

"THE PLAY'S THE THING"

BY

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Time: 1938

Set: A luxury apartment

Cast:

Charles Standon: A distinguished actor, in his 50's

Greta: His wife. 30's. Attractive

Larry Ames: A good looking young actor, in his 30's

Betty: A maid. 20's

Harry: Her boyfriend. Also in his 20's

The lounge of a luxury apartment in London. It is furnished with 1930's style furniture. There is a large couch, two armchairs, a writing desk, a cocktail cabinet, a television set and a telephone. There are two doors. One leads to the hall, and the other to the dining room.

As the curtain rises, off stage we hear the voice of Charles.

CHARLES: I want the truth. It was you Greta, wasn't it? Why won't you answer me?

GRETA enters from the dining room, followed by CHARLES.

GRETA: Alright, alright, alright, it was me.

CHARLES: And how many other cheques have you forged my signature?

GRETA turns away from him.

CHARLES: Look Greta, you had better tell me the truth. It's easy enough for me to find out. Well!

GRETA: One other, about six months ago.

CHARLES: For what sum?

GRETA: Fifty pounds, I think.

CHARLES: And now seventy pounds, why?

GRETA: I needed the money.

CHARLES: Why didn't you ask me?

GRETA: I'm sick of asking you. I have to ask you for every penny.

CHARLES: If you were more responsible you wouldn't have to.

GRETA: You're a mean bastard.

CHARLES take a deep breath and is about to speak.

GRETA: Oh no, not to your friends. You're a soft touch to any old actor, or someone collecting for charity. But when it comes to me....

CHARLES: You get a perfectly adequate allowance.

GRETA scoffs.

CHARLES: What did you need this money for?

GRETA: A debt to a bookmaker.

CHARLES: Oh no! I presume it was the horses?

GRETA: Yes.

CHARLES: How long has this gambling been going on?

GRETA: Oh... I don't know. Maybe a year.

CHARLES: And how much have you lost?

GRETA: I haven't always lost. At one period I was winning around twenty pounds a week.

CHARLES: And now?

GRETA: I've just hit a bad patch, that's all. A losing streak.

CHARLES: But you expect it to change?

GRETA: Yes, of course.

CHARLES: You're a fool Greta. Haven't you anything better to do with your money?

GRETA: Anyone's a fool according to you, who spends money on anything with which you disagree.

CHARLES: I don't think you realise when you're well off.

GRETA: Oh not that again.

CHARLES: You don't appreciate the standard of living we have.

GRETA: Meaning that I had nothing before we were married.

CHARLES: Well, you weren't exactly living in luxury, were you?

GRETA: I wasn't doing too badly.

CHARLES: No!

GRETA: I could have been a star by now.

CHARLES: What rot. You had no acting ability, and you know it.

GRETA: I was never really given the chance to find out.

CHARLES: Nonsense. When you had an opportunity to go into rep, you turned it down.

GRETA: Oh, big deal.

CHARLES: You could have gained a wealth of experience from acting in repertory, far more than at the Windmill.

GRETA: I went to the Windmill because it paid more money. Oh it's alright for you to talk, you've always had it. I wasn't so lucky.

CHARLES: It's true that I came from a reasonably well-off home, but I had my bad times. My father cut off my allowance when I told him I had decided to go on the stage. It took me a long while to become established.

GRETA: It wasn't only because of the money. I never wanted to be a straight actress, I wanted to do musical comedy.

CHARLES: And I imagine you thought from standing still on a pedestal, in a supposedly artistic pose, you could observe the whole of the musical comedy scene.

GRETA: Very funny. If we're going to be personal, you know Charles Standon, is not such a great actor.

CHARLES: I have never considered myself to be a great actor. However, 'Forgotten Summer' enters its second year on Wednesday, so I cannot be too bad.

GRETA: I never said you were bad. But you're old fashioned, your acting is mannered. Sure you're popular in the West-End, but I doubt if your performance would go down so well out in the sticks. Your appeal is to the older generation. They still think of you as a Matinee Idol.

CHARLES: Maybe. About the cheques, I shall overlook it this time. But if it happens again I can't promise to be so lenient.

GRETA: It won't happen again.

CHARLES: After all, forgery is a criminal offence.

GRETA: I said, it won't happen again.

CHARLES: Very well, we'll consider the subject closed.

GRETA sits on the couch and picks up a magazine. CHARLES glances around the room.

CHARLES: You've changed the room around. The desk was better where it was before.

GRETA: I don't agree.

CHARLES: You've done this before and it always ends up back in its original position.

GRETA: Only because of you.

CHARLES: Because it happens to be the best position.

GRETA: There is nothing wrong in rearranging furniture sometimes.

CHARLES: Not if it improves the room, but in this room everything is in its right place, other than the desk.

