

ACT I

The action of the play takes place in the Doctors' Common Room on the third floor of St Andrew's Hospital, London

It is an old-fashioned, comfortable room reflecting the occupants' profession. There are double swing doors UL leading to a corridor and another pair of double swing doors DR leading to another corridor. A single door UM leads to the toilet/bathroom and a similar door DL leads on to a landing. There are large windows UC with a panoramic view of London in the background. In front of the window is a window seat. There is a 'food and drinks' sideboard over which there is a mirror along the centre of the L wall. A small desk and chair are ULC. A telephone is on the desk. Upstage of the doors DR there are some hooks on which are hanging overcoats, scarves, jackets, etc. Two unmatching armchairs of differing size are situated DLC and DRC. There are various bits and pieces of medical origin scattered around the room. Intermittently snow will be seen falling outside the window

The CURTAIN rises on a snowy morning three days before Christmas. The room is decorated for Christmas and there is a Christmas tree below the UL swing doors. The clock above the swing doors UL shows 10:45 and the time advances with the action of the play

David is discovered writing at the desk. He is in his early fifties, charming and slightly pompous. He is wearing dark trousers and a waistcoat (his jacket is hanging on the back of his chair). He rises and checks his written speech. After a moment he addresses an unseen audience

David "... And so at a time when the world is looking to the medical profession for guidance, for assurance, for higher standards of techniques and professionalism and dedication and — er — *(He checks with his paper)* learning — I ask you, my fellow neurologists, my colleagues from far and wide — *(he points to parts of the audience)* from Australia — Canada — Pakistan — Bulgaria. I ask you to recall the words of the Hippocratic Oath —

Dr Mike Connolly, carrying a plate of mince pies, enters through the door DL. Mike is an exuberant doctor in his late twenties

Mike (*calling off*) I'll carve the turkey and tell that butcher to save his mistakes for surgery.

He chuckles and bangs the door shut. David glares at him as Mike turns and sees him

Mike 'Morning, Dr Mortimore. Have a mince pie?

David I'm busy, Connolly.

Mike Aren't we all, sir? Three days to Christmas and we're only just starting rehearsals for the pantomime. Did Sister Henderson leave a set of Victorian costumes here for me?

David I'm trying to learn this, do you mind?

Mike Is that your Father Christmas speech for the patients?

David (*flatly*) It's my lecture for the Conference this morning.

Mike (*dismissively*) Oh, that?

Mike looks in the dresser for costumes

David It may interest you to know, Connolly, that my fellow neurologists — from as far afield as Iceland and Japan — consider it worthwhile making this journey to London.

Mike crosses to the window seat and opens it

Mike I should think they do. All expenses paid and a week at the Savoy.

David goes back to his speech. Mike has found the costumes, and during the ensuing dialogue he is sorting them out and, at the same time, eating a mince pie

Here we are. What time are you on?

David (*tersely*) Twelve o'clock.

Mike (*ominously*) One hour and fourteen minutes to high noon. Good luck.

David Thank you.

Mike You nervous?

David Yes!

Mike Well, don't worry, with two hundred neurologists out there you won't go short of tranquilizers.

David gives him a cold look and then returns to his speech

David " — for higher standards of techniques, professionalism, dedication and learning, I ask you, my fellow neurologists ...

Rosemary Mortimore enters from DL. She is an attractive woman a little younger than David. She is very smartly dressed and wearing a top coat

... my colleagues from far and wide ... "

Rosemary Sorry to trouble you, David —

David (*exasperated*) Rosemary, darling!

Rosemary I need some change for the parking meter.

David I'm trying to work on my speech. (*He looks for change in his pocket*)

Rosemary Sorry, sweetheart, but I'm double parked. Good-morning, Dr Connolly.

Mike is now trying on a Long John Silver pirate's coat

Mike 'Morning, Mrs Mortimore. You here for the Lecture?

Rosemary You bet. I couldn't miss my husband's big day, could I?

David Your husband's big day will be a fiasco if I don't know my speech.

Rosemary Last night you knew it backwards.

Mike I say, that will be a novelty. Have a mince pie.

Rosemary No thank you.

Mike They're very good. Made by the sister in charge of contagious diseases.

Rosemary I'll wait till Christmas Day.

David Connolly, have you any change on you? (*To Rosemary*) You're very early, aren't you, Rosemary?

Rosemary Sir Willoughby said something about you and I welcoming the delegates into the lecture hall.

Mike (*producing coins*) A couple of quid OK?

Rosemary (*taking the money*) Lovely. David will pay you back. (*To David*) If I don't get another chance, darling, "Good Luck".

David Thank you, dear.

Rosemary You'll be wonderful.

David Thank you!

Rosemary Are you nervous?

David Yes!

Rosemary I'll see you in the lecture hall, Dr Connolly.

Mike moves downstage holding a fairy costume and a wand

Mike No, I've got more important things to do than that.

David Thank you, Connolly.

Mike I'm rehearsing for the Boxing Day pantomime.

Rosemary Ah, well, that is important, of course. Are you in it this year, David?

David (*tersely*) In what, dear?

Mike The St Andrew's pantomime.

David Connolly, all I'm interested in at the moment is the Ponsonby Lecture and my two hundred fellow neurologists.

Rosemary Actually, darling, I think the two hundred neurologists might be happier if you gave them the pantomime instead of the lecture.

Rosemary smiles and exits DL

Mike laughs. David gives him a cold look

David Connolly, why don't you wave that and disappear?

Mike returns to his costumes and David to his speech

"I — I ask you, my fellow neurologists —"

Dr Hubert Bonney enters from DR. He is an insignificant but enthusiastic man in his early fifties

Hubert Ah, there you are, David!

David God!

Hubert removes his white jacket and takes his suit jacket from the pegs DR

Hubert 'Morning, Mike.

Mike 'Morning, Dr Bonney. Are you all right for today's rehearsal?

Hubert Oh, yes, I'll be there. (*To David.*) Just thought I'd wish you good luck.

David Thank you, Hubert.

Hubert Big day, eh?

David Yes.

Hubert You nervous?

David Yes! But with two hundred neurologists out there I won't be short of tranquilizers, will I?

Hubert (*innocently*) Would you like a tranquilizer?

David No! Hubert, I'm trying to work on my lecture.

Hubert Ah. I'll let you get on with it then.

David Thank you.

David returns his attention to his papers

Hubert Are you memorizing the whole speech?

David I'm trying to!

Hubert (*impressed*) I say! I'm finding it difficult enough remembering my first line in Dr Connolly's melodrama. I'm the villain, aren't I, Mike?

Mike You are indeed.

Hubert I have to come on and say to Matron — she's the heroine — I have to say, "Ahoy in front and avast behind." (*To Mike.*) Are you sure that's a big laugh?

Mike A belter.

Hubert Yes. I don't quite see why.

David Hubert, shouldn't you be on your rounds?

Hubert Just finished. Well, what a day, eh? I never thought when we were students here you'd be up on that rostrum one day delivering the Ponsonby Lecture.

David If you don't stop nattering I won't be delivering anything.

Hubert Of course. My dear fellow. Would you like me to make you a nice cup of tea?

David No, thank you.

Mike puts a red hat on David's head

Mike (*as he does so*) There's your Father Christmas hat. You couldn't cope with him and play a dead body in my melodrama, could you?

David Just take your costumes and go.

Mike I suggested we borrow a real body from the mortuary but Dr Saunders wouldn't have it.

Matron enters UL wheeling a hospital trolley on top of which is what looks like a body covered in a sheet. Matron is a large lady

Matron Excuse me, gentlemen.

David People are in and out of here like a stomach pump.

Matron Oh, we are a grumpy Father Christmas, aren't we?

David Matron, this is supposed to be the Doctors' Common Room.

Matron Correct, and I'm taking a shortcut.

Mike Of course. Quite right. Don't apologize, Matron.

Matron I wasn't going to.

Hubert (*referring to the trolley*) Matron, is that anyone we know?

Matron (*lifting the sheet*) The patients' Christmas presents. (*She reveals a trolley full of wrapped Christmas packages*)

Hubert Very good. I'll give you a hand, shall I? (*He pushes the trolley DR*)

Matron Thank you, Dr Bonney. We're keeping them in the mortuary until Christmas Day.

Mike And don't forget, Matron, rehearsals are about to commence.

Matron Rehearsals.

Hubert Dr Connolly's melodrama.

Matron I haven't got time for that.

Hubert (*as they go*) Matron, perhaps you could explain the significance of "Ahoy in front and avast behind"?

Matron gives Hubert a severe look and they exit DR with the trolley

Mike (*to David*) I hope I'm not going to have to explain all the bad jokes to Dr Bonney.

David Connolly, will you either be quiet or go and rehearse.

Mike (*putting a lady's bonnet on his head*) My, but you're so masterful!

Sir Willoughby Drake enters from DL. He is an elderly, stern gentleman

Drake Is Dr Mortimore anywhere ...?

He stops on seeing Mike wearing the bonnet

Who are you, sir?

Mike Dr Connolly, sir. One of the housemen.

Drake Is that the headgear you're wearing this year?

Mike Mm? Oh, no, Sir Willoughby. Rehearsing for the pantomime.

Would you care for a mince pie, sir?

Drake (*interrupting*) Get out. I want to speak to Dr Mortimore.

Drake pours himself a stiff whisky as Mike collects up his costumes

Mike Yes, of course. May I take this opportunity to wish you a very Happy Christmas, Sir Willoughby?

Drake Clear off!

Mike starts to go, but returns

Mike I don't suppose you'd like to play the fairy?

Drake glares at him

Mike exits DR

David Good-morning, Sir Willoughby.

Drake (*impatiently*) Yes, yes, yes. Now, Mortimore, I don't have to emphasize the importance of the Annual Ponsonby Lecture —

David Certainly not, Sir Willoughby.

Drake Don't interrupt, please.

David Sorry.

Drake As Chairman of the Board of Governors and past Head Surgeon of St Andrew's I consider that I'm in a unique position —

David You most certainly are. Do sit down, sir.

Drake (*ignoring this*) A unique position when it comes to selecting the Ponsonby Lecturer. This year, Mortimore, I don't think it's any secret that you were not the first choice for the role.

David (*lightly*) Well, I'd heard rumours that I wasn't top of the list.

Drake You were bottom. However, beggars can't be choosers. Against my advice Neurology was designated this year's subject. You're the senior specialist here. *Ipsa facto* — you're delivering the Ponsonby Lecture. (*He tops his glass up*)

David I won't let you down, Sir Willoughby.

Drake God help you, if you do. Does your speech contain any references to the present government?

David Definitely not, sir.

Drake Well, put some in, you damn fool.

David Oh, right. Any references in particular?

Drake Complimentary ones, for heaven's sake. The Junior Health Minister's attending the lecture and we need a new scanner.

David (*writing*) Complimentary references it will be, sir.

Drake And plead poverty.

David Poverty, right.

Drake But don't let those overseas medicos think we're hard up.

David Right. Not hard up but plead poverty.

Drake And keep it brief. Neurology numbs the brain. See me in my office in five minutes. I'd better vet this speech of yours.

David Thank you, sir. Most kind. Five minutes.

Drake (*hesitating, fractionally*) The Ponsonby Lecture could be the step up to Head Physician for you here.

David Well, of course, I hadn't even allowed myself to think that far ahead.

Drake Damn liar. You know full well there's a tradition at St Andrew's that the Ponsonby Lecture is practically a direct line to a knighthood.

David (*hoarsely*) Knighthood.

Drake Why do you think I got mine?

David (*innocently*) I've often wondered about that.

Drake Five minutes!

Drake exits DR

David immediately starts to address his unseen audience

David "— Fellow neurologists — we're fortunate in this country to — er — have more than sufficient funds to maintain a robust vigorous Health Service. However, I see that we have the Junior Minister for Health in our audience — and for him I'd like to plead poverty."

Jane's head appears round the door DL, unseen by David. She is about forty, pretty and cuddly

"Now, although I must be — er — brief — I would like to compliment the government on — er —"

Jane Excuse me —

David (*jumping*) For heaven's sake.

Jane Sorry, I didn't mean —

David (*interrupting*) This is the Doctors' Common Room.

Jane Yes, I know.

David Patients' Waiting Room is downstairs in the Main Hall.

Jane It's you I want to see, Dr Mortimore.

David The receptionist will make an appointment for you and I'm afraid you'll need a note from your GP.

Jane It's me, Dr Mortimore. Jane.

David (*blankly*) Jane? (*Suddenly realizing*) Good heavens! Nurse Tate.

Jane I didn't mean to give you a shock.

David Yes — no — well, — good heavens!

Jane It's been a long time. Over eighteen years.

David Good heavens! You don't look a day older.

Jane (*grinning*) Is that why you recognized me right away?

David Well, no *more* than a day. And you were always the prettiest on the ward.

Jane And that's what you said to all the nurses.

David Nonsense, you were the prettiest, and as far as I was concerned, the most efficient.

Jane As far as you were concerned, I was certainly the most accommodating.

David Nurse Tate, please! (*He hastily closes the door DL*) I don't do — what we did — with all the nurses.

Jane Just some of them, eh?

David Miss Tate — Jane — I'm a very happily married man.

Jane You were a very happily married man eighteen years ago.

David Yes, I was, and still am. Anyway, to the best of my recollection you were perfectly willing.

Jane Yes, of course. It was wonderfully naughty and romantic. Rolling around out there on the Sluice Room floor.

David Well, it's grand seeing you, after all this time.

Jane (*suddenly*) Oh God! May I sit down? My knees are knocking. (*She sits*)

David I'm a bit worried about the time actually. I'm delivering the Ponsonby Lecture this morning.

Jane (*suddenly rising*) I should have told you eighteen years ago.

David Told me what?

Jane Didn't you ever wonder why I suddenly left the hospital? Without even saying goodbye properly?

David Well, I remember thinking that it seemed a bit abrupt.

Jane I was expecting.

David Expecting what?

Jane After what we did what do you think I was expecting?

David Couldn't have been a raise. *(He chuckles at his joke)*

Jane I left the hospital to have a baby.

David *(still chuckling)* A baby! *(Suddenly realizing)* A baby?

Jane Yes!

David We had a baby?

Jane It was my fault. Stupid. A nurse getting herself pregnant.

David Hardly brilliant for a doctor, either. Do you mind if I sit down? *(He sits)*

Jane Can I get you anything?

David Like a cigar? *(Rising)* I can't sit down, I've got to see Sir Willoughby Drake in five minutes. *(Sitting)* And my wife will be back any moment ... *(Rising)* Oh, my God, my wife! *(Sitting)* This really is one hell of a ... *(He rises)* It might not be mine, of course, Miss Tate.

Jane It is. There wasn't anyone else.

David *(sitting)* Oh, good.

Jane I so nearly told you at the time, but then I thought there was no need to make a mess of your life as well. You were ambitious. Hoping to specialize.

David Miss Tate, this really is a very busy morning for me. Why have you suddenly decided to tell me after all this time?

Jane Because of Leslie.

David Leslie?

Jane That's our son.

David Our baby's a little boy, is he?

Jane Les is quite a big boy now.

David Yes, I suppose he would be.

Jane Well, I'd always told Leslie that his father's name was Tate. And that I was Mrs Tate.

David *(curtly)* That's very good.

Jane And that Mr Tate had died when Leslie was a tiny baby seventeen years ago.

David *(curtly)* Excellent.

Jane Climbing the Himalayas.

David Himalayas?

Jane I thought it was nice for a little boy to have a picture of his daddy as a sort of romantic hero.

David Fine.

Jane Then yesterday I told Les the truth.

David *(aghast)* You did what?

Jane It was his eighteenth birthday.

David And that was his present, was it?

Jane No. I'd come round to thinking that when he was eighteen he should know the real truth about his father.

David *(mortified)* Miss Tate!

Jane I didn't say it was *you* exactly. I mean not by name.

David What *did* you say exactly?

Jane Just that I'd had an affair with a young doctor here in St Andrew's when I was a trainee nurse and that he was already married.

David That was all right.

Jane No it wasn't. I didn't appreciate what it would mean to Les. All day yesterday he went on about it. I'd never seen him like this. Laughing and crying.

David God!

Jane And as it was his birthday, we'd had some champagne. I don't think that helped.

David But you didn't actually tell him my name.

Jane No, but this morning the poor boy was in dreadful condition. He'd taken some pills last night because he couldn't sleep but they hadn't worked so he'd finished off the champagne.

David Good God!

Jane Washing down with half a bottle of gin.

David Champagne, gin and pills?!

Jane Yes.

David If you'd done that eighteen and a half years ago we wouldn't have had this problem today.

Jane He was quite hysterical. He seemed to think it was all your fault.

David My fault?

Jane For deserting me and leaving him fatherless.

David Dammit, I didn't even know about "Les" until five minutes ago.

Jane He's very confused.

David *He's* confused?!

Jane If you could have seen him this morning. I should have insisted he stayed in bed. He's only got a learner driving licence, you see.

David *(after a pause)* A learner driving licence?

Jane He said he'd made up his mind to come to the hospital and find out who his father was.