

THE LAST ORCHID

AN ORIGINAL STAGE PLAY BY

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Version 2

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2 Woodfall Avenue
Barnet (Herts)
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CHARACTERS

KIT, Christopher Birdwood Thomson, later Lord Thomson of Cardington

MARTHE, Princess Marthe Bibesco

BORCHARDT, Colonel Borchardt, Austrian Army (fictional character)

RAMSAY, Ramsay MacDonald, first Labour Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

The story told in this play takes place over the years from 1915 to 1930 and is based on actual events but the play itself and the character of Colonel Borchardt are works of fiction.

Act One

1915

A bare stage with three chairs placed centre stage left, upstage centre and centre stage right. SFX of gunfire and WWI battles are blended with patriotic military music which eventually drowns out the gunfire. During this KIT enters, wearing the dress uniform of a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Engineers, and sits on the left-hand chair and begins to read The Times. As the music fades, he lowers his newspaper and stands.

KIT: “Your country needs you but not here; out there.” ... A Lieutenant Colonel does not interrogate a Field Marshall who is also the Secretary of State for War ... I waited for clarification. *(Pause)* What Kitchener wanted, pure and simple, was someone to go out to Bucharest and, in very short order, persuade the Romanian government to come off the fence. *(Pause)* His none-too-subtle plan was to convince Romania to join the fight on our side to relieve pressure on the Western Front. I dared to ask him, which way Bulgaria would jump, or, for that matter the Turks? He assured me that he and Winston Churchill had foolproof plans for sorting out the Turks. Well; I ask you? Kitchener rather frostily asked *me* if I had had any leave and if I were married. I had to confess I was a forty-year-old bachelor. Then that meant I didn’t need any leave, he said, and could set off next morning.

KIT sits down and disappears behind The Times. A Strauss waltz strikes up and MARTHE and BORCHARDT, dance on from downstage right. She is a beautiful thirty-year-old, wearing a ball gown, a necklace of emeralds and other jewellery including a tiara. He is around the same age as Kit and in the uniform of an Austrian Colonel. They waltz towards the centre chair and when the music stops BORCHARDT gallantly bows as she sits down, clicks his heels and marches off to the right hand chair. The music fades as KIT begins to speak again.

KIT: I reported to the Embassy in Bucharest and we were off straightaway to the Palace. Our audience was scheduled immediately after the Austrian Ambassador and my own opposite number, his Military Attaché, Colonel Borchardt: a hard man to like.

BORCHARDT and KIT stand and take two paces forward.

BORCHARDT: His Excellency has acquainted me with the reputation of my English opposite number. While I scarcely regard engineers as soldiers in the strictest sense, unlike cavalry, or even the infantry, he does come from a military family. Our first encounter was very formal and cool, as befits the representatives of combatants meeting in a neutral country. I disliked him on sight.

BORCHARDT and KIT make a smart left turn to face offstage right. BORCHARDT bows and steps back two paces before bowing again and making an about turn. They march towards each other, executing a

smart salute as they pass. BORCHARDT marches offstage while KIT advances to stage right where he halts, bows, takes two paces forward and bows again, and then marches offstage. An unseen pianist begins to play the final pages of Wagner's Liebestod. MARTHE's speech and the music should end together, the final note of music coming after the final spoken word of her speech. MARTHE stands and slowly progresses downstage left.

MARTHE: I liked both of them but when this tall, handsome Englishman arrived in Bucharest one became more conscious of Colonel Borchardt's faults. He could be funny, but always in a rather (*she searches for the right word*) Austrian way. He had never read a novel and only liked *Johann* Strauss: couldn't stand Richard. But, oh, he could dance! My husband was never there to dance with. He has scarcely been at home since I was married off to him at the age of sixteen and he threw himself upon me like a child molester.

She returns to the stage right chair, turning it to face downstage left. The two men enter from stage left. They are now wearing swords. BORCHARDT comes in first and moves the centre chair over to the left and downstage roughly opposite Marthe's. KIT enters and moves the left chair downstage of BORCHARDT's as though it were a few seats along a row from him. They nod formally to each other and then their heads turn to look at Marthe.

It was at one of the Queen's little soirées that we first saw each other. Of course, one is used to men staring. Indeed, I believe I shall know I am growing old when they stop doing so. I had to meet this man.

The Liebestod ends. There is a brief pause and then the unseen pianist strikes up Chopin's Valse Brillante and, after a few bars, all three stand. The two men, standing tall, advance towards Marthe and she walks towards them. At the crucial moment, MARTHE walks past BORCHARDT and extends her gloved hand to KIT who takes it and bows his head to bestow on it a brief kiss. KIT and MARTHE walk together downstage left while an angry BORCHARDT walks on and exits. KIT and MARTHE stop and turn half right and half left away from each other. The music fades.

KIT: The Ambassador had told me who she was; charming and talented, effectively a grass widow, married to an utter cad whose hobbies were fast cars and even faster women. His Excellency more or less implied that, since *he* was too old, it was as much a part of my patriotic duty to win Princess Bibesco's affection for God, King and Country as it was to persuade Romania to enter the war. When I saw her for the first time, I needed no further reminder where my duty lay. (*He smiles and sighs*) ... And when she spoke!

They turn inwards. She takes his arm and they stroll together.

MARTHE: I fear, Colonel, you have come here to do us harm.

KIT: Highness! How could anyone wish harm to befall *you*?

MARTHE: According to the King, you want Romania to join the war; a war that has little or nothing to do with us. We Romanians are a peace-loving nation.

KIT (*smiling*): Well now: my discussions with your government were supposed to be confidential; at least on our side.

MARTHE (*smiling back*): Oh, I promise you the King only told the Queen in the *strictest* confidence, or so she assured me.

KIT: My Ambassador told *me*, in the *strictest* confidence I assure you, that you are a writer. Travel books that really transport one to the scenes described, and now historical novels. I must say I am looking forward to reading some of them.

MARTHE: I'm afraid I write in French.

KIT: As indeed does Marcel Proust. But I confess I've been quite taken by *Du côté de chez Swann*. I hope he will write more.

MARTHE: You speak French! And your accent is not at all like that of your Ambassador. (*Putting on the accent of an Englishman speaking French*). "Lay sow-vaage co-monce ah Cay-lay" ... Who else have you read?

KIT: Flaubert, Balzac, Zola, and I've tackled Renan, *La Vie de Jésus*.

MARTHE: I'm impressed; but I shall withhold final judgement until I can test your powers of recall, to see how deeply you have read and understood.

KIT: I am beginning to feel my sojourn in your country is not going to be as much of an exile as I'd feared. I hope we shall have the opportunity for many further such ... literary discussions.

MARTHE: I feel I shall want a whole series of them! And in the meantime, since I have to leave very soon and my husband's very English Rolls-Royce is waiting at the door for me, may I have you driven home.

KIT: But isn't my apartment on the Calle Victoria in quite the opposite direction from your town house?

MARTHE: On the contrary, as one says in English, 'right up my street'. Shall we meet in the foyer in five minutes?

He bows to her and she bobs a slight curtsey and sails regally off stage. After a few deep breaths and a blissful smile, Kit draws his sword, waves it a couple of times round his head and, holding it like a cavalryman, gallops offstage in the opposite direction.

KIT: Cha-a-a-arge!

An angry Borchardt marches shouting right across the stage

BORCHARDT: Ein, zwei, drei, Schiesse! ... Schiesse! ... Schiesse! ... Schiesse! (*Exits.*)

The strains of a Romanian folk tune swell while the chairs are cleared and the centre stage is set with a travel rug, cushions and a 'director-style' canvas chair. After a brief pause, KIT, MARTHE and BORCHARDT stroll on together. She is now in a simple day dress with a hat and carrying a parasol. The men are in civilian clothes. BORCHARDT is carrying the picnic hamper. KIT has a travel rug over his arm and is carrying another chair. As they reach the rug BORCHARDT manages to put the picnic basket down on KIT's foot. KIT places his chair next to its companion. MARTHE sits on the original chair as the two men square up to each other. As they speak, they move downstage, away from MARTHE, still facing each other.

BORCHARDT: My regrets, Herr Colonel. No permanent damage I trust. It would be unfortunate if anything injurious happened to you here, on neutral ground.

KIT: No offence taken. (*They eye each other and there is a momentary pause, each waiting for the other to speak, but KIT continues.*) Lovely weather for the time of year, wouldn't you say?

BORCHARDT: You think so? No doubt you are completely unused to sunshine in your foggy country, Herr Englander. I hope you will enjoy our European weather while you can, especially since you are likely to be leaving here soon: *very* soon in my opinion.

KIT: I assure you that we too have glorious summers. England is famous for them. That's when we play our national sport: cricket.

BORCHARDT: Cricket? What kind of national sport can possibly be named after a species of grasshopper? Are you sure you do not mean 'leap-frog'? My cousin tells me English prisoners-of-war play that all the time, rather than take part in any of the education programmes they are offered, including lessons in the German language.

KIT: Perhaps, my dear fellow, they have come to the very sensible conclusion that there's hardly any point in learning German since, given the way things are going, they are unlikely to be there long enough to derive any real benefit.

BORCHARDT: I am not your *dear fellow*! You think you are so very clever, Herr Shakespeare.

KIT: Just concentrating on my strong points ... *Herr Clausewitz*.

BORCHARDT: Pah! I suggest to you that a careful study of General *von Clausewitz* will reveal just how weak the Allied position really is. *Schlecht; und es wird immer schlimmer!*

KIT: To be sure, I *did* study his works in Staff College and learned a great deal; for example, about 'the inherently unstable interaction of the forces of violent emotion, chance, and rational calculation'. You will recall that passage I'm sure. Now, if you were ever to open your Shakespeare, you would realise just how little your generals seem to have learned about the spirit of the English, and how we can rise to any and every challenge.

BORCHARDT: Challenge? What would you Englishers know about challenge? That is where *we* are so strong. We *thrive* on a daily diet of challenge.

KIT: Is that so? Very well then: how would you like a challenge right now?

BORCHARDT: What challenge?

KIT (*pointing downstage right but up, as if towards distant high ground*): You see that rock, halfway up the hillside there? I will race you to the rock and back again, and I'll even give you a thirty second start. Just looking at you, Colonel, I can't believe you're in a fit condition to run that distance without collapsing.

BORCHARDT angrily strips off his jacket and throws it on the ground.

BORCHARDT: *Donner Wetter!* I will show you, Englander.

KIT (*carefully removing and folding his own jacket*): Aha! Very well then, Colonel. Are you ready? On my count of three; one ... two ... three!

Without a backward glance, BORCHARDT charges off downstage right (or even through the stalls?) Meanwhile, KIT strolls up towards MARTHE, hangs his jacket over the back of the spare chair and sits down beside her. They smile at each other.

KIT: The Austrian Military Attaché sends his apologies, Ma'am, but he has had to answer a sudden and very urgent call of nature. (*MARTHE laughs out loud and pats KIT's arm.*) So shall we take this unexpected opportunity to discuss the many merits of Marcel Proust?

MARTHE: I must tell you I have already written to him to say he has an admirer among the well-read English.

KIT: I envy your acquaintance. Mind you, my admiration for his prose is tinged with a certain feeling that his sentences and paragraphs are so very long that, by the time I reach the end of one, I've often forgotten where he started from but I'm too daunted to go back and start again.

