actually, I've seen the duck, sir.

Roote
You have? What's it like?

Lush
It's a dead duck, sir.

Roote
Dead?

Lush
Quite dead, sir.

Roote
Good God, I didn't know it was dead.

Lush
Yes, as dead as patient 6457. If not deader.

Silence

Act Two
Gibbs
Is this Ministry whisky, sir? It's quite excellent.

Roote (to Lush)
What do you know about 6457?

Gibbs
I wouldn't advise any further discussion of that matter, sir.

Roote
What do you know about 6457?

Lush
I know that he's dead.

Roote
What do you know about it?

Gibbs
It is advisable to discuss the matter any further, sir.

Roote (to Lush)
You're damned clever, aren't you?

Lush
As a matter of fact, I met a relation of 6457's today.

Roote
You what?

Gibbs
Lush. The matter is closed.

Roote
What relation?
ACT TWO

ROOTE

I was fed, Mister Cleverboots, at my mother's breast.

GIBBS

So was I.

LUSH

Me too.

Sudden silence

ROOTE

WELL? AND WHAT ABOUT IT?

Pause. ROOTE sinks back in his seat. GIBBS drinks. LUSH drinks. ROOTE watches them, looks at his glass, picks it up and swallows the glassful. He chokes, stands, writhes about in a fit of coughing. GIBBS and LUSH go to his aid.

GIBBS (slapping his back)

Come and sit in the armchair, sir.

LUSH (slapping his back)

Come and sit on the sofa, sir.

A short tug-of-war commences, ROOTE still coughing.

GIBBS

Shall I call the doctor, sir?

LUSH

Shall I call the nurse, sir?

ROOTE's coughing subsides. He stands, shaking and panting.
LUSH goes to the desk, picks up a glass of whisky, takes it to ROOTE.

Here drink this, sir.

ROOTE viciously knocks the glass out of his hand. He stands, glaring at them, then goes back to his desk, sits. LUSH picks up the glass and he and GIBBS join ROOTE at the desk. LUSH fills his glass.

ROOTE
6457’s mother, eh? How did she get in? Wasn’t the porter on duty at the gate?

LUSH
Don’t you want to know what she wanted?

ROOTE
I want to know why the porter wasn’t on duty at the gate!

GIBBS
He’s in charge of the raffle, sir, in the understaff canteen.

ROOTE
Tubb? That was Tubb just now, on the intercom?

LUSH
Oh, very much Tubb, sir.

ROOTE
Holding a raffle when he should have been on duty at the gate? Honestly, things are going from bad to worse. (Pouring.) Down the hatch. (He raises his glass.)

ACT TWO

GIBBS
Thank you, sir. Happy Christmas.

ROOTE
Happy Christmas to you, Gibbs.

LUSH
Happy Christmas, sir.

ROOTE
Thank you. Happy Christmas to you, Lush. A happy Christmas to you both.

GIBBS and LUSH (raising their glasses)
And to you, sir.

ROOTE
Thanks. And the best of luck for the new year.

GIBBS and LUSH
The best of luck for the new year to you, sir.

GIBBS and LUSH drink, and watch ROOTE expectantly. He, about to drink, notices their attention, sips carefully, lowers the glass, chuckles in their faces. A knock at the door.

ROOTE
Who’s that?

Enter TUBB, carrying a small paper parcel.

TUBB
Tubb! I thought you were on the intercom.

TUBB
Merry Christmas to you, Colonel.
Thank you, Tubb. And to you.

How did you enjoy your Christmas dinner, sir?

Disappointing.

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Colonel.

Too much gravy.

Really? Mine was bone dry.

What?

Honestly. Bone dry.

Well, mine was swimming in gravy.

That's funny, isn't it, Gibbs? His was swimming in gravy and mine was bone dry.

I'm surprised to hear yours was wet, Colonel.

Well, it was. Very wet.

That's funny. Mine was bone dry.

What have you got there, Tubb?

It's a Christmas present for you, Colonel.

A present?

Just a little token of the understaff's regard, Colonel. Just a little something for Christmas.

Not a duck, by any chance?

A duck, Colonel?

I just wondered whether it might have been a duck.

