

Act 1, Scene 1 Ruth & Charles

(RUTH crosses and sits in the armchair. CHARLES is mixing cocktails)

RUTH. Yes. I expect Madame Arcati will want something sweeter. Oh dear!

CHARLES. What's the matter?

RUTH. I have a feeling that this evening's going to be awful.

CHARLES. It'll probably be funny, but not awful.

RUTH. You must promise not to catch my eye. If I giggle it will ruin everything.

CHARLES. We can't hurt the old girl's feelings, however funny she is.

RUTH. But why the Bradmans, darling? He's as skeptical as we are. He'll probably say the most dreadful things.

CHARLES. I've warned him. There must be more than three people and we couldn't have the Vicar and his wife because they wouldn't have approved at all. It had to be the Bradmans. (*CHARLES comes to R of Ruth and gives her a cocktail.*) Here, try this.

RUTH (*sipping it*) Lovely - dry as a bone.

CHARLES (*raising his glass to her*) To 'The Unseen'!

RUTH. That's a wonderful title.

CHARLES. If this evening's a success, I shall start on the first draft tomorrow. Do you remember how I got the idea for *The Light Goes Out*?

RUTH. Seeing that haggard woman in Biarritz. Of course.

CHARLES. She certainly came in very handy. I wonder who she was. (*going to her, taking her glass and moving up to the drinks table*) Have another?

RUTH. Darling - it's most awfully strong.

CHARLES (*pouring it*) Never mind.

RUTH. Used Elvira to be a help to you - when you were thinking something out, I mean?

CHARLES (*pouring out another cocktail for himself*) Every now and then - when she concentrated - but she didn't concentrate very often.

RUTH. I do wish I'd known her.

CHARLES. I wonder if you'd have liked her.

RUTH. I'm sure I should. As you talk of her she sounds enchanting. Yes, I'm sure I should have liked her because you know I have never for an instant felt in the least jealous of her.

CHARLES. Poor Elvira. (*He comes to the L of Ruth and gives her a cocktail*)

RUTH. Does it still hurt? When you think of her?

CHARLES. No, not really. Sometimes I almost wish it did. I feel rather guilty . . .

RUTH. I wonder if I died before you'd grown tired of me if you'd forget me so soon?

CHARLES. What a horrible thing to say.

RUTH. No, I think it's interesting.

CHARLES Well, to begin with, I haven't forgotten Elvira. I remember her very distinctly indeed. I remember how fascinating she was, and how maddening. I remember how badly she played all games and how cross she got when she didn't win. I remember her charm when she had achieved her own way over something and her extreme acidity when she didn't. I remember her physical attractiveness, which was tremendous, and her spiritual integrity, which was nil. And I remember how morally untidy she was.

RUTH. Was she more physically attractive than I am?

CHARLES. That was a very tiresome question, dear, and fully deserves the wrong answer.

RUTH. You really are very sweet.

CHARLES. Thank you.

RUTH. And a little naive, too.

CHARLES. Why?

RUTH. Because you imagine that I mind about Elvira being more physically attractive than I am.

CHARLES. I should have thought any woman would mind - if it were true. Or perhaps I'm old-fashioned in my view of female psychology.

RUTH. Not exactly old-fashioned, darling, just a bit didactic.

CHARLES (*smiling*) I love you, my love.

RUTH. I know you do; but not the wildest stretch of imagination could describe it as the first fine careless rapture.

CHARLES. Would you like it to be?

RUTH. Good God, no!

CHARLES. Wasn't that a shade too vehement?

RUTH. We're neither of us adolescent, Charles; we've neither of us led exactly prim lives, have we? And we've both been married before. Careless rapture at this stage would be incongruous and embarrassing.

CHARLES. I shouldn't like you to think that you'd missed out all along the line.

RUTH. There are moments, Charles, when you go too far.

CHARLES. Sorry, darling.

RUTH. As far as waspish female psychology goes, there's a rather strong vein of it in you.

CHARLES. That's exactly what Elvira used to say.

RUTH. I'm not at all surprised. I never imagined, physically triumphant as she was, that she was entirely lacking in perception.

CHARLES. Darling Ruth!

RUTH. There you go again!

CHARLES (*kissing her lightly*) As I think I mentioned before, I love you, my love.

RUTH. Poor Elvira!

CHARLES She certainly had a great talent for living. It was a pity that she died so young.

RUTH. Poor Elvira!

CHARLES That remark is getting monotonous.

RUTH Poor Charles, then.

CHARLES. That's better.

RUTH. And later on, poor Ruth. (*beat*) If I died, I wonder how long it would be before you married again?

CHARLES. You won't die. You're not the dying sort.

RUTH. Neither was Elvira.

CHARLES. Oh yes, she was, now that I look back on it. She had a certain ethereal, not - quite - of - this - world quality. Nobody could call you even remotely, ethereal.

RUTH. Nonsense! She was of the earth, earthy.

CHARLES. Well, she is now, anyhow.

RUTH. You know that's the kind of observation that shocks people.

CHARLES I was devoted to Elvira. We were married for five years. She died. I missed her very much. That was seven years ago. I have now - with your help, my love risen above the whole thing.

RUTH. Admirable. But if tragedy should darken our lives, I still say - with prophetic foreboding - poor Ruth!