MARTHE: I cannot deny a certain truth in what you say.

From far offstage there comes an angry cry, (perhaps from the back of the Gods with the aid of a voice-double).

BORCHARDT (*offstage*): Scheisse!

Shielding his eyes with his hand, KIT looks towards the sound.

KIT: I wonder if that was Nature suddenly calling again.

Both laughing, they rise and stroll off stage left. The rugs, cushions, jackets and chairs are cleared. The Romanian folk music rises and fades. There is a pause.

Once again wearing his jacket plus a straw boater, KIT strolls on stage and halts, looking across with amused surprise; at which point BORCHARDT, wearing his jacket and a Tyrolean hat and holding a glove, strides towards him and stops very close. He glares while KIT looks bemused. Then, BORCHARDT strikes KIT with his glove. KIT does not flinch but puts his hand to his cheek and gently rubs it.

BORCHARDT: You deliberately chose to humiliate me I demand satisfaction!

KIT: This is the twentieth century! Are you actually proposing a duel?

BORCHARDT: If you are afraid, I will accept your public apology.

KIT (*after a pause*): I am certainly not afraid.

BORCHARDT: Then you will give me satisfaction?

There is a significant pause before KIT replies.

KIT: Yes, Colonel ... but, according to the rules, it will then be *my* choice of weapons.

BORCHARDT makes a curt bow and even manages to click his heels.

BORCHARDT: *Natürlich!*

BORCHARDT draws himself up then turns about and marches off. KIT rubs his cheek again.

KIT: Well now!

KIT shrugs and then strolls across and off stage. Romanian dances by Bartok or Enesco fade up during the change of scene. The stage is reset with a chaise longue upstage centre and a simple writing desk with an upright chair further downstage right. MARTHE, carrying a notebook, strolls in from stage right and sits in the upright chair. She places the notebook open on the writing desk and picks up a pen. She writes as she talks. The music fades under MARTHE's speech.

MARTHE: It has to be said, and this diary bears witness to it, that my life has not been without incident ... Now; here I am, in the eye of more than one storm. My own husband is up to something tonight – well, he is always up to something – only, this time, he has put on his uniform and had himself driven off, saying his regiment has been mobilised: so it might not be a woman this time. *(She stands up and walks about.)* Where is everybody this evening? I need company. I've not heard anything for two whole days from my handsome Englishman. My mother heard a rumour about a duel but that must be nonsense: this is 1915. *(She sits again at her desk.)* Where are you, Kit? You're a new experience for me. You behave so correctly and yet the way you *look* at me is a whole romantic novel in itself. You seem to want me, yet you hesitate; and that makes me want *you!* I do find your fair hair and blue eyes so wonderfully attractive. I even found myself asking if, one day ... maybe some day ... *(The music of Tatiana's Letter Song from Eugene Onegin swells as she writes.)*

After a few moments, KIT enters upstage wearing khaki. His left eye is bruised, there is the suggestion of a cut lip and he is so weary he almost staggers. MARTHE realises he is there and starts up while he sways in front of the chaise longue taking off his cap. The music fades.

KIT: Marthe!

MARTHE *(rushing towards him)*: Kit!

She wraps herself round him and he gasps with pain. Starting back, she gazes into his eyes. They hold hands.

MARTHE: It's true then? You've been fighting a duel: was it over *me*? How exciting! Sir Lancelot, have you won me in mortal combat?

KIT: Mortal combat? Let's just say a boxing match, and the first English blood shed for Romania. But if I *am* Sir Lancelot then you must be my Guinevere ... *(He grins)* Have I really won you? That would be such a trophy!

MARTHE: But why a boxing match? Nobody gets killed in a boxing match.

KIT: Don't be so bloodthirsty! It was a boxing match because Borchardt issued the challenge so I was entitled to choose the weapons. You should have seen his expression when my second produced the boxing gloves; but he couldn't argue without losing too much face.

MARTHE: And you haven't killed *him*?

KIT: He was dead to the world for a few moments perhaps, but he'll live.

MARTHE: Thank God for that. But you're hurt, my dear. Is it very bad?

KIT: We're both pretty bruised and I might even have cracked a rib but honour is satisfied.

MARTHE: My romantic warrior; this calls for the medicinal application of a tender kiss to each of your wounds.

She embraces him tenderly and they kiss but then she hugs him more tightly and he gasps with pain. She helps him tenderly to sit down on the chaise longue and kneels beside him, taking off her shoes. She puts her head against his chest and he folds her gingerly in his arms.

MARTHE: I'm so sorry. I promise to treat you more gently.

KIT: Dearest Marthe: but now I have a new problem. (*She looks puzzled.*) It seems that one teaspoonful of kiss has not been enough to cure all my aches and pains. I shall need the whole bottle.

MARTHE: I shall attend to that personally. No one else shall be allowed to lay a hand, or a lip, on you. We'll start tonight.

KIT: At my age I find it hard to admit it, but I think I've never really been in love before. Now I feel so completely devoted to you, and all my future plans are centred round you. After the war ...

MARTHE: What war? There is no war. There's only this little island of peace. We are *alone* here; now; and the world cannot touch us. (*She gazes up into his eyes and takes his face in her hands.*) Come; let me take you to bed. I shall undress you with such tenderness ... and enthusiasm!

He gently detaches her hands and holds them to his heart. There is a pause. He sighs.

KIT: Wouldn't you just believe it but I must go off straight away and fight Borchardt again.

She leaps to her feet.

MARTHE: A second duel? That's absolutely unheard of. What sort of a stupid game is it you men are playing? I forbid it!

KIT: It's not a game this time, my darling; it's war; but it won't start officially until tomorrow morning at three o'clock. Romania is joining the Allies against the Central Powers. Our Ambassador thinks that my own victory over Borchardt might just have tipped the scales – rather unorthodox diplomacy, but still, if it works ...

MARTHE: So that explains my husband's departure.

KIT: Regulars and reserves have all been called up.

MARTHE: But this is suicide for Romania. So many people will be killed. It's shameful.

KIT: I can only agree.

MARTHE: You ought to be ashamed of *yourself*. By what right do you interfere in a little country, so far away from England?

KIT: In a war situation, our leaders don't often think about the rights of others, or any long-term consequences.

MARTHE: Exactly! And when it's all over, even supposing the Allies win, what will *we* be left with? Will there even be a Romania?

KIT: Romania had to be for us or against us. No shades of grey, no compromises, no half-measures.

MARTHE: And, in the end, no Romania! And ... what is to become of *us*? We two!

She kneels again and very gently embraces him but, even so, he winces.

KIT: Us? Are we 'us'? That would make me very happy. As for *us* then, I have a personal dream; offering you a small part of England and the whole of my heart; but that's for the future. Right now, I'm concerned for your safety. Come to England, I beg you.

MARTHE: Your famous green and pleasant land! But would you be there? They'll make you a general for this, and then you'll be off again.

KIT: If there was any justice, they ought to court-martial me. When they see how badly this turns out, they'll be looking for a scapegoat.

He struggles painfully to his feet with her help. She helps him up and is holding her shoes in her hand.

MARTHE: They would not dare! I shall write to Winston Churchill.

KIT: You might even be a glamorous spy so they could shoot me for that as well!

MARTHE: Well, before they do, let me see what secrets I can worm out of you during the next few hours.

KIT: Marthe, you must get away from here.

MARTHE: Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow! *(Beat)* Tomorrow will come all too soon; tonight is for us. Come with me.

KIT: Marthe, I beg you, give the orders for your staff to pack.

MARTHE *(shaking her head)*: If there is really going to be a war, then to leave now would be what you soldiers call desertion.

KIT: Admirable sentiments but what would there be for you to do? It's not safe to remain here. Let me give you another country.

MARTHE: No, I shall work here in the military hospital. But we can talk about all of that in the morning. Tonight there is no one here but us two. Come.

KIT shakes his head sadly.

KIT: My orders are to go immediately and destroy oil wells at Ploiesti. My transport is waiting, but I couldn't go off without seeing you; and maybe even boasting about my personal victory over one Austrian.

MARTHE: This is ridiculous. I insist, no, I demand you stay here with me, close beside me, all night. I shall be so gentle with you.

They are standing face to face with each other and he folds her very gently into his arms.

KIT: You are a sweet siren. Your voice could tempt any man onto the rocks. But you knew this from that very moment at the Queen's concert, didn't you? You knew you'd made a conquest. I was ... I still am ... and if it pleases God that I survive this war, I shall always be your devoted subject. But ... *(She looks up at this)* ... if we were ... if we are one day to become ... lovers ... there are two pre-conditions.

MARTHE *(pushing him away – he cries out in pain)*: I talk of love and you talk about pre-conditions!

KIT (*tenderly rubbing his chest*): First of all, I need to recover from these bruises. I'm in no condition to become anyone's lover, least of all yours.

She smiles and comes back towards him with her arms open. She is still holding her shoes in her downstage hand.

MARTHE: My darling; of course!

KIT: And, secondly, you must divorce your husband and *marry* me.

With her upstage hand she slaps his face.

MARTHE: I can't believe what I'm hearing. I have an unfaithful husband who treats me like the dirt under his shoe. I have a procession of men panting eagerly at my bedroom door. And now ... now, when I manage to fall in love with an *honourable* Englishman, he refuses as a *gift* what crowned heads of Europe have offered to buy. It's simply too humiliating!

KIT: One simply cannot be a cad!

MARTHE: Get out!

KIT: My darling.

He advances towards her but she retreats two paces for his one.

MARTHE: Get out; get out of my sight!

He takes another step, holding open his arms. She retreats again and throws one of her shoes at him. If possible he catches it; otherwise, he painfully picks it up as she rushes towards the chaise longue and throws herself on it.

MARTHE: Get out of here! You don't love me at all: not what *I* call love. You English have no passion. You're all *sang froid* and stiff upper lip. (*Mockingly*) "Play up and play the game." Go then! I never want to see you again. (*She turns round to sit on the chaise longue facing him.*) I hope you get killed!

The music is the final rapidly descending scale ending the first movement of Mahler's 2nd Symphony. KIT puts MARTHE's shoe in his jacket pocket, bows towards her and walk stiffly off stage. Moments later, there is the sound of a vehicle driving off. MARTHE looks up and calls in a tremulous voice.

MARTHE: Kit! Kit, I'm sorry. Come back! I'm so full of remorse.

There is no reply and the sounds fade. After a moment, MARTHE rushes off stage too. The music of Holst's Mars from The Planets Suite swells. The set is cleared and a small card table is placed downstage left that

has a map on it, held down by office table clutter. The music is held under the next speech.

A bruised BORCHARDT, his arm in a sling, enters, holding an old-fashioned upright phone with a detachable earpiece. He stands beside the table.

BORCHARDT: Kapitan Hebecker. Hallo! Is that Kapitan Hebecker? ... Good. Have you been given the map? ... Is the target marked? ... Yes, yes, there will be plenty time on other nights to attack troop concentrations. Your personal target tonight is that building. The moment war is officially declared. Whatever else you do tonight, Kapitan Hebecker, make sure you drop high explosive down his chimney. *(He hangs up the earpiece.)* Goodbye, Colonel Shakespeare.

He exits. The music swells and then is faded out. A banner with a large Red Cross (with prior permission) is lowered upstage centre. The card table, map and phone are cleared. There are the occasional offstage sounds of artillery.