Oh no, we haven't got any duck, sir.

No duck?
Thanks very much, Tubb. What is it?

A man called Lamb, sir.

Who is it?

Tubb

Silence

Well, it wasn’t exactly claimed, sir. But we found out who owned the ticket so we’re keeping it for him till he turns up, it’s only fair. Tubb Claimed? Who by?

ROOTE

Tubb

Oh, that duck. Oh, that was claimed.

ROOTE

Tubb

Eh? Unclaimed? Ready for the oven? What? That was a duck wasn’t it? And what’s more it was unclaimed.

Tubb

THE HOUTHOUSE

No, sir.

What about number 84 then? Eh? Unclaimed. Ready for the oven. What? That was a duck wasn’t it? And what’s more it was unclaimed.

It’s a Christmas cake, Colonel, cooked by the cook.

ACT TWO

How very kind, How very kind, I’m deeply moved.

Deeply moved.

... to you, sir.

For you, sir.

A cake? For me?

Lush

That’s very nice, isn’t it, Gibbs?

ROOTE

Tubb

A cake? For me?

ROOTE

Lush

How very kind. How very kind. Most touched. More than touched. Deeply moved. It’s a long time, a very long time since I had a Christmas cake. A long time.

Pause

From the cooks, sir, from me, sir, from the porter’s staff, sir, from the cleaning staff, sir, from the very, very all of us...

Deeply moved. More than moved...
THE HOTHOUSE
LUSH
What an awfully nice gesture.

TUBB
The understaff, Colonel, and I'm sure the patients, would be
even more deeply moved if you were to give them a Christmas
address, sir.

ROOTE
An address?

TUBB
They would be most touched, sir. They're all clustered up
now in the canteen and I've fitted up the loudspeaker system
with an extension to all the corridors leading onto the
patients' rooms as well.

LUSH
What a splendid idea.

ROOTE
An address? Your people would appreciate an address, would
they?

TUBB
Oh, they would, sir. I know they would. Just a little word for
Christmas.

LUSH
What an exciting innovation.

ROOTE
And the patients . . . they haven't expressed any desire . . .
themselves . . . have they?

ACT TWO
TUBB
Well, not exactly expressed one, sir, as far as I know, but I've
fitted up the loudspeaker system to their rooms and I'm sure
they'd be deeply moved.

Pause

ROOTE
What do you think, Gibbs?

Pause

GIBBS
Gibbs!

I beg pardon, sir?

ROOTE
I said what do you think?

GIBBS
I . . . I think it's an excellent idea, sir.

ROOTE
Lush?

LUSH
I think it would be deeply moving, sir.

Pause

ROOTE (briskly)
Where's the mike?
THE HOTHOUSE

TUBB

Here, in the cake, sir.

ROOTE

In the cake!

TUBB (unwrapping the paper)
I just shoved it in with the cake, sir.

ROOTE
Well, it's got no business to be anywhere near the cake! What's the matter with you? (Muttering.) What a place to put a mike!

TUBB (extracting mike)
Here we are, Colonel.

ROOTE
Well, plug it in, let's get on with it.

TUBB plugs in by the wall. ROOTE sits, clears his throat.

TUBB (with mike)
On here on the blotting paper all right, sir?

ROOTE
Move out of it.

TUBB
Switch this switch when you're ready, Colonel.

ROOTE

ACT TWO

TUBB

They're all ready. They're all clustered up in the understaff canteen.

Pause

ROOTE

What are you looking at, Gibbs?

GIBBS

Nothing in particular, sir.

ROOTE
You were looking at me! Do you call that nothing in particular?

Pause

ROOTE (rising)
I can't do it now. I'll do it later on. Later on. You can't make a speech like that without some thought. Tell them not to be disappointed. Tell them they'll hear my Christmas address later on. Later on.

The lights go down on the office. They go up on the sitting room. MISS CUTTS is lying in an armchair, tossing a ping-pong ball in the air and catching it.

GIBBS descends the steps. Suddenly a long sigh is heard, amplified.
GIBBS stops. MISS CUTTS, about to toss the ball, stops. A long keen is heard, amplified.
GIBBS looks up. MISS CUTTS looks up. A laugh is heard, amplified, dying away. Silence.
MISS CUTTS puts the ball to her mouth.
GIBBS is still a moment, then turns and enters the sitting room.
MISS CUTTS throws the ball at him.

CUTTS

Catch!

GIBBS (warding it off)
Don’t do that!

He stoops for the ball and puts it in his pocket. From another pocket he withdraws a packet of pills, takes one out and swallows it.

CUTTS
What’s the matter, Charlie?

GIBBS
Headache.

He sits, swallows another pill, closes his eyes.
MISS CUTTS goes to him.

CUTTS
Have you got a headache, darling? (Whispering in his ear.) Come to room 1A. I’ll make it better for you. (She kisses his ear.) Are you coming?

GIBBS
I’ve got to go back.

CUTTS
What! Why?

ACT TWO

GIBBS
To hear his Christmas address.

CUTTS
Another one? Oh, God, I thought he’d forgotten all about it.

GIBBS
He hadn’t forgotten.

CUTTS
Every year. Sometimes I could scream.

GIBBS
I can’t stand screaming.

CUTTS
Charlie, what is it? Don’t I please you any more? Tell me. Be honest. Am I no longer the pleasure I was? Be frank with me. Am I failing you?

GIBBS
Stop it. I’m not in the mood.

CUTTS
Let me massage your neck.

GIBBS (throwing her off)
You and your necks! You love to get your hands round someone’s neck!

CUTTS
So do you.

GIBBS
What do you mean by that?
Mean?

GIBBS
I'm not in the habit of touching people's necks.

She kneels at his side.

CUTTS
It was such fun working with you this morning.

Pause

You're so clever. I think you're the cleverest man I've ever had anything to do with. We don't work together nearly enough. (Taking his hand.) It's such fun in room 1A. I think that's my favourite room in the whole place. It's such an intimate room. You can ask the questions and be so intimate. I love your questions. They're so intimate themselves. That's what makes it so exciting. The intimacy becomes unbearable. You keep waiting for the questions to stop, to pass from one intimacy into another, beautifully, and just when you know you can't ask another one, that they must stop, that you must stop, that it must stop — they stop! — and we're alone, and we can start, we can continue, in room 1A, because you know, you always know, your sense of timing is perfect, you know when the questions must stop, those questions, and you must start asking me questions, other questions, and I must start asking you questions, and it's question time, question time, question time, forever and forever and forever.

GIBBS (standing)
I tell you I'm not in the mood.

ACT TWO

CUTTS

Come to 1A, Charlie.

GIBBS stands, looking at the door.

GIBBS
Did you hear anything, just now?

CUTTS
What?

GIBBS (slowly)

CUTTS

He stands.

What was it?

GIBBS
I don't know.

CUTTS (a nervous chuckle)
Don't tell me something's going to happen?

GIBBS
Something's happening. But I don't know what. I can't ... define it.

CUTTS
How absurd.
ACT TWO

Lush.

GIBBS
Lush? Lush could never be taken for a murderer. He's scum but he's not a murderer.

CUTTS
No, but you are.

GIBBS stares at her.

What did you say?

GIBBS (quietly)
Pause

What did you call me?

CUTTS
Nothing.

GIBBS
You called me a murderer.

CUTTS
No, I didn't call you anything -

GIBBS (ice)
How dare you call me a murderer?

CUTTS
But I didn't!
THE HOThOUSE

GIBBS
Who do you know that I've murdered?

CUTTS
No-one!

GIBBS
Then how dare you call me a murderer?

CUTTS
You're not a murderer!

GIBBS (hissing)
I'm not a murderer, he's a murderer, Roote is a murderer!

Pause

You dare to call me a murderer?

CUTTS (moaning)
No, Charlie.

GIBBS
You know what that is, don't you? Slander. Defamation of character.

Pause

And on top of that, you try to incite me to kill my chief, Mr Roote. The man in charge. You, his own mistress. Just to satisfy your own personal whim.

Pause

ACT TWO

CUTTS
Charlie...

GIBBS
Shut up!

MISS CUTTS sinks to the floor.

CUTTS (whispering)
Oh, I wish I was in room 1A. I shall never get to room 1A again. I know I won't. Ever.

The lights go down on the sitting room.
They go up on the office.
ROOTE and LUSH still drinking.
ROOTE perched on the desk, LUSH seated, drooping.

ROOTE
Women! I've known them all. Did I ever tell you about the woman in the blue dress? I met her in Casablanca. She was a spy. A spy in a blue dress. Believe it or believe it not that woman was an agent for a foreign power. She was tattooed on her belly with a pelican. Yes. Her belly was covered with a pelican. She could make that pelican waddle across the room to you. On all fours, sideways, feet first, arse upwards, any way you like. Her control was superhuman. Only a woman could possess it. Under her blue dress she wore a shimmy. And under that shimmy she wore a pelican.

Pause

My cake! We haven't cut the cake! My God, and it's nearly midnight.
He unwraps the cake, holds it.

A beauty. (Going to his desk drawer.) Wait a minute. Where are we? Just the thing in here.

Takes a carving knife from the drawer.

Now. Right down the middle.

He cuts the cake.

I remember the day my walls used to be hung with Christmas cards, I used to walk knee deep in presents, all my aunties and uncles popping in for a drink, a log fire in the grate, bells on the Christmas tree, garlands, flowers, floral decoration, music, flowers ... floral decoration ... laughter ... (Abruptly.) I didn’t notice a card from you, did I? Didn’t expect it either. Because you’ve no sense of decorum, it sticks out a mile. No heart. It’s not so much the language, it’s the attitude of mind that’s nasty, unwholesome, putrid.

LUSH (dully)
The snow has turned to slush.

ROOTE
The temperature must have dropped. (Thrusting a piece of cake at him.) Well, here you are, have a piece of this cake.

LUSH stares at it.

Go on. Eat it!

They both munch. LUSH spits his out. ROOTE grabs him by the neck.

ACT TWO

What are you doing? That’s my cake!

LUSH
I can’t!

ROOTE (shaking him)
That’s my Christmas cake! You can’t spit out my Christmas cake!

LUSH (violently, breaking away)
Stuff it!

ROOTE regards him.

ROOTE (gravely)
You’ve insulted me, you’ve insulted the cook, and you’ve insulted Jesus Christ.

Pause

We’ve got no room for unhealthy minds in this establishment.

LUSH (muttering)
Muck and slush.

ROOTE
Lush!

LUSH
Colonel?

ROOTE (grimly)
I said you’d better watch your step. (He slams the table.)
Everyone had better watch their step! *(He begins to move about the room.)* I don’t like the look of things. You can’t trust a soul. And there’s something going on here that I haven’t quite cottoned on to. There’s something funny afoot. I can feel it. Some people think I’m old, but oh no, not by a long chalk. I’ve got second sight. I can see through walls. *(He considers.)* I don’t mean that that’s second sight, seeing through walls. I mean I’ve got second sight and I can see through walls!

LUSH
And your knowledge of phytotomy, sir.

ROOTE
That’s more than a passing acquaintance. I can see right through them. I can hear a whisper in the basement. I didn’t waste my youth. I exercised my faculties – to the hilt! And I spent a lot of time pondering. Pondering. For instance, this stupid business of the world going round. It’s all a lot of balls: if the world was going round we’d be falling about all over the room. *(Bending over LUSH.)* But are we? Are we?

LUSH
Most extraordinarily acute, Colonel.

ROOTE
And today I feel something in my bones. I know it. Something’s going on which I can’t define. It’s ridiculous. But I don’t damn well know what it is. Do you think I’m going to be murdered?

LUSH
That’s it.

ROOTE sits on the desk.

ACT TWO

Pause

It’s true the day started off badly! A death and a birth. Absolutely bloody scandalous! Is it too much to ask – to keep the place clean? And you know what we’ve got on the premises now? A baby! It’s got to go! No question. I wonder if Gibbs has found a wet nurse.

LUSH finishes his drink, pours another, sits staring at it.

You know who you remind me of? You remind me of Whipple Wallace, back in the good old days.

The door opens. GIBBS enters and stands still.

