

THE DOOR WAS OPEN

A one-act play

by

Virginia Hobart

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SET

The dining room of a once-fine Victorian house now rarely used. Dark, damp, comfortless: worn carpet, single electric bar in grate. Folding screen in one corner covered with old photo and newspaper cuttings. Dining room table and eight chairs overhung by spindly plant. Side-board with cutlery drawers, modern hostess trolley with plates and water jug. Radio on mantelpiece.

CHARACTERS

CHARLOTTE WITHERS: At 82, a sharp-tongued, selfish old woman who has outlived a despised husband and most of her friends. Living alone with her arthritis and her memories, there is little in her manner to suggest the gaiety and charm - perhaps even vulnerability - of the society hostess she used to be, and only dyed hair and painted nails to recall a glamour and beauty that was once the talk of the town.

BILLY MAY: An 11 year-old Boy Scout, friendly, inquisitive, sturdy and unsophisticated.

RADIO WEATHER FORECASTER: Voice only.

SYNOPSIS

Charlotte is setting the table without enthusiasm 3 days in advance of a dinner party for her tiresome friends: recalling, to compare and contrast, former triumphs of entertainment and romance. Her shrewish reminiscence is interrupted by the arrival of a bob-a-job boy scout who is grudgingly retained to dispose of a spider. Conversation between these two reveals much about both of their lives, and rather unbalances Charlotte when it is time for him to leave.

THE DOOR WAS OPEN

CHARLOTTE, IN A FADED TEA-GOWN AND MARVELOUSLY ERECT, IS COUNTING CUTLERY FROM THE SIDE-BOARD DRAWER, GIVING HALF HER ATTENTION TO THE WEATHER FORECAST ON THE RADIO

RADIO:

. . . Still no blue skies for you in the outlook I'm afraid. We have a weather front coming in from the north-west bringing cloudy conditions and some shower activity in places with perhaps a touch of snow on high ground. With the humidity factor well up and winds already freshening, there's a strong probability of precipitation starting in the west and reaching all districts by Wednesday night. Scotland, northern Ireland and parts of northern England, much the same outlook for the next few days with the added risk of fog and freezing fog in low lying areas, and temperatures lower than normal for the time of year.

COMMENTARY FADES AFTER 'Wednesday night' AS CHARLOTTE REACTS TO IT

CHARLOTTE:

'Probability of precipitation', my foot! 'Humidity factor'!, 'Shower activity'! What's wrong with rain nowadays for goodness sake?

PUTTING DOWN SPOONS AND MAKING WAY CAREFULLY TO MANTELPIECE

English, fool! Can't you speak plain English any more?

TAKING A COUPLE OF JABS AT THE OFF SWITCH

Why don't you just say it's going to rain? Just going to rain.

RETURNING TO THE SIDEBOARD

Jargon, everything's jargon these days. What do they think, it's more scientific? More reliable - ha! More bearable perhaps, like 'putting the dog to sleep'. 'Passing away' and 'putting the dog to sleep'. Pathetic isn't it. Well spades are spades in this house, young man.

STARTS GATHERING UP THE SPOONS

Spades are spades and spoons are . . . two, three, four - spoons are spoons, aren't they Mrs. Thing? Which you'd have in your pocket quick as a flash if I wasn't . . . six, seven - I'm not blind you know. Not stupid either. I've had more home-helps than you've had hot dinners. They've all got pockets and most of them have also got bags. Part of the uniform, flat shoes and shopping bags and - that's another one isn't it? 'Home-helps'? No such thing as charwomen any more. Seven, eight. No rain and no charwomen, just a string of useless creatures who don't scrub and don't do windows, and . . .

STOPPED IN HER TRACKS

. . . 'probability of precip - ' Wednesday night? He did say Wednesday night didn't he? Phyllis won't be coming then. (SARCASTIC) What a pity. (NOW SWEET) 'No dear, I shouldn't risk it if I were you, not after last time with your chest. Not if it's going to rain. Most unwise. You stay home with a nice book dear.' And I won't have to use your nasty place mats. With any luck they'll find their way into Mrs. Thing's bag one of these days.

TURNS TO TABLE AND STARTS GATHERING UP PLACE MATS

Dickens, typical! Plastic scenes from Dickens she says absolutely me! 'From Selfridges, I couldn't resist Lottie, don't you think they're absolutely you?' Oh yes, in my crinoline and muff, absolutely, and you know perfectly well I prefer linen - pea brain! Of all the old crowd to come back after 50 years it would have to be Phyllis. Just thank goodness she doesn't drive.