GRETA: Oh you infuriate me.

CHARLES: It doesn't take much to do that.

GRETA: This whole room reminds me of a stage set. Once everything is in its place, nothing can be changed.

CHARLES: Not a bad arrangement.

The telephone rings.

GRETA: Well, there's your cue. Answer it.

CHARLES moves to the telephone.

CHARLES: Mayfair 6211... Oh, hello John....
When did it happen? Is there anything
I can do? I can come up. Don't be silly,
of course I can. Just try to calm down
and I'll catch a train up as soon as I
can. Alright John, see you this evening,
goodbye.

CHARLES replaces the receiver.

CHARLES: Kathy, she's gone. As you heard, John
wants me to go up there.

GRETA: Why, what can you do?

CHARLES: Provide sympathy. Make arrangements
for the funeral. He sounded very
distressed.

GRETA: He knew it might happen any day.

CHARLES: I know, but it's still a shock even
when you're expecting it.

GRETA: I can understand you going to the
funeral, but surely he can make the
arrangements.

CHARLES: He'll be lost without Kathy, and I
am his only brother. He never was any
good at organising things. As boys I
always had to help him. Come with me.

GRETA: No, he didn't like me.

CHARLES: Nonsense.

GRETA: He may be your kid brother, but he's
a man now. He must be nearly fifty.

CHARLES: Age doesn't come into it. Certain
people always need someone to guide
them. Probably difficult for you to
understand, Greta, being so sure of
yourself. I shall go and pack a few
things, then I'll be off.

CHARLES exits.

GRETA: Oh god!

GRETA lights a cigarette. We hear the
sound of the front door buzzer. A few
seconds later the door from the hall
opens and BETTY, the maid, enters.

BETTY: There's a Mr Ames here, Madam.

GRETA reacts suddenly.

GRETA: What name did you say?

BETTY: Ames. He wishes to see Mr Standon.

GRETA: Oh well you'd better show him in.

BETTY exits. GRETA quickly tidies her hair. BETTY returns followed by LARRY AMES, a good looking man in his twenties. He is carrying a large envelope.

BETTY: Mr Ames.

GRETA: Thank you Betty.

LARRY waits until BETTY has left the room, then moves towards GRETA.

LARRY: Greta darling.

GRETA: Are you mad coming here? Charles is in another room.

LARRY: It was him I came to see.

GRETA: Why?

LARRY: About my play. (He taps the envelope he is holding). I got taken to the 'Ivy' for lunch the other day. Charles came in and sat at the next table. This chum of mine, knows him. He told him about my play and your old man suggested I let him read it. It's as simple as that.

GRETA: So Charles ask you to call?

LARRY: Well, no. I suppose I could have put it in the post, but it seemed too good an opportunity to miss, an excuse to see you.

GRETA: I saw you Wednesday.

LARRY: It's Sunday today, almost a week. I love you Greta, I want to be with you all the time. I thought you felt the same

GRETA: I do, you know I do.

LARRY: Well we can't go on like this,
we've got to talk about it.

GRETA: But not now.

LARRY: I hate having to share you.

GRETA: You don't share me, not in the way
you mean.

CHARLES enters. He is carrying a small
suitcase.

CHARLES: I'm off now, I'll be...
(He sees Larry) Oh hello Mister..

GRETA: Ames. He's brought a copy of his play
for you to read.

LARRY: I hope you didn't mind me calling.

CHARLES: Not at all, but I'm afraid you've
called at a rather inconvenient time
as I have to catch a train to Birmingham;
family matter.

LARRY: That's alright, I only wanted to leave
you the manuscript.

CHARLES: Well, at least you must have a drink.
Greta will look after you.

GRETA: What can I get you Larry?

CHARLES: You two know each other?

GRETA: Yes, we met when I was touring.

CHARLES: If you let me have the script, I'll
look at it on the train.

LARRY: Thank you.

LARRY hands the envelope to CHARLES.

CHARLES: You must excuse me now.

CHARLES goes to GRETA and kisses her
on the cheek.

CHARLES: Goodbye Greta. I'll be back in time
for tomorrow night's performance.

GRETA: Bye Charles.

LARRY: Goodbye.

CHARLES leaves. GRETA goes to the cocktail cabinet. LARRY sits down.

LARRY: What was all that about?

GRETA: Oh, his sister-in-law's died. He's gone to hold his brother's hand. What would you like?

LARRY: G and T please.

GRETA pours the drinks and hands one to LARRY.

LARRY: Thanks. You smell gorgeous.

GRETA: You like the perfume?

LARRY: Mmmm.

LARRY puts his drink down, gets up and embraces GRETA. She doesn't object, but after a second, gently pushes him away.

GRETA: We must be careful. Betty's in the flat.

LARRY: Do you want to hear my good news?

GRETA: Yes.

LARRY: I was offered a part in a play, today.

GRETA: Oh, wonderful darling. I am pleased for you. I know how much you hate that job.

LARRY: It's not much money. In fact, by the time I've paid expenses it won't work out much more than I get at the shop. But at least it's back in the business.

GRETA: When do you open?

LARRY: We start rehearsals in two weeks and go on tour next month.

GRETA: I wish I were coming with you.

LARRY: But you can. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. They're looking for a girl for the second lead. I'm sure you would get the part.

GRETA: You're joking.

LARRY: No, I'm serious. The stage manager's a buddy of mine. He'll put in a word for you with the producers. I've got to see them again on Tuesday. If you come along with me.....

GRETA: Hold it Larry. I can't take the job.

LARRY: Why not? You said you wanted to get back on the boards again. Besides it gives us a wonderful opportunity to be together.

GRETA: I can't just leave here and go on tour.

LARRY: Why not?

GRETA: Well there's Charles. I don't know what he'd say.

LARRY: Does it matter. You'll be on tour for a few weeks. He'll understand. He's an actor isn't he?

GRETA: No. I couldn't. He wouldn't let me.

LARRY: Are you afraid of him?

GRETA moves away from LARRY. He follows her.

LARRY: Has he struck you again?

GRETA: No, but I don't want to upset him. You don't know what he's like when he loses his temper. He's liable to do anything.

LARRY: Greta, why don't you leave him and come with me.

GRETA: Oh Larry. You're a poppet, but be reasonable. What would we do for money?

LARRY: We'd both be working.

GRETA: For how long? And for what?

LARRY: I'd be satisfied with it, just to be with you.

GRETA: You are very sweet.

LARRY: I don't care that much about money. And it hasn't brought happiness to you.

GRETA: No. But I've got used to living like this.

LARRY: If the play's a success, in a short while we could be living like this.

GRETA: You haven't changed, have you Larry? Still putting all your faith into the future.

LARRY: I have to. I'm looking for something better than the past.

GRETA: I already have something better, and I don't want to lose it.

LARRY: Don't place too much importance on possessions. The way things are going in Europe, it's possible there will be a war. You must grab opportunity when it's there.

GRETA: You think I don't know that? But I've become accustomed to a certain amount of luxury. I can't give it up just like that. Besides, he would never let me go.

LARRY: Then you should leave him. Divorce him.

GRETA: Oh I couldn't do that. I haven't any grounds.

LARRY: It doesn't have to be adultery any more. Under that new act, you can cite him for cruelty.

GRETA: He hasn't actually been cruel.

LARRY: Well, mental cruelty then.

GRETA: No.

LARRY: Yet you say that you do not love him.

GRETA: I don't. I love you, and I'd like it to stay that way. But not in dreary bed-sits and dingy dressing rooms.

LARRY: I take it that means you're not interested in doing the play?

GRETA: I'm sorry.

LARRY: Then I'm not interested in doing it either.

GRETA: Oh don't be silly. You must take it, an opportunity to get back into the business.

LARRY: No. I couldn't bear it, weeks on end away from you.

GRETA: Oh Larry.

GRETA embraces LARRY.

LARRY: I'll stay on at the shop for the time being. Now that I've started writing, if I can get my play produced, then I'll take up writing full time. It could solve our problems.

GRETA: That would be wonderful. What is your play about?

LARRY: You could say that it's rather like our situation.

GRETA: Oh yes.

LARRY: Well, briefly, it's the old triangle story. Wife of a wealthy man in love with another, who, like me hasn't any money.

GRETA: It does sound very familiar.

LARRY: The husband is aware of his wife's association with the man, but he loves her and doesn't wish to lose her. At first he takes no notice of the affair, hoping it will pass. But it doesn't.

GRETA: So far darling, I can't say I find it very original.

LARRY: Well, I'm only giving you the basic plot. There's a lot more to it.

GRETA: How does it end?

LARRY: Finally the whole thing comes to a climax when he finds the two of them together at his home. Realising that his wife only stays with him because of his money, He decides to demonstrate to the boy friend, just how much money does mean to his wife. He takes a revolver and a copy of his will from a desk. He tells his wife he has altered the will, and that if he should die now, she would receive nothing. He then raises the gun to his temple and says he will count three, and then fire. He is certain, under the circumstances, that she will stop him. But she doesn't, so he fires.

GRETA: Just like that eh!

LARRY: As I said, there's a lot more to it. It turns out that he only had a short time to live anyway. What do you think?

GRETA is deep in thought. She doesn't speak for a moment.

GRETA: Yes. It's not bad.

LARRY: You don't sound very enthusiastic.

GRETA: I was thinking. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he did.

LARRY: If who did what?

GRETA: Charles.

LARRY: Oh yes, I can hear the audience at the first night calling for the author.

GRETA: I didn't mean that.

LARRY: What then?

GRETA: I meant, wouldn't it be wonderful if he did commit suicide.

LARRY: Really Greta, It's naughty to say things like that.

GRETA: I was just imagining what things could be like for us, if he did.

LARRY: It would solve our problems. Oh well, perhaps he'll be in a train accident.

GRETA: Things don't happen so conveniently. Accidents need planning.

LARRY: What do you mean?

GRETA: What do you think I mean?

LARRY: You are not suggesting that we arrange a train accident?

GRETA: No, not a train accident.

LARRY: But you are suggesting something else?

GRETA: Well?

LARRY looks seriously at GRETA for a moment, then smiles.

LARRY: You're joking. You must be. One moment you refuse to give up this life of luxury, and the next you talk of taking a chance of jeopardizing it all.

GRETA: I'm in real trouble now. Up to my neck in debt.

LARRY: Surely Charles will....

GRETA: Charles...? Don't make me laugh. I have to fight for every penny.

LARRY: You must have some money.

GRETA: No. I have nothing.

LARRY: You could sell something. Jewellery. I know, your car. You don't really need a Lagonda.

GRETA: I've already borrowed money against the car and haven't been able to keep up with the repayments. They keep sending me nasty letters. I'm afraid they'll come and take the car. Charles would kill me if he knew.

LARRY: I'm sure he'd help, if you asked.

GRETA: No Larry, he literally would kill me.
(She starts to cry) Unless we kill him first. It's him or me.

LARRY: You really are serious.

GRETA: Yes. If you love me, help me. Please.

LARRY: I do love you. I'd do anything for you.

GRETA: Really.

LARRY: Yes... But not murder.

GRETA: You've no reason to have any love for Charles, you know. Remember that play you were up for the lead, a couple of years ago? Well, Charles Standon was the reason that you didn't get the part.

LARRY: Why?

GRETA: Because he suggested another actor to the producer.

LARRY: Look Greta, I do sympathise with you regarding your problems and when I said I'd do anything for you, I meant it. But I do draw the line at murder. I'm sure it's only this highly emotional state you're in that made you suggest such a thing.

GRETA: (Starting to cry again) You're right. I'm sorry, Larry.

LARRY: I can let you have a few quid each week, if it will help.

GRETA: It's very sweet of you, but it wouldn't be enough.

LARRY: If Charles does take the play, I can probably get an advance on the royalties. I'll give it to you.

GRETA: Thank you, but it's a big 'if'. He reads many plays. Only a few get taken-up. And even if he was interested, these things take time to put together, and by then it will be too late.

LARRY: Well I don't know what else to suggest. I can't think of any other way I can help you.

GRETA: Let's forget about it for the moment, shall we?

LARRY: I'm sure something will turn up, Greta. Things are never as bad as they seem.

GRETA: I've heard that before. I hope you have written more original dialogue than that in your play.

LARRY: I think I have.

GRETA: What have you called it?

LARRY: The Rehearsal. What do you think of that as a title?

GRETA: It's alright, I suppose.

LARRY: It can easily be changed.

GRETA: (As in deep thought) Yes... Yes thinking about it The Rehearsal is a good title. Yes, very good (Getting enthusiastic) I'm sure what you said is right.

LARRY: What did I say?

GRETA: You said your play could solve all our problems, and darling, you could be so right.

LARRY looks mystified. GRETA kisses him.

Blackout - End of scene one.

SCENE TWO

About a week later.

The set is the same as for scene one.

CHARLES enters from the dining room. He goes to the cocktail cabinet and pours himself a drink.

CHARLES: What ever made you ask Ames over, tonight?

GRETA enters from the hall. She is wearing a smart Cocktail dress and is smoking a cigarette in a holder. She picks up a fashion magazine and sits down on the couch.

GRETA: I didn't hear what you said.

CHARLES: I said, why did you invite Ames, tonight?

GRETA: You said you wanted to see him. Tonight's as good as any other, isn't it?

CHARLES: I suppose so. Oh I went to tell Betty that there'd be one more for dinner. But it's her evening off. She's going out.

GRETA: I forgot that when I invited him over. But it doesn't matter, there's plenty in the frig.

CHARLES goes and picks up the telephone and starts to dial.

GRETA: Who are you 'phoning?

CHARLES: Renaros, to book a table.

GRETA: No don't.

GRETA gets up from the couch, comes over to CHARLES and takes the receiver from him and replaces it. She also stubs her cigarette out.

GRETA: I'll make dinner.

CHARLES: What's this sudden interest in the culinary arts?

GRETA: I am capable of preparing a simple cold meal. Or did you want something more elaborate?