He used to hang about with a chap called House-Peters. Boghouse-Peters we used to call him. I remember one day Whipple and Boghouse – he had a scar on his left cheek, Boghouse – caught in some boghouse brawl, I suppose. *(He laughs.)* Well, anyway, there they were, the Whipple and Boghouse, rolling down the banks of the Euphrates this night, when up came a policeman . . .

He stares vacantly.

up came this policeman . . . up came a policeman . . . this policeman . . . approached . . . Boghouse . . . and the Whipple . . . were questioned . . . this night . . . the Euphrates . . . a policeman . . .

GIBBS moves. ROOTE jumps.

Aaaahhhhh! *(To him.)* What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing, creeping up behind me like a snake? Eh? You frightened the life out of me.
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS

I've come to hear the Christmas speech, sir.

ROOTE

Well, why don't you make it? You're dying to make it, aren't you? Why don't you make it?

GIBBS

It's your privilege, sir.

ROOTE

Well, I'm sick to death of it! The patients, the staff, the understaff, the whole damn thing!

GIBBS

I'm sorry to hear that, sir.

ROOTE

It's bleeding me to death.

LUSH rises.

LUSH

Then why do you continue?

ROOTE looks at him.

ROOTE

Because I'm a delegate.

LUSH

A delegate of what?

ROOTE (calmly)

I tell you I'm a delegate.

ACT TWO

LUSH

A delegate of what?

They stare at each other.

ROOTE

Not only me. All of us. That bastard there. (To GIBBS.) Aren't you?

GIBBS

I am.

ROOTE

There you are.

LUSH (moving to him)

You haven't explained yourself.

ROOTE

Who hasn't?

LUSH

You can't explain yourself.

ROOTE

I can't?

LUSH

Explain yourself.

GIBBS

He's drunk.
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE (quietly)

Explain yourself, Lush.

LUSH

No, you! You explain yourself!

ROOTE

Be careful, sonny.

LUSH

You're a delegate, are you?

ROOTE (facing him squarely)

I am.

LUSH

On whose authority? With what power are you entrusted? By whom were you appointed? Of what are you a delegate?

ROOTE hits him in the stomach.

ROOTE

I'm a delegate! (He hits him in the stomach.)
I was entrusted! (He hits him in the stomach.)
I'm a delegate! (He hits him in the stomach.)
I was appointed!

LUSH backs, crouched, slowly across the stage, ROOTE following him.

Delegated! (He hits him in the stomach.)
Appointed! (He hits him in the stomach.)
Entrusted!

ACT TWO

He hits him in the stomach. Lush sinks to the floor. ROOTE stands over him and shouts:

I AM AUTHORISED!

Lush remains heaped on the floor. ROOTE goes back to the desk, pours a drink for himself and Gibbs.

ROOTE (to Gibbs, sourly)

What do you want?

GIBBS

I came to hear your Christmas speech, Colonel.

ROOTE

You're sure you didn't come here to murder me?

GIBBS

Murder you?

ROOTE

Yes, wasn't that why you came?

GIBBS

Certainly not. What an idea.

ROOTE

Yes, you did! I can see it in your eyes! Can you see it, Lush, in his eyes? This chap came here to do me in. You can see it in his eyes.

GIBBS

I did no such thing.
THE HOTHOUSE

ROOTE
You went cross-eyed, man don't argue with me. Guilty! It was written all over your face.

GIBBS
This is ridiculous.

ROOTE
Yes, well, you're not much good at it, are you? You're pretty poor at it. I twiggled it like that! (He clicks his fingers, laughs.) Didn't I? You won't get very far as a murderer, will he, Lush?

LUSH begins to stand, slowly.

Will you?

GIBBS
I resent this levity, sir.

Do you?

ROOTE
I resent it very strongly.

He resents it. (Going behind the desk with his drink.) Well, if he resents it he resents it. (Drinks.) You're just too sensitive, that's your trouble.

GIBBS
A foul insinuation.

ACT TWO

ROOTE
Oh, don't be so touchy!

LUSH walks carefully to GIBBS.

LUSH
He was only having a little joke, Gibbs old man.

ROOTE
Of course I was.

GIBBS
I found it less than funny.

LUSH
He didn't mean it. Honestly. Don't be downhearted. Now give me the knife and we won't say another word.

Sudden silence.

All still. GIBBS and LUSH stare at each other.

LUSH makes a tiny movement to his jacket.

Immediately GIBBS rises, with a knife in his hand.

LUSH faces him, a knife in his hand.

ROOTE seizes the carving knife from his desk, comes above them, covering them both, grinning.

Silence. All knives up.

Suddenly a long sigh is heard, amplified.

The knives go down.

A long keen is heard, amplified.

They look up.

A laugh is heard, amplified, dying away.

Silence.
What was that?

I don’t know. What was it?

I don’t know.

Pause

I heard something, didn’t you?

Yes, I did.

Yes, I heard something.

Pause

Well, what was it?

I don’t know.

Nor do I.

Pause

Well, is there any way of finding out?

Something’s happening, sir. I don’t like it. There’s something going on . . . which I can’t quite define.

How odd you should say that. I was only saying the same before, wasn’t I, Lush? I was saying the same before. Just before you came in.

Pause

We’ll investigate. Come on, Lush.

Go yourself.

Go with him.

I don’t want to go with him.

Go with him! What’s the matter? Are you frightened of the dark?

No . . . well, you see, the fact is, Colonel, I’ve . . . I’ve got a present for you.

A present?
A Christmas present.

ROOTE (suspiciously)
Oh yes? What sort of a present?

LUSH
Just a little something, sir, for Christmas.

He takes a cigar from his pocket and hands it to ROOTE.

This is it.

ROOTE
I say! That looks a fine one.

LUSH
Just a little token, sir.

ROOTE
Well, that's a very nice thought, Lush my lad. I'm deeply gratified.

LUSH
I'm glad you like it, sir.

ROOTE (beaming)
Yes, very nice. I shall smoke it before I go to bed. Now off you go, about your business.

GIBBS
Oh, when would you like to see Lamb, sir?

ROOTE
Lamb?
You remind me of someone.

In my new negligee? Who?

Where did you get that thing?

It's a gift. Who do I remind you of?

Where did you get it?

Cutts (sitting on the sofa)

From a friend. Do you like it? She just gave it to me. I had tea with her today. She's a nursing mother. She doesn't need it. She insisted I should have it.

Cutts (sitting on the sofa)

She's so sweet, and she's got such a bonny baby. I said to her, now we're friends, I can't go on calling you 6459, can I? What's your name? Do you know, she wouldn't tell me? Well, what does your lover call you? I said, what little nickname? She blushed to the roots of her hair. I must say I'm very curious. What could he have called her? She's sweet, but she said the baby misses his Daddy. Babies do miss Daddy, you know. Archie, can't the baby see his Daddy, just for a little while, just to say hallo?

Cutts

Are you... happy?

Happy? Of course I am.

Are you... are you happy with me?

Of course I'm happy. With you. When you're not silly.

You're really happy with me?
THE HOTHOUSE

CUTTS

Not when you want me to go out into the cold with my nightie on.

ROOTE (taking her hand)

Don’t go out.

He caresses her hand. She regards him gravely.

CUTTS

You know, sometimes I think I’m not feminine enough for you.

ROOTE

You are, you are feminine enough for me.

CUTTS

Perhaps if I was more feminine you wouldn’t want me to go out in the cold.

ROOTE

I don’t want you to go out. I want you to stay.

CUTTS

Or perhaps ... perhaps it’s because you think you’re not masculine enough.

ROOTE

I am!

CUTTS

Perhaps you’re not.

ROOTE

You can’t want me to be more masculine?

ACT TWO

CUTTS (urgently)

It’s not what I want. It’s what you really think. It’s what you really deeply think and feel. It’s what you want, it’s what you truly are, can’t you see that, Archie? I mean, if you’re suddenly worried that you’re not masculine enough – I mean, that I’m not feminine enough and that you’re too feminine – well, it’s not going to work, is it?

ROOTE

Now, wait a minute, I never said anything–

CUTTS

(slipping down to his knees, intensely)

If I didn’t love you so much it wouldn’t matter. Do you remember the first time we met? On the beach? In the night? All those people? And the bonfire? And the waves? And the spray? And the mist? And the moon? Everyone dancing, somersaulting, laughing? And you – standing silent, staring at a sandcastle in your sheer white trunks. The moon was behind you, in front of you, all over you, suffusing you, consuming you, you were transparent, translucent, a beacon. I was struck dumb, dumbstruck. Water rose up my legs. I could not move. I was rigid. Immovable. Our eyes met. Love at first sight. I held your gaze. And in your eyes, bold and unashamed, was desire. Brutal, demanding desire. Bestial, ruthless, remorseless. I stood there magnetised, hypnotised. Transfixed. Motionless and still. A spider caught in a web.

ROOTE stands, sits at his desk, stares at the microphone, takes his glasses out of his pocket and puts them on, stares at the mike, switches it on.

ROOTE (into the mike)

Patients, staff and understaff. A merry Christmas to you all,
and a happy and prosperous new year. And on behalf of all
the staff I'd like to wish all the understaff the very best of luck
for the year to come and a very happy Christmas. And to the
patients I should like to send a personal greeting, to each and
every one of them, wishing them the heartiest compliments
of the season, and very best wishes, on behalf of the staff, the
understaff and myself, not forgetting the Ministry, which I
know would be glad to be associated with these words, for a
healthy, happy and prosperous new year.

Pause

We have had our little difficulties, in the year that is about to
die, our little troubles, our little sorrows as well as our little
joys; but through working together, through each and every
one of us pulling his weight, no matter how lowly or appar-
tently trivial his job, by working, by living, by pulling
together as one great family, we stand undaunted.

Pause

We say goodbye to the old year very soon now, and hail the
new, but I say to you, as we stand before these embers, that
we carry with us from the old year . . . things . . . which will
stand us in good stead in the new, and we are not undaunted.

Pause

Some of you, sitting at your loudspeakers tonight, may some-
times find yourselves wondering whether the little daily
hardships, the little daily disappointments, the trials and
tribulations which seem continually to dog you are, in the
end, worth it. To you I would say one simple thing. Have
faith.

Pause

Yes, I think if I were asked to convey to you a special message
this Christmas it would be that: Have faith.

Pause

Remember that you are not alone, that we here, for example,
in this our home, are inextricably related, one to another, the
staff to the understaff, the understaff to the patients, the
patients to the staff. Remember this, as you sit by your fires,
with your families, who have come from near and from far, to
share this day with you, and may you be content.

He switches off the microphone and sits.
The lights go down on the office.
Darkness.
A low blue light grows on the stairway and the forestage.
Silence.
Squeaks are heard, of locks turning.
The rattle of chains.
A great clanging, reverberating, as of iron doors opening.
Silence.
The patients appear.
They wear dark gowns. They weave, dip, gather, disperse,
whisper, giggle.
One group merges into another, single patients dart from group to
group.
They weave, slither, whisper.
Half seen, half heard.
The lights fade.
Darkness.
The lights go up on the office in the Ministry.
LOBB rises as GIBBS enters.
THE HOTHOUSE

LOBB
Ah, come in, Gibbs. How are you?

They shake hands.

Have a good journey down?

GIBBS
Not at all bad, thank you, sir.

LOBB
Sit down.

They sit.

Cigarette?

GIBBS
No thank you, sir.

LOBB
You haven’t been waiting long, have you?

GIBBS
Oh, no sir, not at all.

LOBB
My secretary’s down with flu. Rather disorganised. What’s the weather like up there?

GIBBS
Quite sharp, sir.

ACT TWO

LOBB
Been fair to middling down here, for the time of year. Treacherous, though. My secretary, for instance, quite a stalwart sort of chap, strong as an ox, went down like a log over the weekend.

GIBBS
It’s certainly treacherous.

LOBB
Dreadful. How are you feeling yourself?

GIBBS
Oh, I’m quite fit, thank you, sir.

LOBB
Yes, you look fit. Remarkably fit, really. You wear a vest, don’t you?

GIBBS
Yes, sir.

LOBB
There you are. Very sensible. My secretary, for instance, strong as an ox, but he never wore a vest in his life. That’s what did it.

Pause

Well, I’m glad you got down to see me, Gibbs.

GIBBS
So am I, sir.
Rather unfortunate business. You’ve made out your report, I take it?

Lobb

Yes, sir.

Lobb

I haven’t seen it yet.

Gibbs

No, sir. I have it with me.

Lobb

Hand it in to the office on the way out, will you?

Gibbs

Yes, sir.

Lobb

Got any definite figures?

Gibbs

Yes, I ... have, sir.

Lobb

What are they?

Pause

Gibbs

The whole staff was slaughtered, sir.

Lobb

The whole staff?
LOBB
Oh, really? Yes, go on.

GIBBS
Lush, Hogg, Beck, Budd, Tuck, Dodds, Tate and Pett, sir, were hanged and strangled, variously.

LOBB
I see. Well, I can see there’s going to be a lot of questions asked about this, Gibbs.

GIBBS
Yes, sir.

LOBB
What’s the position now?

GIBBS
The patients are all back in their rooms. I’ve left the head porter, Tubb, in charge of things. He’s very capable. All the understaff, of course, are still active.

LOBB
They didn’t touch the understaff?

GIBBS
No. Just the staff.

LOBB
Mmmnn. Look here, Gibbs, there’s something I’d like to know. How did the patients get out?

GIBBS
I’m not sure that I can give an absolutely conclusive answer to that, sir, until the proper inquiry has been set in motion.

GIBBS
One possibility though is that one of their doors may not have been properly locked, that the patient got out, filched the keys from the office, and let the others out.

LOBB
Good Lord.

GIBBS
You see, the locktester who should have been on duty – we always had a locktester on duty –

LOBB
Of course, of course.

GIBBS
Was absent from duty.

LOBB
Absent? I say, well . . . that’s rather . . . significant, isn’t it?

GIBBS
Yes, sir.

LOBB
What happened to him?

GIBBS
He’s . . . not to be found, sir.

LOBB
Well, it would be a good thing if he were found, wouldn’t it?
THE HOTHOUSE

GIBBS

I shall do my best, sir.

LOBB

Good-o. *(Slight pause.)* Tell me. Why weren’t you killed? Just as a matter of interest.

GIBBS

I was engaged on some research, sir, alone. I was probably the only member of the staff awake, so was able to take measures to protect myself.

LOBB

I see. Well, it’s all most unfortunate, but we can’t really do anything until the report has gone in and the inquiry set up. Meanwhile you’d better try to get hold of that locktaster of yours. I think we shall probably want to have a word with him. What’s his name?

GIBBS

Lamb, sir.

LOBB *(making a note of the name)*

Mmmnn. Well, Gibbs, I would like to say on behalf of the Ministry how very much we commend the guts you’ve shown.

GIBBS

Thank you, sir. My work means a great deal to me.

LOBB

That’s the spirit. *(Slight pause.)* You can carry on now, I suppose? We’ll have some reinforcements down in a few days. Can’t be sooner, I’m afraid. We’ve got to get hold of some properly qualified people. Not as easy as all that.

ACT TWO

GIBBS

I can carry on, sir.

LOBB

You’ll be in charge, of course.

GIBBS

Thank you, sir.

LOBB *(rising)*

Don’t thank me. It’s we have to thank you. They walk to the door.

One last question. Why do you think they did it? I mean ... why did they feel so strongly?

GIBBS

Well, Mr. Lobb, it’s a little delicate in my position . . .

LOBB

Go on, my boy, go on. It’s the facts that count.

GIBBS

One doesn’t like to speak ill of the dead.

LOBB

Naturally, naturally.

GIBBS

But there’s no doubt that Mr Roote was unpopular.

LOBB

With good cause?
GIBBS

I'm afraid so, sir. Two things especially had made him rather unpopular. He had seduced patient 6459 and been the cause of her pregnancy, and he had murdered patient 6457. That had not gone down too well with the rest of the patients.

Blackout on office.

Lights rise on soundproof room.

LAMB in chair, electrodes and earphones attached. He sits quite still, staring, as in a catatonic trance.

Curtain.