RETURNS TO SIDE-BOARD WITH MATS, CHECKING DUST
WITH FINGER ON WAY TO CUTLERY DRAWER

Where was I now? Soup spoons. Fish knives and forks, only three short now without Phyllis. Why nothing gets put away properly round here -

RUMMAGING AMONG BILLS AND OLD CARDS, UNEARTHES
ALMOST EMPTY PRESENTATION CUTLERY CASE

Woman, can you never put things back where they belong? Perpetual game of hide and seek. Perpetual. If you think I've got nothing better to do than - . That's that then, isn't it. No fish knives, no fish. Just as well I dare say. Friday to Wednesday for salmon. (MALICIOUS SMILE) No fish darlings tonight. It's off the menu, I'm afraid it is altogether off.

INSTEAD OF RETURNING CASE, TAKES IT TO NEAREST CHAIR
READING INSCRIPTION ON LID

Presented to Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Withers on the occasion of . . . (SITTING) Poor daddy, didn't even like fish did he? Fishing either, come to that. All those years with the Aylesbury and District Anglers: respite from mother I suppose.

EXAMINES A SURVIVING KNIFE

Used to be twelve, didn't there? Twelve knives, twelve forks, always used to be. Bone handle, real bone, hardly ever see it nowadays. All plastic nowadays. Plastic and stainless steel. Worn out though, look.

ROTATES LOOSE HANDLE

1919, almost as old as me. Seen better days my friend. Seen better days in this very room, haven't we?

LIGHTS BEGIN TO DIM

The old days, the old crowd. Lala, Gibby, Bunny, Baz with that ridiculous monocle. Peter - Peter was it, always strumming on the banjo. Ukulele? Banjo?

BANJO MUSIC FADES IN WITH THE CHARLESTON

Banjo. Lottie's Lot. Oh yes, Lottie's twenty first birthday. Dancing, champagne, feathers. Feathers in my hair, didn't I? Cigarette holder, long as my arm, all the rage weren't they.

HOLDING OUT THE KNIFE IN DEMONSTRATION, THEN STANDING UP TO STRIKE A VAMPISH POSE

And that dress from Fabrice, all fringes, perfect for dancing. On the table - just hold that for me darling.

PUTTING KNIFE DOWN, SHE TRIES A STEP OR TWO BUT HAS TO STEADY HERSELF ON THE BACK OF A CHAIR.

Daddy's precious table. I didn't even take off my shoes. Such fun. Such fun trying to kick the chandelier. Then swinging on it like a trapeze. Like the circus. Tossing my feathers - garters too, didn't I? Everyone clapping, cheering, everyone, everyone -

WRAPT PAUSE WHILE MUSIC FADES OUT AND LIGHTS COME UP

Everyone except dear Phyllis who knew it wasn't safe. Who knew it was going to come down. Then who practically fainted when it did.

SITTING DOWN

What a mess. What a mess. Glass everywhere, people crawling all over the place picking it up. Out of the punch, out of the fireplace - out of each other's hair. Trying to put it back together, ha. Daddy absolutely furious, and Phyllis fussing about my ankle which I shouldn't walk on, never mind dance, for at least six months: 'especially not dancing Lottie, honestly I really don't think it's safe.' Hasn't changed much, has she? Now it's leaving the front door unlocked for five minutes - oh yes, and crossing the

street! (MIMICKING HERSELF MIMICKING PHYLLIS) Especially at night, Phyllis. In the rain, Phyllis. You heard the forecast, and you can't keep expecting Arthur to come and pick you up.

STANDING, SHE RETURNS CUTLERY CASE TO SIDEBOARD, AND SEARCHES DRAWERS FOR FORKS.

She can of course and he will, the old fool. Pair of old fools. If anything's not safe these days it's Arthur driving. Should've given up years ago. Well he can just - what has that woman done with the forks? - he can just have her at dinner, that'll teach him. Put up with her beastly Tomkins all evening. He's supposed to be a cat lover isn't he? They should be in here, if I've told her once I've told her a . . . No, that's our only man gone to waste. Well, Sybil then, she's got a cat. If it isn't dead yet. Nasty fat creature moulting and vomiting all over the place. All right, Sybil, regurgitating, I know. (MIMICKING NOT QUITE WELL-BRED VOICE) 'Regurgitating, Charlotte. Hair balls dear, in the tummy, they have to regurgitate'. Regurgitate. Re-gur-gi-tate. And that's another one, what's wrong with vomit? What's wrong with sick, being - Oh my god, a spider! There's a spider in the forks!