Entering from opposite sides of the stage, KIT and MARTHE walk slowly towards each other and stand, face to face, in front of the Red Cross banner. The music ends. He is wearing a greatcoat. She is in a matron's uniform with a starched headdress.

MARTHE: You have come to say good bye? *(KIT nods.)* I was glad to hear you survived. But how did you come to be at home? You were supposed to be in Ploiesti.

KIT: Your husband was responsible.

MARTHE: What are you saying? You're supposed to be on the same side now.

KIT: His regiment was helping my team of sappers dynamite the oil wells and when we were finished his Rolls Royce turned up and he offered me a lift back to Calle Victoria. In a weak moment, I left my sappers to clear up and he had me back there before three in the morning. I'd only just rolled myself into my duvet when the bomb landed. I was lucky.

MARTHE: How are your other wounds?

KIT: My bruises are a wonderful rainbow of colours ... Marthe, please change your mind, even now. I'm leaving today. I could take you and your daughter with me to Russia.

MARTHE *(shaking her head)*: This is my country.

KIT: I still have that other country to offer.

MARTHE: I only wanted one Englishman; a whole country is too much.

KIT: You have that Englishman, entirely captive. Won't you come with him, right now?

MARTHE: That moment has passed. I have my job and my duty to do here.

KIT: You could do that same job in England. I'll see you safely there, all the way.

MARTHE: I shall never understand you. Running away might sound romantic but you've already said there cannot be any real intimacy between us. You can't ask me to be with you and wear a chastity belt.

KIT: After the war, all that can be put right.

MARTHE: After the war! After the war! After the war you could be dead and I could not love a corpse. I want a hot-blooded Englishman – even warm-blooded might have been enough.

KIT: A chap can't help the way he's made. I do love you, Marthe.

MARTHE (*closing the distance between them*): And I love you, Kit; warmly, hotly, passionately, urgently, in the here and now. Why don't you stay with me here in Romania? You could lead the resistance against the invaders and I could join your band of partisans in the mountains. (*Beginning to mock*) But only on my evenings off, once I had fulfilled all my duties here at the hospital.

KIT: As ever, my dear, you use the cutting edge of language as a weapon. But you're right. Our duties call us. Although I love you I *am* going to leave you, abandon you if you will, in your time of need. The best I can hope now is that I shall find you safe and sound after the war, and then I can put the rest of my life at your disposal.

MARTHE: You are a wonderful man, an officer and a gentleman. I just hope that, when all this is over, I shall still want you as much as I do now.

She reaches up and they kiss lightly on both cheeks and then she turns away to hide her tears. An impatient car horn sounds offstage.

KIT: Marthe!

MARTHE: Go now! Please go.

He sighs deeply, hesitates, then turns and walks off stage left. Marthe crumples slowly to the ground. As the lights dim slowly, Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony swells and fades finally with the lights.

End of Act 1.

Act 2

Scene 1: Paris 1919

Downstage extreme left is a single upholstered railway carriage seat with a small table in front of it. Centre stage is a dining table with a white napkin, cutlery and glasses and chairs to left and right. At the centre rear of the stage hangs a notice board with a painted heading saying "Gare de l'Est" above a chalked notice reading "Orient: Retardé – 3h 00m".

MARTHE, dressed in travelling clothes, is sitting on the carriage seat. While the rest of the stage is unlit, strobe lights playing on her and sound effects suggest she is travelling on a train. As these lights and sounds fade, the rear of the stage is illuminated and, from upstage left and right, backing on stage and looking around but not yet aware of each other, KIT and BORCHARDT enter, both in civilian clothes with overcoats and hats, and carrying bunches of flowers. KIT is carrying a dozen red roses while BORCHARDT holds an assortment of long-stemmed flowers. About two metres from each other, they turn inwards and upstage to read the notice board. They speak together.

KIT (*mildly*): Oh, I say!

BORCHARDT (*forcefully*): Schiesse!! Drei Stunden!

The two men do a slow-motion double-take as they hear the other voice. They stand looking at each other for a long moment before moving, and then both begin to laugh.

BORCHARDT (*clocking his heels and making a curt bow*): Donner Wetter! Herr Shakespeare! Ill met by moonlight, proud t-Thomson.

KIT (*sweeping off his hat and making a mock Elizabethan bow*): Good Heavens, General von Clausewitz! This is indeed an honour.

They come together and shake hands vigorously, still shaking their heads in disbelief and grinning broadly.

KIT: The war is over between us, then?

BORCHARDT: That war anyway.

KIT: In which case, (*gesturing at the notice*) while we wait, shall we dine together?

BORCHARDT: With pleasure.

With some mutual back-slapping they exit stage right and the rear stage lights dim while the 'train' lighting and sound effects fade up. Marthe is writing in her notebook. The lights and sounds cross fade once more and the dining table is highlighted. KIT and BORCHARDT, now divested of their overcoats, hats and flowers, enter and seat themselves

on opposite sides of the table. They start with oysters and KIT pours two glasses of white wine. They drink a silent toast to each other.

BORCHARDT: ... Since you ask; no, I have not forgiven you. Why should I? I was grossly insulted. (*KIT draws back, puzzled. BORCHARDT grins.*) But maybe, just maybe, since I became married to a German lady last year, I do not harbour a grudge to quite the same extent as formerly. Times have changed and, if we wish to survive, Austrian's will have to adapt and evolve.

KIT: Married! Congratulations, old chap! I say, this calls for another toast. To Frau Borchardt! Is your wife here with you?

BORCHARDT: Alas no; I am on half pay and she has to remain at home. Someone must look after the family business.

KIT: Oho, "the family business", eh! You sly dog; so you've married into money, what?

BORCHARDT: If only that were so! The "family business" is a tobacco kiosk at the railway station in Konstanz. But we must hold on to it until my own future is more certain. Things are very difficult at the moment; very difficult and my appointment as military adviser will not be extended beyond the end of this year.

KIT: So what are you planning to do, if one may ask?

BORCHARDT: I am hoping to obtain an administrative post working for the Zeppelin Company. That is where the future lies I am certain.

KIT: I suspect it's also our shared past. It *was* you who ordered that Zeppelin to bomb my apartment wasn't it?

BORCHARDT: *Tatsächlich!* I wanted to kill you.

KIT: In breach of the Hague Conventions? Do you still plan to kill me?

BORCHARDT: No, General Thomson, I don't want to kill anyone. I don't want any more killings. I want an honourable peace that will last for the rest of the twentieth century, and beyond. *Ach*, I am getting sentimental. I must have been reading too much Shakespeare. I blame you for that; but, even so, I shan't kill you!

KIT: I don't know if one can read too much Shakespeare, and there are other writers; even Goethe if you like that sort of thing. But have your views changed so completely? You used to be a firm believer in *Sturm und Drang*.

BORCHARDT (*shaking his head*): I have seen too much of the consequences of war and I very much fear the consequences of this peace. Already we have starvation in certain places. Women and children are dying. And yet, every day, I hear the French asking for

colossal reparations to be piled on us. But how can Germany claw her way out of her problems if more than half she earns has to be paid in blood money to the French?

KIT: You must tell me more about what's really happening in your part of the world.

BORCHARDT: With pleasure! I might as well sing for my supper. I certainly can't afford to pay for it!

The lights and sound effects cross fade, highlighting MARTHE, but her 'train' is stationary.

MARTHE (*still writing*): There has been a derailment somewhere ahead of us and we might well have to be rerouted. However, I have been fortunate to meet someone in the dining car, the husband of that amusing writer, Colette. He joined me for dinner and regaled me with his own plans for Europe's future, including breaking Germany up again, into principalities. I *think* he was joking, but he did ask me if I would like to have the throne of Bavaria. (*Jokingly*) I have given him a provisional acceptance! He says he wants to put a ball and chain on Germany for the next three generations. I do not altogether care for his views, but he is such a handsome man, and so much at the centre of things.

Cross fade to the restaurant where the two men have moved on to their main course and to red wine.

KIT: Will the fact of being an Austrian make it harder to get a position?

BORCHARDT: Not at all. Germany needs a few good Austrians to run it better than the Prussians.

KIT: Lloyd George tells me he's already having to keep the peace between the French and the Americans. On the one hand there's Clemenceau baying for German blood and gold, and on the other, Woodrow Wilson preaching goodwill to all men, with certain exceptions.

BORCHARDT: Without the Americans, I think we might have won the war, especially after Russia went to Hell. If you want my opinion, you and the French are making the same mistake as the Prussians in 1870.

KIT: And that is?

BORCHARDT: The surest way to guarantee a revival of German nationalism and militarism is to humiliate its people and drive them into poverty. You mark my words.

KIT: I shall, old chap, I shall, but, somehow, I don't think the present British Government is listening. And as for the French (*he shrugs*) ... We may need a change at the top.

BORCHARDT: Then aim for the top. Go over the top. Treat it like a military operation.

KIT: I'm actually thinking of resigning my commission and going into politics.

BORCHARDT: So let us drink to the dreadful prospect of civilian life.

As they raise their glasses, the lights cross-fade to favour MARTHE again. The train is moving again.

Cross-fade back to the restaurant where KIT has a modest dessert in front of him, barely touched, plus a balloon of cognac, while BORCHARDT has a huge, almost empty, dessert dish, coffee and cognac. As centre-stage is illuminated, he drains all his wine glasses, drinks his coffee in one gulp, belches and picks up his cognac before sitting back and grinning broadly. He is tipsy.

BORCHARDT: And here we are; I *also* carrying a bunch of flowers.

KIT: Not the usual errand for a newly married man, I must admit. How did you know Princess Bibesco was on this train?

BORCHARDT (*taps the side of his nose*): Military intelligence. The flowers are not, in fact, from me. I was requested: no, *verdammt*, I mean commanded to deliver them, with a letter.

KIT: Good Lord; from whom?

BORCHARDT: That must forever be a secret, but let us just say he will never succeed to the throne when the exiled Kaiser dies.

KIT: A letter!

BORCHARDT: Don't worry! She will never read it. I shall deliver the flowers but I have already put the letter on the fire.

KIT: Won't that land you in trouble?

BORCHARDT: No one will know she never saw it and no reply is all the answer that man deserves. I am leaving the army: it is of no consequence.

KIT: If I leave the army, I want it to *have* some consequence.

BORCHARDT: What would you live on?

KIT: Journalism, I hope, until I can get into politics.

BORCHARDT: *Gott in Himmel*, think carefully. Only newspaper proprietors can afford Princesses these days.

KIT (*glancing at his watch*): Talking of princesses, I'd better call for the bill.

Cross-fade to MARTHE. The strobe effect slows and stops. MARTHE stands and walks to centre stage where she pauses and looks around. In the background KIT and BORCHARDT exit and their table is removed while the carriage seat slides off stage. For a moment or two, MARTHE continues to stand, looking to left and right. She sighs and then seems to spot someone offstage and waves. She begins to walk briskly off stage.

After a brief pause, KIT and BORCHARDT enter in their overcoats and carrying their flowers. BORCHARDT and his flowers are the worse for wear. He has to be supported by KIT. They reach centre stage and look around, even peering into the audience, shading their eyes.

BORCHARDT: The bird of paradise has flown!

KIT: Late for my most important meeting in four years! I deserve to be court-martialled.

BORCHARDT: Then you would *certainly* have to leave the Army.

KIT (*taking a firm hold of BORCHARDT*): Come on, old chap. I'd better see you safely back to your hotel. I've nothing else to do.

As they slowly make their way off stage right, the lights fade.

End of Scene 1

Scene 2: Normandy 1919

Jaunty French accordion music covers the scene change to a beach house in Normandy. Apart from a back drop of blue sky and beach, the house need only be hinted at upstage left. In the house there is a small table with a period typewriter and some papers. KIT is sitting on an upright chair, hunting and pecking with signs of exasperation. Downstage right are some beach chairs on a rug with cushions, suggesting a beach picnic. MARTHE, reading from a piece of paper she takes out of a blue envelope, enters upstage right and strolls round and down to the picnic area then turns towards KIT. They are diagonally across the stage from each other about as far as each can go without being offstage. The music fades. KIT looks up and sees MARTHE as she stuffs the paper and envelope into her pocket.

KIT (*calling*): Hello! It looks beautiful out there.

MARTHE (*calling*): There are cries down here of “Author, Author!” Can’t you hear them? Do come out to play!

KIT stands and stretches and, shading his eyes with his hand, he gazes out of the “window” and waves.

KIT (*calling back*): I think you are about to save my life. I’ve been sitting up here all morning hunting for *le mot juste* and I can’t seem to find it anywhere. You haven’t seen it, by any chance?

MARTHE: Come on out here and look. It might have blown out of your window. Do come. It’s a beautiful Normandy summer’s day.

KIT: I suppose you’ve written your five hundred words.

MARTHE: A thousand actually.

KIT: There’s no justice in this world, that’s obvious.

MARTHE: Only for the rich. Come on! A walk along the beach will blow your cobwebs away.

KIT: I can’t see any wind. You’ll have to blow in my ears.

MARTHE: I shall give you a blow to the head if you sit up there a moment longer.

KIT: I’m going to throw you in the sea for that.

MARTHE screams in happy anticipation and runs off stage right while KIT charges off left [and round the back of the set]. MARTHE creeps onstage upstage right and tiptoes diagonally downstage. She gets to centre stage and looks round grinning.

KIT (*offstage*): I can see you!

MARTHE screams again and runs downstage left while KIT runs in from upstage right. She tries to elude capture.

KIT: Cha-a-a-arge!

MARTHE: You'll never catch me. Nobody can. (*KIT finally catches her and holds her round the waist at arms length. They stand looking at each other.*) Unless, of course, I want to be caught!

They have a momentary embrace and then, as if remembering something, she detaches herself.

KIT: It was so good of you to invite me here. I was beginning to wonder if we would ever see each other in Paris. Whenever I managed some free time you always had prior engagements; and I certainly needed this break.

MARTHE: I think Cabourg is going to be more fashionable than ever now and it will have Proust to thank for that.

KIT: I'm sorry to say I've only read a one chapter of the new book. It's over six hundred pages!

MARTHE: A writer is someone who writes; and that's all he does; night and day. By comparison, you and I are almost amateurs, allowing ourselves time off for relaxation and diversion.

KIT: I assume you're still planning to see me off at St Malo.

MARTHE: Kit, I ...

KIT: Marthe?

MARTHE (*obviously not able to say what she wants and changing the subject*): What I mean is ... have you forgiven me for not waiting for you at the station? Being so late, I just assumed ... but, knowing you, I shouldn't have doubted ... I'm sorry.

KIT springs to his feet and strikes a mock heroic pose.

KIT: I hereby declare I have forgiven everyone and everything; with the specific exception of the mother of the signalman responsible for the derailment.

MARTHE: You would forgive his *father*, then?

KIT: In the unlikely event that his father could ever be traced, then perhaps.

MARTHE: As always, it's a man's world!

KIT: I shall never forgive myself for leaving you to find your own way home, all by yourself.

MARTHE stretches out her hand which he takes and kisses. He seems to want to go on holding it but she withdraws it.

KIT: How *did* you get home?

MARTHE has to conceal hesitation and confusion.

MARTHE: Oh, I ... I just took a taxi like an ordinary mortal. Well, two taxis actually.

KIT: Two?

MARTHE: I couldn't possibly have managed in one taxi; with my maid *and* the luggage.

KIT (*grinning*): Like ordinary mortals would have to!

MARTHE: Let's both forgive and forget. Tell me what you are working on today that's proving so difficult.

KIT (*extending his hand to her*): Shall we walk as we talk? It helps me think.

With her arm through his, they stroll round the stage, sometimes stopping to admire the view.

KIT: This place is quite painfully beautiful; and yet it's only one small part of *la belle France*. I've come to love this country almost as much as England and sometimes, whisper it quietly, I even prefer it; especially when you're here with me. Being born in India, I had to get to know England, almost like a foreigner does. That's why I don't feel disloyal thinking that, one day, I shall come to die in France.

MARTHE gasps and crosses herself.

MARTHE: Don't say such things. Tell me about your book.

KIT: It's the old story. I am trying to look at European history, to see if there are lessons we should learn. We've made some terrible mistakes.

MARTHE: So, *have* you learned some interesting lessons, anything you could teach me, for instance?

KIT: Don't get me started. Warfare in the twentieth century could be a hundred times more destructive. It must be prevented.

MARTHE: Isn't that what Versailles is about: stopping the Germans ever doing it again?

KIT: You can't blame it all on the Germans!

MARTHE: But as long as countries like France and England are strong, they can make *sure* there are no more wars, can't they?

KIT: In truth, Marthe, no!

MARTHE: Why ever not?

KIT: Just think for a moment. Imagine you're a German, struggling hard to rebuild a life for yourself and your family and you see Frenchmen and Englishmen enjoying a comfortable life. Are you going to say, "Well, never mind, they deserve it. They won the war, so that's all right." I don't think so.

MARTHE: There aren't many Frenchmen who would find anything wrong with that. After all, didn't we win the war?

KIT: Bluntly, no! I think America won the war for us, and just in time. We old Europeans were committing mass suicide.

MARTHE: So what *does* history tell us?

KIT: History only *talks* to us. We need to listen and to learn.

MARTHE: And have you got all this down on paper?

KIT: No. In fact, I've worked myself into something of a state of depression. I can't see anything remotely like a happy ending.

MARTHE: If this *were* a novel I'd tell you to make lots and lots of notes, so you don't forget anything; or lose any new ideas. Jot it all down. But never write the final chapter until you've finished everything else because the ending is always different from anything you imagined.

KIT: I could very well be writing a gigantic work of fiction but I haven't the gifts of someone like H G Wells. The simple truth is everything leads me to the conclusion we're heading for an even bigger disaster: unless we can somehow break the mould.

MARTHE: Not *another* disaster, please Kit! We've just had the "disaster to end all disasters"?

KIT: More like a fairly modest catastrophe. Perhaps we should run away to some remote island, just you and me.

MARTHE: Oh dear me; that has no appeal for me: no social life. You're far too gloomy for a sunny morning on the beach. Why not simply abolish the problem? It was a *united* Germany that became too strong: so break it all up again. Recreate Bavaria, Prussia and a few other small states; then forbid any of them to have armies.

KIT: *Omnia Gallia in tres partes divisa est!* Next thing you'll be saying we ought to divide up Great Britain into three or even four countries. We need *unity* not division. We need a powerful *international* organisation pledged to peace. If we can imagine it, we can do it!

MARTHE: Personally, I can't imagine France and England ever allowing Germany to become a great power again. Well, not for fifty years at least.

KIT: That is so reactionary, so eighteenth century! Who on earth have you been talking too?

MARTHE (*slightly cross at this accurate remark*): Can't I have my own ideas? Still, you're the military expert. I'm just a romantic novelist. Let's stroll back to the house.

They turn towards each other and KIT reaches out to enfold MARTHE in his arms. She is stiff as a poker. He senses this and holds her at arm's length. She finds it hard to look at him.

KIT: What is it, my dear? Was it bad news?

MARTHE: What do you mean?

KIT: That telegram?

MARTHE (*confused and embarrassed*): How did you ...?

KIT: From my bedroom window. I do hope it isn't bad news.

MARTHE (*still confused and seeming reluctant to reply*): No, not at all; well, it's complicated.

KIT: Why do I sense a change of plan?

MARTHE: The thing is ... it was from my ... from his ... his publisher. He's coming ... that is he's telling me that ... that ... that Marcel is likely to come here to visit me, this afternoon.

KIT: And that merits a telegram: and from his publisher, rather than the man himself?

MARTHE: You don't know Marcel! Nothing is supposed to be planned, everything impromptu. Then he arrives, supposedly unannounced. But he would be terribly put out if there had been no preparations.

KIT: A supply of madeleines and some lime tea, I suppose. Why can't he just turn up and, for once, find no one at home?

MARTHE: He would be ill for weeks.

KIT: But does this affect your coming with me to St Malo?

MARTHE nods and shrugs.

KIT: My darling, we'd planned to talk on the way there.

MARTHE: What is there to discuss? I'm still a married woman and a practising Roman Catholic. And you're still an honourable Englishman and a soldier.

KIT: Not for too much longer.

MARTHE: Meaning?

KIT: You know how unhappy I am with Versailles and how unfair it is.

MARTHE: To the Boches, perhaps.

KIT: To all of us, if it sows the seeds of another conflict. No, I must do something.

MARTHE: And what will that be?

KIT: I am going to resign my commission and go into politics.

MARTHE: Politics? You're not serious?

KIT: Entirely. The realisation crystallised inside me this morning as I tried to write; as I tried to think about a world for us to be proud to live in. I can't do this and stay in the army.

MARTHE: But why politics when you seem well on the way to becoming a Field Marshall?

KIT: It's been a long time since the army intervened in our politics.

MARTHE: If politics is what you truly want then I'm sure you'd be successful. Who could resist Brigadier-General Christopher Thomson DSO? You'll win by a landslide.

KIT: You're making it sound too easy. I'd need to get myself adopted by a winnable constituency.

MARTHE: That will surely be no problem. Speak to Lloyd-George. Or maybe you don't want to be a Liberal. Not many people do these days. Let me write to Philip Sassoon. He has so many good connections ...

KIT: Marthe!

MARTHE: ... Philip could easily find you a place; somewhere in the Home Counties, not too far from London, that has nice people, and a good hunt and I could come and visit. You would be such a gift to them. They'll make you Prime Minister straight away!

KIT: I don't think your circle of friends can help me.

MARTHE: Why ever not? What are friends for? You're such a catch. You just have to say the word.

KIT: The word is one you may not like. I'm going to join the Labour Party.

MARTHE: *Mais c'est incroyable ! Tu es fou ?*

KIT: No: totally sane and logical. The articulate bourgeoisie who've had a good education, people of standing and with a reputation we've *earned*; we're the ones who can move mountains. We are the ones who can stand up for the underdog. We don't want a revolution in England like they've had in Russia.

MARTHE: In England? Never!

KIT: All the conditions are there in embryo.

MARTHE: But what will you live on? Politics doesn't pay.

KIT: I plan to write several books, plus some journalism.

MARTHE (*becoming upset, even angry*): Then you will starve! My novels sell but I could never *live* on my literary earnings. You won't be able to afford the fare for the boat train to Paris, never mind Romania.

KIT (*standing on his dignity*): I would have my Army pension.

MARTHE (*losing her temper*): I tell you I have *no* plans to be associated with an impoverished Chelsea Pensioner.

MARTHE runs off stage. KIT stares after her dumbfounded. There is a brief lightning flash followed by a rumble of thunder and then the sound of rain beginning to fall. KIT turns and walks wearily off stage. After a moment, as the sounds of rain increase and the music of Tchaikovsky's 4th Symphony swells, KIT enters left and packs his typewriter into its case and carries it offstage again. The music continues but slowly the sounds of rain fade. KIT enters downstage, dressed for a journey and carrying a small valise. Then MARTHE comes running on from upstage and crosses to join him centre stage. He puts down his valise; she takes hold of his coat lapels and he grasps her elbows.

MARTHE: Forgive me, dear friend, but I do feel you are about to throw your life away. Can't you see? *Now*, you are somebody: somebody important. You have influence. The Prime Minister looks to you for advice. You move in all the best circles.

KIT: Marthe, I'm going *round* in circles, and getting nowhere.

MARTHE: You could still have influence in politics if you make the right choices. In England, the two *important* parties have all kinds of different people in them; even some who care about your favourite animal – the underdog.

KIT: You're teasing me.

MARTHE: No: I'm serious. Don't throw it away. For my sake, for our sake, be someone important. I need important people in my life.

KIT (*nodding sadly*): As befits a princess!

MARTHE: I'm only a princess because I was married off as a child bride to someone called a Prince. But it's the only life I know!

KIT: The life I want will only be complete if there's a place in it for you.

MARTHE: Then make that place. You could certainly become a leader, maybe even *the* leader, in the Conservative party. They have no one of any real talent. Then you could get something done for your underdogs, and all their dozens of 'under-puppies'.

KIT folds her gently into his arms and kisses her on both cheeks then puts her back at arm's length before stooping to pick up his valise. He proffers his arm and they begin to walk slowly upstage.

KIT: I know it seems sudden to you but there was no way I could do any of this while there was a war on. I had to obey orders. But now all that's over and my conscience will not let me do otherwise.

MARTHE jerks her arm out of his and steps away from him angrily.

MARTHE: Your *conscience*? Did you have a conscience in Romania when you told me – a married woman, and a practising Roman Catholic – that you wanted me to run off with you? (*There is a flash of lightning again and a terrific clap of thunder.*) Go on then! Off you go to your self-imposed obscurity. And I expect you'll get soaked on the way there. It serves you right. You'd better be careful. There's a lot of influenza about and it might well affect people with tender consciences!

MARTHE runs off while KIT sags visibly then straightens up and walks sadly but determinedly off. Again, the final bars of the first movement of Mahler's 2nd Symphony, the descending scale, mark his exit. There is a moment of empty stage then, offstage, a car door shuts, the engine starts and it drives off. MARTHE re-enters downstage and makes her way to the picnic chair. She slumps into the chair. After another moment, there is the offstage sound of a car approaching. MARTHE hears it and seems to perk up. As she hears the car approach, stop and its door open, she stands up and strolls happily upstage.

MARTHE: You came back!

Then she reacts in surprise, throwing her arms wide open before making a mock bow.

MARTHE: Monsieur de Jouvenel! You are here; and timing your arrival to absolute perfection.

She runs off upstage right with her arms open for an embrace. Go to black.

End of Act 2.

Act 3

Scene 1 – London, December 1923

To the left of centre stage there are two gentlemen's club armchairs with a low coffee table between. Downstage right is a small round table with two upright chairs. KIT and BORCHARDT are in the armchairs holding glasses of brandy. There are coffee cups on the table.

BORCHARDT: Four years since last we had dinner together and, once again, I am indebted to you.

KIT: A pleasure, dear chap.

BORCHARDT: Perhaps next time it will be at *my* expense but, at the rate I am going, that will not be tomorrow.

KIT: That might be very welcome; because, at the rate I'm going, I may not be able to afford club membership for another year.

BORCHARDT: We live in difficult times and I do not see many signs of improvement. If it hadn't been for Herr Eckener I think I should have been selling matches in the street. The Zeppelin Company nearly went out of business.

KIT: He seems impressive.

BORCHARDT: He persuaded the Allies to let us build one large airship, and then he sold it to the Americans! Now he's travelling round Germany raising funds for the next one.

KIT: So what brings you here, then: more airship business?

BORCHARDT: There are possibilities of mutual technical co-operation.

KIT: You must mean with Vickers.

BORCHARDT: Commander Burney seems very interested.

KIT: All he wants is a monopoly on airships; like they have in submarines. I couldn't agree to that.

BORCHARDT: Concentration on one company makes economic sense; and besides, what can you do to prevent it?

KIT: At present; nothing.

BORCHARDT: Your political plans are not progressing?

KIT: I did make a dent in the Conservative majority in Bristol but then I was shot down in flames over St Albans. I'm very lucky to have my job as Military Correspondent of the *Daily Herald* but, even so, political ambitions are eating into my capital.

BORCHARDT: Capital! I had some once; but that was a long time ago. At least the new Reichsmark seems to be holding its value. Ach, let's talk about other things. How's your love life?

KIT (*with a wry laugh*): Another disaster area. I write fairly regularly but replies are few and far between. I almost wish I didn't love her so much.

BORCHARDT: *Es tut mir leid, lieber freund!* Catch yourself a wealthy heiress, or perhaps a war widow with money. There is an excess of supply over demand, if you are not too concerned with looks. *That* would improve your political career! Imagine the selection meeting! "The candidate's wife, Lady Britannia, is the daughter of the Duke of Plaza Toro." Then they'd sit up and listen.

KIT: I doubt if I could woo and wed in time. The next election will come too soon for that. No one has a majority this time and none of the parties really wants to take up the poisoned chalice.

BORCHARDT: As a military man, tell your friend to strike while the others are weak. This could be Labour's chance!

KIT: It may be our chance, but it's MacDonald's choice.

BORCHARDT: Fortune favours the brave, Herr Shakespeare.

KIT (*with a wry smile and raising his glass*): You improve with keeping, old chap. I sometimes forget why I disliked you.

BORCHARDT: I could remind you; but, alas, I have a meeting at the Royal Aeronautical Society.

BORCHARDT stands. KIT looks at his fob watch and gets up too.

KIT: And I have to get over to the *Herald*. Stay in touch!

They shake hands and as they exit upstage the lighting favours downstage. Offstage, a car draws up and MARTHE, dressed in the latest fashions trips across the stage. She turns and looks back waving.

MARTHE: *À ce soir!*

MARTHE exits and the armchairs are cleared. RAMSAY MacDonald enters and sits at the round table where he starts laying out 'file cards' and pushing them around. After a moment, KIT enters. RAMSAY rises.

RAMSAY: You got my message then.

KIT: The Editor told me you wanted to see me.

RAMSAY: Don't look so surprised. I told you at the Fabian Society how much I wanted to pick your brains and now it's getting serious.

Everyone else is getting so fevered and frantic at the mere thought of taking office they can't think straight. What do you say? Should we make a bid for power?

KIT: It may not be the best time; but to retreat now would look like flinching under fire.

RAMSAY: That's the spirit! Baldwin and Asquith are more scared about facing up to the mess than letting me in to deal with it.

KIT: It might look like sneaking in by the back door.

RAMSAY: With my social background, I've fewer inhibitions about back doors.

KIT: But for how long?

RAMSAY: But once we do, even for a month or two, a King's Speech written by a *Labour* Prime minister would be a powerful manifesto.

KIT: I wish I'd won a seat!

RAMSAY: You'll do better next time. I'll get you a seat up north. Right now, help me choose the right people.

KIT: Is that what these cards are for?

RAMSAY: Exactly. Now, put names to them: starting with yourself. You'd make a damn fine Foreign Secretary.

KIT (*smiling*): Ramsay, it's a well-known fact you see yourself as our greatest expert on foreign affairs. Anyone else taking that job would cramp your style; as you would inevitably cramp theirs.

RAMSAY: The War Office, then? There's no one better qualified.

KIT: But I'm *not* qualified. I'm not even an MP.

RAMSAY: I'm telling you we can fix all that. Now, speak up man. Time's pressing. Apart from picking a Cabinet, I've still to buy presents, so Gordon Selfridge can have a happy Christmas too.

KIT: When would we take office? It's just that ... I've been invited to Paris for Christmas and I ...

RAMSAY: Oh yes! Lady Londonderry was gossiping about you the other day. Is it yon Princess? Well, that's none of my business. Choose, man, choose!

KIT: Very well then. (*KIT puts his finger on one of the cards.*)

RAMSAY: Agreed! And in return for that we'll take office in January.

KIT and RAMSAY exit and their table and chairs are cleared. A café table and two chairs are placed downstage left. There is a snatch of Gershwin's An American in Paris. As the lights come up, MARTHE and KIT in outdoor clothes are seated at that table with drinks.

MARTHE: My darling Kit; discretion personified! You never mentioned it in your letters. Just as well! I never could have kept a secret like that. How wonderful for you. A seat in the Cabinet *and* a peerage: you English know how to do these things!

KIT: I'm glad you're pleased.

MARTHE: Pleased? I'm delighted. But what position has Mr MacDonald given you?

KIT: Secretary of State for Air.

MARTHE: What a Shakespearian title: straight out of *The Tempest!* Secretary for *Air*. Sea air, mountain air, fresh air ... (*Kit smiles broadly and shakes his head.*) ... Or is a Labour government going to nationalise its production, distribution and exchange?

KIT (*enjoying the joke*): Never!

MARTHE: I know! You plan to introduce rationing of *hot* air, but it *will* be available in all the best stores?

KIT: I haven't decided yet.

MARTHE: And in a Socialist England, if I breathe in, will someone else have to breathe out?

KIT: Stop, stop! I shan't be able to keep a straight face in Cabinet if you go on. You know very well the matter is much more down to earth rather than all up in the air: or do I have that the wrong way round? Even so, I do have plans to create something lighter-than-air that will put a girdle round the earth.

MARTHE: In forty minutes?

KIT: More like forty days. We need a fleet of British airships to link the Dominions. We can't leave it all to our mutual friend. He has too much of a head start.

MARTHE: I do prefer airships to aeroplanes; all canvas and string; and if the engine stops one cannot float gently to earth.

KIT: Very true.

MARTHE: But should we call you now? You must have a title.

KIT: Have you any suggestions?

MARTHE: ‘Lord Prospero’; no, too Italian-sounding. Mind you ... since you’re a *red* Baron, why not ‘von Richthofen’?

KIT: Very clever; but I wonder if others would see the joke.

MARTHE: Then what should a Bolshevik Baron be called?

KIT: Strictly speaking, since it’s a minority government, I’m a *Menshevik* Baron, but let that pass. I might choose the name of an airfields; like Northolt, or Hendon. Lord Thomson of Hendon: how does that sound?

MARTHE: It sounds rather *ordinaire* for a Lord-in-Air.

KIT: Lord Thomson of Lympe? [*pronounced LIM*].

MARTHE: Of *limb*; which limb? Do you mean an arm or a leg, or are you thinking of growing wings?

KIT: No, no! L-Y-M-P-E. It’s an airfield in Kent.

MARTHE (*French pronunciation*): *Impossible!*

KIT: All right, what about Lord Thomson of Cardington, where the Royal Airship Works happen to be? What do you say?

MARTHE: Cardington. Carr–ding–tong! Yes, I like that one. (*With heavy French emphasis*) Carr–dinng–tonng! It sounds like a bell.

KIT: This is very hush-hush until it’s announced from the Palace.

MARTHE: *Entendu!* But now, mon cher, I must go. I have an important engagement this evening and ...

KIT: But Marthe, I had assumed ... I mean to say, I’ve come over to Paris specially to share my good news ... I’ve even booked a table at the Crillon.

MARTHE: I am so sorry but you know, Kit, in my circle one’s diary is always so full. But I shall see you in London at Easter, I promise. Now I must fly.

MARTHE rises and, blowing kisses, gathers up her bag and departs. KIT has risen and looks after her disconsolately.

KIT: Goodbye. Goodbye. (*A long pause*) Goodbye Lady Thomson.

KIT puts money on the table and follows MARTHE off stage. The lights dim while the café table and chairs are cleared.

Scene 2 – London, April 1924

Vaughan Williams's London Symphony, the 'Piccadilly' motif swells and fades under the next scene. Big Ben strikes three and RAMSAY is revealed seated at the round table speaking into his telephone.

RAMSAY: Very interesting, Ambassador. Keep an eye on him when you get back to Berlin ... Thank you, goodbye. (*He replaces the receiver and muses to himself.*) Mind you, if I'm honest, is there much difference between a Scotsman like me being Prime Minister *and* Foreign Secretary here in London, and an Austrian demagogue wanting to be in charge in Berlin? I just hope I'm slightly less of a rabble-rouser.

He shakes his head and picks up one of the papers on the table. KIT enters. He seems weary.

KIT: Prime Minister.

RAMSAY (*consulting his fob watch*): Right on schedule as ever, CB. You really are a most reliable fellow. So, can we get you airborne?

KIT: It's all set out in the paper, PM, and I'm sure you've done your homework.

RAMSAY: I'm sympathetic but we need to get it past the Treasury.

KIT: My people have been especially rigorous with the financial calculations.

RAMSAY: No doubt. Just tell me how you're going to get there.

KIT: The advisory committee are unanimous we need an Imperial Airship Service, flying mail and passengers on scheduled flights to Canada, to India via Egypt, with a later extension to Australia. In due course we can add South Africa. We plan to build two different prototypes.

RAMSAY: Who will do the work?

KIT: The Airship Guarantee Company will build the commercial prototype. They've hired Barnes Wallis to design it. He's such a prickly character I'm not unhappy *they'll* have to contend with him rather than us. The second will be an Air Ministry project based at Cardington.

RAMSAY: And have you got names for them yet? *Britannia, Ark Royal, Prince of Wales*, that sort of thing?

KIT: No, not even *Tweedledum* and *Tweedledee*. Until they're built they'll simply be R100 and R101.

RAMSAY: Engineers have no poetry!

KIT: I can't say I'm feeling too poetic at the moment.

RAMSAY: What's the matter? A mere four months in office; you're about to embark on a project that will make your name and, if I'm not mistaken, you were over in Paris during the Easter recess having a high old time. I'm not just the Prime Minister, CB, I'm your friend. What's troubling you?

KIT (*with a weary sigh and a shrug*): I never once saw her alone; not once! The fact is, Ramsay ... men like me should stay away from women like that ... especially rich, beautiful, highly talented and already married: and Roman Catholic into the bargain. Women like that are pretty pictures, but pretty pictures need expensive frames. One day, perhaps, I may have the wherewithal but ...

RAMSAY: I'm sorry, old chap. Not much a fellow can say. Just bear in mind gilded frames are no better at keeping in pet canaries than gilded cages and if the bird goes off song then even gold-plated birdseed may not help. She might just be out of your league. Bury yourself in your work; that's what I did when I was widowed. Not that it helped all that much. Concentrate on your magnificent airship programme linking the Empire. Even if we lose office it will be your enduring legacy.

KIT: How long have we got?

RAMSAY: Best measure it in months. I don't think the others will indulge us much longer. Put it this way, I wouldn't order any Air Ministry Christmas cards.

The final scene represents the four years of KIT being out of office in Britain and seemingly out of favour in Paris and Bucharest. Upstage left, KIT is seated at a writing desk musing and writing, with Marthe's shoe beside him. Downstage right, MARTHE reclines languorously on a chaise longue surrounded by books and hats, talking to herself. On a low table adjacent to her chaise is an open box of chocolates and a bunch of red roses, still in their florist's wrapping. Downstage left, RAMSAY, smoking a cigar, sits in an armchair facing the audience while BORCHARDT is upstage right behind a small desk, also facing downstage. When he first speaks, he stands up and remains standing throughout the scene, wagging a finger and hectoring his listeners. At times in the following scene all the characters should talk across each other.

KIT: At least we managed to get the airship programme going ...

BORCHARDT: ... Yes: we have made progress ...

RAMSAY: ... Only nine months in office: but we did a few good things: putting right some of the damage done by Versailles. Mind you, it may all have been too late ...

MARTHE: ... Each time I board the *Orient Express* I feel I never want to arrive at my destination. It's like a luxurious and stylish hot house where I can rest and be refreshed before blooming once again like a rare orchid ...

BORCHARDT: ... The *Graf Zeppelin* is a triumph but still we are reliant on hydrogen. Helium is the answer but those *verdammte* Americans won't sell it to us ...

KIT: ... The press have called R100 the 'capitalist' airship and R101 the 'socialist' one and that seems to have sent Barnes Wallis off the deep end again. After five years of squabbling, neither team seems able to offer a serious critique of what the other is doing ...

RAMSAY: ... The Germans still won't forget and may never forgive ...

MARTHE: ... My spiritual home is Paris and my language of choice is French but when I think about love that tends to be in English ...

BORCHARDT: ... That's protectionism for you, but what can you expect from a country that won't even join the League of Nations ...

RAMSAY: ... I'm glad CB got his airship programme launched ...

KIT: ... and I managed to get *Smaranda* written at last: one of the benefits of being out of office, I suppose ...

RAMSAY: ... CB sent me his new book. The bits about Marthe Bibesco; well, he calls her *Smaranda*; are a bit mawkish but then the man's a middle-aged bachelor in love with a glamorous fairy princess so who can blame him. I'm a little bit in love with her myself ...

BORCHARDT: ... And as for that book of his: it makes your toes curl to read the way he refers to her ...

KIT: ... Now I have to travel to earn money on the American lecture circuit. Rewarding; but culturally very depressing when one travels beyond the cosmopolitan East Coast ...

BORCHARDT: ... My dear friend Thomson is a *dummkopf* ...

KIT: ... And all of this means my contacts with Marthe are mostly by letter: *my* letters in the main since she seems to write to everyone except me ...

MARTHE: ... That dear sweet man pours his heart out in his letters and paints such an idealised picture of me in his lovely book ...

BORCHARDT: ... What that beautiful woman needs is a good slap and then (*accompanied by a crude gesture*) *bums mal wieder!* It is a well-

known fact that she has served under more crowned heads than Talleyrand. And she keeps Thomson on a string, though he won't admit it ...

MARTHE: ... Isn't it curious: whenever someone like King Alfonso or Jouvenel leaves my bed I find myself thinking about my very English Kit? ...

RAMSAY: ... There'll be trouble if that man and his National Socialists ever get into office. Perhaps they never will, but, mark you, it isn't so long since they were saying that about the Labour Party ... (*A phone rings off-stage left.*) Excuse me! Life goes on, I'm afraid. (*RAMSAY exits.*)

BORCHARDT: ... The more I read about that man, the more I hear him on the radio and the newsreels, and then when I finally *saw* him speaking in *Nürnberg*; that's when I *knew* he's the leader Germany has been waiting for. And an Austrian ... (*BORCHARDT stands to attention and, clicking his heels, gives the Nazi salute and marches off-stage.*)

KIT (*after a long pause*): Dear God, I'll soon be fifty! ... I do love her, but I think she'll be the death of me.

KIT picks up Marthe's shoe off the writing desk. He stands up slowly and raises the shoe to his lips. Go to black.

End of Act 3.

ACT 4 1929

There has been another election. Labour has the largest number of seats but far short of an overall majority. The two armchairs are now downstage right. Rear stage left is a writing desk. Before the scene begins there is background music (but without the words) of 'This Sweet Memory' from the Ivor Novello musical Bitter Sweet.

RAMSAY is seated in one chair, looking impatiently at his fob watch and drumming his fingers. KIT enters quickly.

RAMSAY: At last: where on earth have you been? I've had Special Branch out looking for you. (*Grinning*) You haven't been up to anything, have you?

KIT: Nothing I wouldn't tell my own mother. Indeed, there's no need. She was there with me. We were at the new Ivor Novello show; *Bitter Sweet*. Something of an acquired taste in my case, but *she* loves it.

RAMSAY: You know full well *why* I'm looking for you.

KIT: If I *were* hiding from you, then that might well have been the reason.

RAMSAY: You will join me, won't you?

KIT: Another minority government? How long this time? Not even as long as the last, I'd say. Is it really worth it?

RAMSAY: Your guess is as good as mine. Lloyd George says he can deliver the Liberals. On paper, that's a majority of 85.

KIT (*ironically*): That makes me feel very confident! What basis is that for democratic government?

RAMSAY: Until there's a crisis, let's make use of them.

KIT: There's always a crisis.

RAMSAY: We're not talking coalition here.

KIT: He might as well have a desk in the next room.

RAMSAY: CB! We two have been like David and Jonathan. Don't desert me now.

KIT: Ramsay, you're asking the wrong man.

RAMSAY: If you're not going back to the Air Ministry I'm going to have to appoint Wedgwood Benn. Do please spare me that.

KIT: Would you back the airship programme?

RAMSAY: To my last gasp of hot air!

KIT: I don't know what that means; but I suppose I can't let you down, after all these years.

RAMSAY: There would have to be results, mind, and fairly soon, or the Treasury will swing its axe. There can be no sacred cows, or even sacred airships.

KIT: We can set some sensible deadlines for R101, the one that's farther behind schedule.

RAMSAY: Careful: don't box yourself in. Deadlines can become tripwires, and you'd be the one that went base over apex.

KIT: I'll talk to them: engineer to engineer.

RAMSAY: Don't try to run the project day-to-day or they'll dump *everything* on you, starting with the blame.

KIT: As soon as we're sworn in, I'll get round the table with both teams!

While RAMSAY exits, KIT goes to his writing desk. The Bitter Sweet music swells and fades as he kisses Marthe's shoe and starts to write.

KIT: My dearest Marthe, Back in office again, my first visit was to Cardington. It was a sobering experience. They may or may not know how to design airships but they seem unable to build one quickly, even if the principles are not much more complex than Meccano. I had hoped you might come over here for a week or two. Visiting Paris seems beyond the possible. I do long to see you and talk about all sorts of things: even Proust. *(A doorbell rings off stage.)* Damn!

KIT exits and there are sounds of a bicycle bell and the door closing again. KIT returns, carrying a telegram in an envelope. He opens it.

KIT: Dear God! No!

KIT rushes off stage and the scene changes. There is a moment of weepy music from La Bohème and the lights come up to reveal MARTHE in a hospital bed, propped up on her pillows and looking very pale. There are several bouquets of flowers including a big bunch of at least a dozen red roses. KIT sits beside her, holding her hand. He lifts her hand to his lips.

MARTHE: I'm so sorry, Kit, I'm so sorry.

KIT: My dearest, you have nothing to be sorry about. You called; I came.

MARTHE: There was no one else. I felt so alone.

KIT: You needed support. I want to be that support.

MARTHE: You are, yes, you are. I've had visitors of course; flowers, perfume; but I needed love.

KIT: And I do love you.

MARTHE: Georges sent a 'Get Well Soon' telegram; all the way from South Africa. The pair of them are hunting big game.

KIT: You're on the mend now, Marthe. You've beaten the enemy.

MARTHE: This time!

KIT: You've won.

MARTHE: So they tell me. At least I haven't lost you!

KIT: That would *certainly* require an operation.

MARTHE: And you knew about Jouvenel. (*KIT nods and kisses her hand again.*) Of course you did. He's gone back to Colette. He doesn't love her. He doesn't love anyone except himself, but it seems *her* literary success is important to his political career.

KIT: We men think too much about our careers.

MARTHE: He didn't even send me flowers.

KIT: I see you have my roses.

MARTHE: A generous dozen; the nurse tells me there are fourteen.

KIT: How many years have we known each other?

MARTHE: I can't do sums. Tell me.

KIT: Fourteen.

MARTHE: So it is. These were lovely days. That trip on the Danube; those glorious sunsets.

KIT: There can be more ... and sunrises too.

MARTHE: I want to go back to Romania to convalesce but they tell me it will be several weeks before I'm well enough to travel. Long, lonely weeks!

KIT: Come to London. I can have you looked after there..

MARTHE: Kit, I'm so sorry. I am being selfish; I always am. I've treated you so badly. You don't deserve it. Forgive me.

KIT: I am just as much to blame. If I'd taken *your* advice, I might have been Governor-General of somewhere uneventful and you might ... well, I don't know what you might ...

MARTHE: I've been so blind. Back in 1916, I should have ... I'm so sorry.

KIT: No! I made the mistake of putting duty before love.

MARTHE: Other men offered me what I called love when, all the time, the real thing was being laid before me in letter after letter.

KIT: The offer stands: as long as I live.

MARTHE: The sight of you coming in that door today was proof if ever I needed it. I feel such gratitude and such a warm glow. It might even be love!

KIT: Get well. Come to join me. Let's fight life's battles together.

MARTHE: Please God, let me do that!

KIT: It will take more than just God, for both of us. There are still hurdles to overcome.

MARTHE: With you, I could overcome anything. I know it now.

KIT: What will your husband say?

MARTHE: Georges is Greek Orthodox. They don't mind. I was the one who converted to Rome but I *will* ask him for a divorce.

KIT: There are problems on my side too; small but significant.

MARTHE (*smiling for the first time*): What! You have a mistress? You're secretly married?

KIT (*managing to laugh*): I've had offers, believe me. It's just the tedious fact that, like you, it will take a little while to extricate myself, before my life is my own to live; where and with whom I please.

MARTHE: As long as I am the one who pleases you.

KIT: You must use the time to get well and I shall use it to finish the job, so that I can leave politics with honour.

MARTHE: My honourable Englishman! I am doing the first sensible thing for years.

KIT: I hope it won't be the last.

MARTHE: You must be my guide and mentor.

KIT: All I really want is to be your husband. Shall we set ourselves the goal of achieving that by the end of this year?

MARTHE: Is that possible?

KIT: I can't say for certain but if you will get your lawyers started, I shall get back to London and tell the Prime Minister to start looking for my successor. He won't be pleased!

MARTHE: Neither will Georges, but never mind. Yes, I'll do it.

KIT: The struggle will be the airship programme but I shall crack the whip. Just see if I don't. In fact, come and see! Don't go to Romania to convalesce, come to London. Ramsay denies it but I'm sure he'd love to see you again

MARTHE: Then book my suite at the Ritz, please, for the middle of September and I shall *make* myself well enough to travel.

KIT: And talking of travel, I'm moving my office to the saloon of R101 for the day when she does her next proving flight. Imagine, being able to work anywhere, not being tied to a desk ... I'm sorry, I'm getting carried away.

MARTHE (*smiling*): Please don't let that happen, my darling. I couldn't bear it. "O, let us be married, / Too long we have tarried."

KIT: I won't "sail away, for a year and a day" but I promise you: "hand-in-hand, we'll dance on the strand, / By the light of the silvery moon."

MARTHE (*suddenly very sad*): There *is* one thing! One sad thing.

KIT (*alarmed*): Marthe, what's the matter?

MARTHE: Oh my darling Kit ... you realise ... you do understand that ... that I could never ... not any more ... give you ... give you a son.

KIT rises and embraces her. Go to black. The scene changes. Downstage left are two armchairs. Centre stage right is a dining table with three places while rear stage left is a dressing chest with drawers and various items of male grooming on top. As the lights go up, KIT and BORCHARDT are seated in the armchairs.

KIT: We had a private dining room.

BORCHARDT: Doctor Eckener can be very entertaining.

KIT: We were a jolly crew. It was probably the first time some of them had spoken to each other for three or four years.

BORCHARDT: That is not good.

KIT: They were on their best behaviour. They wanted to pick his brains.

BORCHARDT: I am prepared to wager he mentioned helium.

KIT: But he also said with experienced crews hydrogen does not pose any undue risk.

BORCHARDT: There is *always* a risk and the technology is already obsolete.

KIT: So what's to do?

BORCHARDT: Dupont have a brilliant scientist working on synthetic rubber but it is smothered in patents. Eckener got nowhere with them. No: I for one am jumping ship and going to work for Willy Messerschmitt.

KIT: His prototypes have an *appalling* safety record!

BORCHARDT: I will make you a large wager that aeroplanes will overtake airships within less than ten years.

KIT: After seeing Graf Zeppelin's display last weekend, I might be inclined to take your bet. Mind you, there would have to be no more low-flying over cup finals at Wembley, or I might have to order the RAF to shoot it down.

BORCHARDT: You joke, dear colleague. I simply point out to you it would need aeroplanes to do that. Airships are pushing very close to the boundary of safety. Like the dinosaurs, they are too big. An accident at this stage could destroy the whole industry.

KIT: Well, I intend to demonstrate my own confidence in airships. I'll be making a speech about that next week in the Lords.

BORCHARDT: And what else might you announce next week? I hear you are expecting another visitor soon.

KIT: Your intelligence, as always, is excellent. She's recovering well. But there will be no 'announcement', as you put it. At least, not until there is something to announce.

BORCHARDT: I wish you both well. She doesn't know how fortunate she is. But take care. Take no risks with her either. Don't fly too near the sun.

KIT: Talking of sons, how's your boy?

BORCHARDT: He wants to be a pilot!

KIT: I blame his father!

The lights dim. BORCHARDT exits. As the lights go up, KIT is by his dressing table, using his hairbrush and then taking a handkerchief out of the top drawer of his dressing table. Before he shuts it, he kisses his fingers and touches something in the drawer. A doorbell rings and KIT exits briefly, returning with RAMSAY.

RAMSAY: And I'm still here first! I could have done at least half an hour's extra work.

KIT (*smiling*): Don't you want to meet your favourite princess?

RAMSAY (*returning the smile*): Why should I have any truck with princesses? I'm a man of the people, remember: some of the people, all of the time; and all of the people, some of the time. The third condition, alas, does not apply!

KIT: The people love beautiful princesses.

RAMSAY: But there aren't enough of them for one each so you'd better hang onto yours. How is she these days?

KIT: Progressing. She was certainly well enough to visit Romania before coming to London. She had to meet her husband.

RAMSAY: Oho!

KIT: 'Oho' indeed.

The doorbell rings. KIT and RAMSAY both look at their fob watches.

KIT: Only fifty minutes: *much* better! Excuse me. (*KIT exits.*)

RAMSAY (*to himself*): The princess and the peer! Who knows: who ever knows?

MARTHE, dressed to perfection and wearing the famous emeralds, sweeps in with KIT in her train, extending her hand to RAMSAY who kisses it.

RAMSAY: My favourite princess.

MARTHE: You're no republican then, Prime Minister?

RAMSAY: I fear that if we had a republic, we might have men like Oswald Mosley as President.

MARTHE: Or Lord Thomson?

RAMSAY: Or Lord Thomson, indeed: but I may have other plans for him.

KIT: Do come to the table.

As the lights dim and the music from Bitter Sweet swells, the diners rearrange the dinner table so that, as the lights fade up, they are at the brandy and cigars stage. KIT offers the cigar box to RAMSAY.

MARTHE: I shall take that as my cue to withdraw.

All rise and MARTHE exits briefly downstage left, only to reappear after a moment or two, upstage left by the dressing table, while the men continue to sit at the dining table. Lighting should initially favour the table.

RAMSAY: This stretch version of R101 must be straining the budget to the limit, CB. The Treasury don't like Oliver Twists.

KIT: We must have the ship fit for purpose. Climatically, India is so completely different from Canada.

RAMSAY: In more ways than climate, believe you me.

KIT: It's not going well there, is it!

RAMSAY: Irwin is simply not the man for the job; but it was the King's suggestion and Baldwin didn't feel able to say no.

KIT: We've all of us been in situations where we couldn't say no.

RAMSAY: I hope that's true, CB. Now listen to me ...

Music swells and lighting favours MARTHE at the dressing table while KIT and RAMSAY continue to talk sotto voce. After a moment or two, KIT reacts in surprise at what RAMSAY is saying and points at himself, slowly shaking his head.

MARTHE places her handbag on the dressing table and brings out her powder compact, opening it to look at herself in the mirror. She looks into her bag and seems not to be able to find something. Putting down the compact, she looks around the dressing table top and then, having an idea, she opens the top drawer and brings out a handkerchief and at the same time spots something in the drawer. Putting down the handkerchief, she brings out her own shoe, gazes at it for a moment before clasping it briefly to her chest, kissing it and putting it back. Then she opens the handkerchief to protect the front of her evening dress and powders her nose. As she puts things away again, she swithers for a moment and then puts the handkerchief into her own bag. She exits briefly, the music fades and the lights favour the dining table again.

KIT is shaking his head in disbelief and RAMSAY is banging the table with his fist and nodding emphatically. As MARTHE re-enters and joins them, they start up with embarrassment to greet her.

MARTHE (*smiling*): If I didn't know you both so well, I'd say you were in the middle of talking about something that isn't considered polite in front of a lady. Shame on you both!

RAMSAY: It was an entirely honourable conversation, as you would expect from a couple of Privy Councillors. But, just at this moment, I fear you cannot be privy to our secrets. (*He rises.*) Now, if you'll both excuse me, I still have matters to do with the Privy Purse to attend to, so I must get back to work.

MARTHE: At this time?

RAMSAY: Fortunately, Prime Ministers live above the shop.

KIT: I'll see you to the door.

RAMSAY gallantly kisses Marthe's hand and then allows himself to be escorted off stage by KIT. MARTHE waltzes round the table and, as KIT re-enters, she runs up to embrace him.

MARTHE: My darling! You still have my shoe.

KIT: As a champagne glass, it leaks dreadfully.

MARTHE: You just need more practice. But do tell me what you two were talking about so seriously ...

KIT: My beloved ... Look, we do have so much to talk about but it's getting rather late for serious discussion.

MARTHE: Aha, you *are* keeping something from me. What is that Scotch terrier up to? He always turns to you when he needs help.

KIT: This is not the moment, my love. Can you come to hear my speech in the Lords tomorrow afternoon, and then we can have tea at the Air Ministry?

MARTHE: But I wanted to tell you all about my discussions with Georges. Still, I had an English governess and I know how much the English respect the rituals of bedtime. I shall go back to my lonely suite at the Ritz and you can go up the wooden road to Bedfordshire.

KIT: Your news and mine can be exchanged tomorrow. And we're invited to the Sassoon's in the evening.

MARTHE: As a couple!

They embrace and walk off stage together. The music is the Ivor Novello once again. The scene is changed. Downstage right is a red leather upholstered 'House of Lords' bench. Upstage right is a ministerial desk. Upstage left is high-backed wooden bench representing the public gallery of the House of Lords. KIT sits on the red leather bench holding

papers while MARTHE and BORCHARDT enter and sit in the 'public gallery', stage whispering to each other.

MARTHE: A total surprise. He's now asking *me* for a divorce.

BORCHARDT: Would it be a sin to divorce a husband who has been so unfaithful?

MARTHE: According to *my* church; yes. But we were married according to Greek Orthodox rites and they are not so dogmatic.

BORCHARDT: Thank God I'm a Lutheran! Don't deny yourself happiness. Leave your Ruritanian Prince and live with your English Lord.

MARTHE: There will be social consequences.

BORCHARDT: That is a preposterous excuse.

MARTHE: I know, dear friend; but a social butterfly like me needs a warm climate of opinion.

BORCHARDT: You're no a butterfly but you *are* a hot house plant, an orchid, perhaps the last orchid in Europe. Let Thomson cultivate you. England has richer soil than Romania and ...

KIT rises and begins to address the House.

MARTHE: Shhh!

KIT: ... And, as Secretary of State for Air, I am aware that the slippage of the timetable is a matter of public concern. It is my purpose today not only to assure your Lordship's House but the nation at large of the government's unwavering commitment. We shall shortly bring the current phase of the Airship programme to a satisfactory conclusion and, in so doing, lay the foundations for future development of airship links with our principal dominions starting with India, the land of my birth. As part of this expansion, we shall shortly bring forward plans for the building of many more airships that will incorporate the lessons we are, every day, learning from R100 and R101.

MARTHE (*stage whisper*): Wonderful news!

BORCHARDT: Money down the drain: and money they don't have.

MARTHE: Shhh!

KIT: We see this programme as leading to the forging of bonds; bonds as strong as steel yet light as air, across the world's oceans. But for the millionth chance, airships are the safest mode of transport yet devised by man. I intend to demonstrate my own confidence in the work of our designers, builders and airship crew by flying to India on the inaugural

voyage of R101, from whence I shall return to set out our future plans to the Dominion Conference at the end of October.

MARTHE: How wonderful!

BORCHARDT: It's a potential disaster.

.MARTHE: What *do* you mean?

BORCHARDT: The dates of that Conference are set in stone. They can't be changed now; unless the King were to die. He's created a deadline and now every hold-up or slippage in the programme will have not only financial but *political* consequences.

MARTHE: You are one of nature's worriers.

BORCHARDT: No, I am one of *nurture's*!

KIT resumes his seat while MARTHE and BORCHARDT shuffle sideways and exit. KIT rises and walks to his desk where he perches, looking very pleased with himself. The House of Lords bench and gallery slide off stage. MARTHE re-enters downstage left and KIT advances smiling to greet her.

MARTHE: Our mutual friend sends his regards but says he will see us tomorrow.

KIT: I'd rather be alone with you right now. We have so much to tell each other.

MARTHE: Then may I tell you first that Georges has provisionally agreed to a divorce. His provisos are all financial but my lawyers feel everything is negotiable. Georges himself has been thinking about remarriage.

KIT: Divorce and remarriage seems to be in the air somehow.

MARTHE: Really? Do your instruments detect them as you fly up there in your airship?

KIT: If it were that simple, a few deep breaths and all our problems would be solved. But we do have problems.

MARTHE: I'm sure we shall have problems for the rest of our lives but you and I will solve ours together.

KIT: There's a new complication I need to tell you about.

MARTHE: I knew it! What has MacDonald done this time?

KIT: You're right. It is the PM's doing.

MARTHE: Is it promotion? That's only what you deserve.

KIT: Marthe ... you know I was born in India.

MARTHE: You are right to be proud of the fact.

KIT: We need to keep this a secret.

MARTHE: I'm *fairly* good at that.

KIT: The PM wants me to become the next Viceroy of India.

MARTHE: *Le vice-roi*: deputy King!

KIT: I would have a free hand. He wants a freely negotiated solution that would satisfy not only Gandhi and the Maharajas but allow us to retain our vital defence interests. It's an immense task.

MARTHE: Kit, you are tailor-made for this. This is your destiny!

KIT: It could be a crushing responsibility, consuming every waking hour. And the appointment is for five years.

MARTHE: Five glorious years away from stuffy London.

KIT: I was about to tell him I wanted to leave politics and escape from the ball and chain of office into the sweet shackles of marriage.

MARTHE: But what is to stop us doing both. You the deputy King of India with me, no more a princess but your deputy Queen. We shall give the most wonderful balls and receptions. You will go on grand tours of your Dominion and, everywhere you go, I shall be at your side! How did you manage to keep that a secret last night?

KIT: It wasn't easy but it means I've had long enough to think about it, and about some of the consequences.

MARTHE: Consequences?

KIT: First of all there will be virtually no private life.

MARTHE: I know all about leading my private life in public.

KIT: Marthe, listen to me! It would be impossible to *receive* you publicly, or even have you stay in the Vice-regal palace.

MARTHE: You would bar the door to your own *wife*?

KIT: Worse. There is so much protocol surrounding the Viceroy, he would not be permitted to marry a divorcée. And she could never be received at Court.

MARTHE: So what's to happen to me then? Am I to be smuggled into your palace in a laundry basket? Or will you come to me in my grace-and-favour residence: when you can take time off from talking to the Mahatma? Or am I to stay at home in Europe, knitting socks for you and waiting on the next airship to bring you for a flying visit? This is not what we planned!

KIT: This is being thrust upon me. I can put it aside.

MARTHE: Can you? An offer like this is like Pandora's Box. Once you've even so much as heard about it may be impossible to refuse.

KIT: Why so?

MARTHE: Because you would always regret you turned down the chance to play the biggest role in the Empire; short of becoming King yourself. Because you will forever be tormented by the sight of someone else doing the job you were born to do. This is *your* destiny!

KIT: This is *no one's* destiny! This is a political appointment. The title may be Viceroy but the job is one hundred per cent political.

MARTHE: Cometh the hour, Kit! Seize the moment: seize it with both hands!

KIT: Marthe! For fifteen years I've been waiting to seize *you* with both hands! I'd willingly give *up* a crown for you.

MARTHE: You don't *have* to! We can do both. Marry me in secret in Italy, like Romeo and Juliet, then go and spend five years altering the course of British history before we settle down to a dazzling social life.

KIT: Stop! ... Come here! Let me hold you. (*The embrace tenderly and there is a moment of silence.*) My one true love, I am listening to you. I haven't made my mind up and I shan't do so until I return from India next month. Afterwards, you and I will spend some time together, on our own. Wouldn't you like to go back to Normandy?

MARTHE: No, Kit, anywhere but Normandy. Let's go somewhere neither of us has ever been before: a fresh start for both of us.

KIT: Amen to that.

They exit together, arm in arm and the scene is reset.

Towards the rear of the stage are Kit's dressing table, his writing desk and chair. An already packed but still open Gladstone bag is beside the dressing table. Downstage right is Ramsay's round table and one chair. Downstage left is Marthe's chaise longue with pillows and a blanket. KIT is writing at his desk. RAMSAY is reading papers at his table. MARTHE is resting under the blanket but holding a telegram in her hand. Music swells from Tchaikovsky's Pathétique Symphony. As the

lights come up, there is a distant flash of lightning followed by a low rumble of thunder. The men look up momentarily and then resume their former activities. The music fades under the next speech.

KIT (*as he writes*): The fourth of October 1930: My dear Roger, Preparations are complete and there is a car waiting to take me round to say goodbye to the PM. Then we are off to India. I hope to relax for three or four days on the voyage out; my first break since June 1929. The workload of a Cabinet Minister cannot be imagined. I think we'll survive another year but only because the opposition parties are so divided. However, I need to tell you, in absolute confidence, there is talk of my going to India *again* next May; but this time as Viceroy. You can imagine I have mixed feelings. For very personal reasons, I might even decline the offer but I shall not say anything to the PM at this stage. (*He sighs.*) ... I must burden you with a couple of personal matters. You need to know that my up-to-date will is in the drawer of my writing desk. Apart from some very personal bequests I know you will attend to, I have left everything to you. So, as I embark on what could be the greatest adventure of my life, I send you my fondest brotherly love. Yours ever, Kit.

He blots the letter, folds it and puts it into an envelope which he props up against the inkstand. Then he goes to the dressing table and opens the top drawer, taking out the shoe which he kisses before putting it into the Gladstone bag and closing it. He looks round and then picks up the bag and exits left. The theme from Novello's Bitter Sweet swells and then fades again as KIT re-enters right, without the bag, and RAMSAY stands to greet him. They shake hands and RAMSAY grasps Kit's arms in a fond farewell and then waves as KIT exits. RAMSAY sits again and begins to write.

RAMSAY: He brushed aside any thought of the risk. How could he stay at home when it went on its way to attainment? Feeling I was still doubtful, he chaffed me about my earlier desire to cross the Atlantic in R100 and said I was the last man on earth to hold him back. Later, as he descended the stairs, I leant over the balustrade to see the last of him. He stopped and called up in lightsome words that, if the worst came, it would soon be over and that the Fate of all of us was written ... (*He looks up, shakes his head and sighs.*) Ye Gods and little fishes! Will you just look at that rain! (*He stands and picks up papers.*) Well, well: duty calls.

He exits right as the Novello music swells again. Lighting dims on the rest of the stage and MARTHE is favoured. She lifts the letter in her hand and begins to read. The music fades but is sustained underneath her speech [which can be partly voiced by an offstage KIT at the discretion of the director].

MARTHE: "My dearest Marthe, I long to see you. You know that R100 gave me pleasure but R101 will, I hope, bring me joy. To ride the storm has always been my ambition and who knows but we may realise it on

the way to India but not, I hope, with undue risk to human lives. I promise, I shall make no decisions about my future until I see you again. I send you my fondest love, for always, forever, for you alone, Kit.”
(She puts the letter down on her lap.) Oh my darling, I feel so nervous and uncertain. Let *me* be the one to bring you joy, rather than your mechanical toy. Go safely, my sweetheart and come back to me. Come back to me. I feel such agonies of remorse for the way I have treated you over the years. Let me show you how much I love you. Let me show you my gratitude. Kit, oh Kit.

MARTHE lays the letter down on her lap again and turns her head away into her pillow and begins to sob. The Novello music swells then, as the lights dim on *MARTHE*, for the first time we hear these words of the song sung by the hero and heroine of Bitter Sweet..

This sweet memory
Across the years will come to me
Though the end is drawing nigh
I shall love you till I die
In my heart will ever lie
Just the echo of a sigh
Goodbye.

Above the music and eventually drowning it out, we hear the roar of diesel engines and the stage lights go to black. [MARTHE uses the darkness to exit.] There is a sudden brief but brilliant flash of lightning; an awesome clap of thunder; then an impression of flames and finally, silence.

THE END