SNATCHING HER HAND AWAY, SLAMMING DRAWER SHUT AND LEANING AGAINST IT, STILL HOLDING A FORK

Oh George. Oh help. Oh god, George.

GRABS A CLOTH AND STARTS POLISHING FORK

Look at this will you. Just look at this. Useless woman. Worse than all the rest put together. How many times have I got to tell you it's no good just scrimping over with a cloth, look. You've got to take the brush and the polish and do it properly. This isn't Woolworths you know, not stainless steel. This is the family silver and it must be treated with respect. Standards, no standards any more. God knows where they find these women, and then they have the cheek to - what was that the other day: 'Mrs. Rivers' - Rivers! Can't even get the name right, can she - 'I'm only here to do the things you can't manage for yourself. If you're not satisfied perhaps you had better ring in to the agency again'. 'Again' all right, and get another one with no more idea of housework than - huh, huh!

A COUPLE OF TOKEN FLUTTERS WITH CLOTH

CHARLOTTE;

Fat lot of use. If you want something done properly . . . Isn't that what they say? I'll do it myself then.

PUTS FORK DOWN AND HEADS FOR KITCHEN

At least I'll know where to find the stuff. Never gets used, at least it will be where it belongs and I'll do it myself, said . . . Who was it always saying that?

PAUSING BY THE TROLLEY

I'll have to do it myself, said . . . the little red hen, that's right, Nanny making you feel guilty just 'having to do it herself', whatever it was - whatever she thinks she was paid for if it wasn't to do . . . do . . .

SHAKING OFF UNCOMFORTABLE MEMORIES, SHE COLLECTS AND STARTS DEALING PLATES ROUND TABLE.

Yes, do . . . Do sit down everybody. Sybil down here by the fire. Arthur, our token man, dear, lets make the most of you at the end. Daphne. Phyllis, is you're coming. If Arthur hasn't got the sense to leave his car in the garage. They won't give up will they? Their last shred of masculinity. Only shred, in Arthur's case, all cats and cardigans and cups of cocoa. Token is about right isn't it? Where have all the real men gone? Dead mostly. That's right, gone for soldiers. Gibby. Peter. Teddy - dear Teddy. Gone but not forgotten.

STANDS CLASPING LAST PLATE TO BOSOM, REMEMBERING AS LIGHTS DIM WITH VERA LYNNE'S RECORD BEGINNING 'WE'LL MEET AGAIN'

Silly man. George could have got you off, you know - or the doctor, with your poor knee. You could have just limped a bit, couldn't you? People with flat feet staying home in their hoards, and you had to go back one last time. One 'more' time, you said, didn't you, and then - and then . . .

VOLUME UP AND CHARLOTTE SWAYING A LITTLE

Didn't stop you dancing, though, that knee. Dancing in the dark, just you and me. In the firelight. You and me and Vera Lynne on the gramophone. You were so handsome in your uniform. So handsome and so worried - remember: 'I suppose there isn't any danger of your husband coming', and I said - I did, didn't I, I said 'George does his war work at the office, and I do mine at home'. Awful, I know, but you were so . . . dashing. So dashing, and that's all we had.

STILL CLASPING THE PLATE, CHARLOTTE HUMS ALMOST TO THE END OF THE RECORD.

Darling Teddy. Dancing for ever in the dark. Just you and me. Just you and me.

SONG ENDS, RECORD SCRATCHILY TURNS UNHEEDED TILL A PATCH OF LIGHT APPEARS AT HALL DOOR

You and me and William, barging in without so much as a knock, as usual, wanting his beastly pocket money. Without so much as 'excuse me' - I told him: 'excuse me for interrupting', at least have the manners next time, barging in on people like that.

LIGHTS FULLY UP AND CHARLOTTE BUSYING HERSELF WITH
PLATES DOES NOT NOTICE BILLY AT THE DOOR

Always something, always wanting: pocket money, biscuits, sweets,
anyone would think he was starving, that boy, anyone - anyone would
think -

BILLY:
Excuse me um, excuse me.

CHARLOTTE CONTINUES WITH HER PLATES

BILLY:
Excuse me please, and have you got any odd jobs you want doing I
could do?

CHARLOTTE: