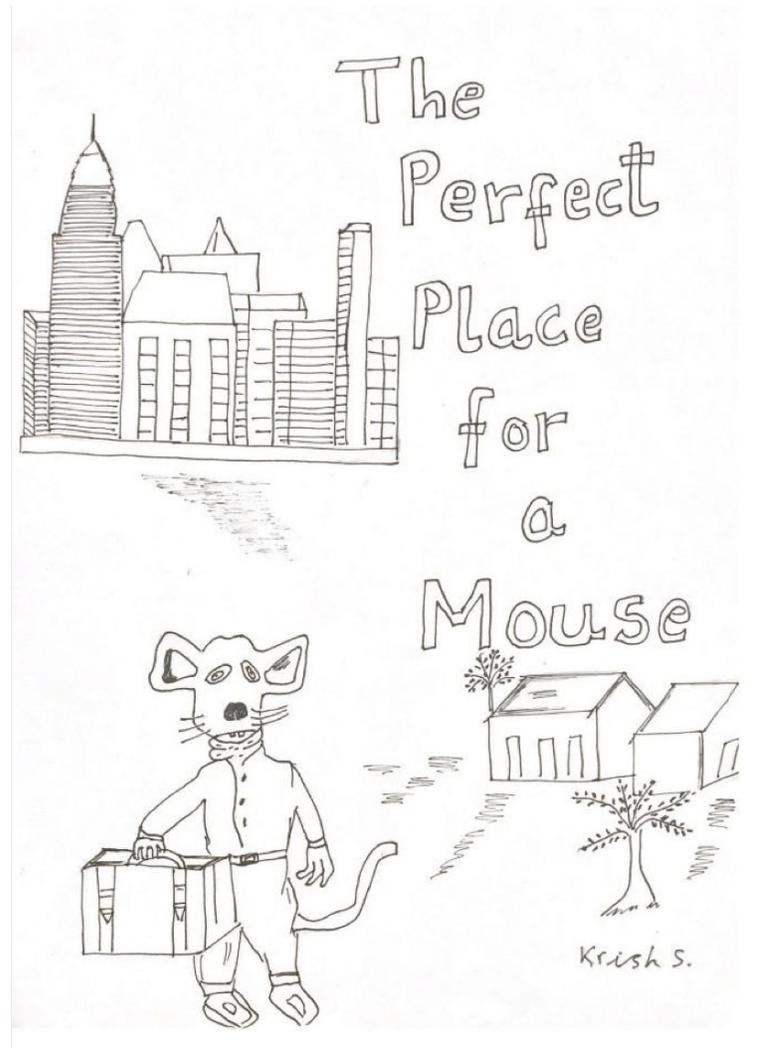


The Perfect Place for a Mouse



by Nicholas Richards

A young man visits his country cousin,
accompanied by his capable valet.
A Wodehousian tale with added fables

Copyright © January 2022 Nicholas Richards and Off The Wall Play Publishers

<https://offthewallplays.com>

This script is provided for reading purposes only. Professionals and amateurs are hereby advised that it is subject to royalty. It is fully protected under the laws of the United States of America, the British Empire, including the Dominion of Canada, and all other countries of the Copyright Union. All rights, including but not limited to professional, amateur, film, radio, and all other media (including use on the worldwide web) and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved; and any unauthorized use of the material may subject the user to any and all applicable civil and criminal penalties. For any information about royalties or to apply for a performance license please click the following link:

<https://offthewallplays.com/royalties-and-licensing-of-plays-sold-by-off-the-wall-plays/>

Synopsis

Peregrine Mouse, a young man about town, visits the farm of his country cousin, accompanied by his sage valet Aesop. The play is interspersed with apposite fables.

Dramatis Personae

Hon. Peregrine Mouse – a young man of urban leisure
Aesop – valet to Peregrine
Aunt Gertrude (Lady Nonsuch) – Aunt to Peregrine
Archibald ffield-Mouse– a farmer, cousin to Peregrine
Honesty ffield-Mouse– his wife
Sincerity}
Goodwill}
Makepeace} - sons of Archibald and Honesty
Clifton Spragg – associate of Webster
Wilfrid Webster – owner of Webster Construction
Derwyn Williams – employee of Archibald
The Fox and Grapes scene
George} – landlord
Alun} – old regular, arachnophile
The Major}
Thomas Williams} (brother to Derwyn)
Robin}
Harry}
Owain}
Joseff}
Bartholomew Hound}
Ignatius Hound} – thugs of the night
Molossians – mysterious masked men of the night
Policeman

Fabularum Personae

Narrators
Hare
Tortoise
Old Man
Death
Various Mice
Cat
Shepherd Boy
Wolf
Villagers
Mr Wolf
Mr Lamb
Cricket
Ant

1. The Town Mouse at home

An elegant bachelor town flat. Centre a table and two chairs. Enter Left Peregrine Mouse, a young gentleman of leisure, bleary and disheveled, with a spot of shaving foam on his ear and a coloured ribbon in his hair. He shuffles to the table and sits. Running his hand through his hair, he finds the ribbon, which he inspects with puzzlement. Enter Upstage at a glide Aesop, his elegant valet, bearing a silver tray on which are a glass of water, a letter and a letter opener; over his arm a white cloth.

Aesop: Good morning, sir.

Peregrine You had an enjoyable evening, I trust.

Peregrine: Rrrr...
(Peregrine takes the glass from Aesop and pours the water over his head. Aesop hands him the cloth.)

Aesop: A letter, sir. *(Peregrine takes the letter and considers it foggily.)*

Aesop: Lady Nonsuch telephoned earlier this morning, sir.

Peregrine: Mrrrr...?! Wrrrr.

Aesop: Indeed, sir. She said that she would call later.

Peregrine: Whatimesitnow?

Aesop: It is already *later*, sir. I suspect that your aunt's arrival is imminent.
(Peregrine shakes his head vigorously to let the morning in. Aesop takes a letter opener from the tray and offers it to Peregrine, who takes the opener in his left hand and fumbles with the letter.)

Peregrine: What's bringing the ancient relative hither at this early hour?

Aesop: I couldn't say, sir.

(Peregrine struggles half-heartedly with opening the letter, the knife wielded clumsily by his left hand.)

Aesop: You are right-handed, sir.

(Peregrine puts the knife in his right hand and applies it to the letter, then stops thoughtfully.)

Peregrine: You know, Aesop...

Aesop: Sir?

Peregrine: I need a holiday.

Aesop: (*With raised eyebrow*) Indeed, sir?

Peregrine: I know what you're thinking. The Honourable Peregrine Mouse is a gentleman of leisure. Nothing that could be called 'work' clouds his waking hours – and so why should this... What's that word beginning with *f*? Means a chap who saunters around town.

Aesop: *Flâneur* is the word I believe you are looking for, sir.

Peregrine: That's the one. Why should this... *flâneur* require a holiday? Well let me tell you. All these late nights... Dinners, dances and what-have-you till the early hours...they take a toll on a man, you know, Aesop. They take a toll.

Aesop: My sympathies, sir.

Peregrine: Quite simply I need a break from the social whirl. A spell of quiet and calm to recover the wonted vim.

Aesop: Perhaps if you aimed to reach your bed before midnight, sir...

Peregrine: How can a fellow of my age have early nights in London? Why, give it a few minutes and young Tuffy Trotter will be on the blower telling me to hoof it to post-haste the Club – and the merry whirl-a-gig will have begun anew.

Aesop: You could always decline the invitation, sir.

Peregrine: Say no to *Tuffy*?! Unthinkable!

Aesop: What you need, sir, is aptly described by the phrase *rest-cure*. My Uncle Oswald used to take an annual rest cure at a spa in Switzerland.

Peregrine: *Switzerland*? Not exactly at the bottom of the garden, is it?

Aesop: There is the element of distance, sir. Boats and trains would have to be involved.

Peregrine: And all those cowbells keeping one awake...And they can't settle on one language to speak or one octave to sing in. No, Aesop, abandon such Swiss dreams, and run me a bath. That's where I'll take my *rest-cure*.

Aesop: Very good, sir. Will you be wanting breakfast?

Peregrine: No, just one of your reviving tonics. *(He absently picks up the letter.)* And post this letter.

Aesop: The letter is to *you*, sir.

Peregrine: *(Looks at the letter)* Oh yes. *(He studies the postmark.)* Postmarked 'Hay-on-Wye'. Whoever could that be?

Aesop: You have a cousin who lives near Hay-on-Wye, I believe, sir.

Peregrine: I do? *(Looking at Aesop as penny drops)* Of course, Archibald Mouse! Gave up the city for a life in the country. Where is Hay-on-Wye, Aesop?

Aesop: The town lies just over the border with Wales, sir.

Peregrine: Mm. And so my poor, rusticated cousin lives in self-inflicted exile by a little town on a river. Why?

Aesop: Yes, sir. With Hay on it.

Peregrine: No, I mean, why move to the country? There he is, a young man about town, flat in Sloane Square, job in the City – and he chucks it all away to live amongst the birds and the beasts.

Aesop: Many choose to escape the bustle of modern London, sir. My Uncle Robert, for instance, a man of urban upbringing, has decided in his mature years to take up residence in rural Herefordshire.

Peregrine: What does he find to do there?

Aesop: He runs a successful forestry business, sir. He is evangelical in his conviction that the health and happiness of our nation will benefit greatly if we restore the broadleaf forest that once covered most of our island.

Peregrine: *(Showing by a weary hand on his brow that he is yet to come to terms with the morning)* Let us hear later of the life and times of your Uncle Robert. Now is the time to set the bath a-running.

Aesop: Very good, sir.

(Exit Left Aesop, followed shortly by the sound of a running bath.)

Peregrine: *(Opening the letter with the letter opener)* Wonder what the old Mouse has to share... *(Reading aloud)* “My dear Peregrine, I trust all is well with you in London town. You will no doubt be surprised to hear after so long from your country cousin. We last met at Cousin Hickory’s wedding...” *(Looking up)* Hickory’s wedding...! That rings a bell – *(uncomfortably)* a very large bell!

(Doorbell. Enter Aesop Left to go to the door Upstage.)

Peregrine: I am not in.

Aesop: Understood, sir. *(Exit Upstage.)*

Peregrine: *(Resumes reading)* As you know I have been for some time leading the life of a happy farmer. I do not regret in the least part exchanging gleaming black city shoes for mud-spattered Wellingtons. But sadly I have rather lost touch with the wider family, and so now I am writing to remedy this. We of the Mouse clan should stick together, be our nests never so far apart.) How true! Always keep your family close!

(Enter briskly Upstage Lady Nonsuch – Peregrine’s Aunt Gertrude – carrying a large box. Aesop follows with a helpless look. Peregrine stands up in alarm. Exit Left Aesop bathwards.)

Peregrine: Aunt Gertrude! *(Stands.)*

Gertrude: *(With stentorian delivery passim)* You’re here.

Peregrine: Guilty as charged.

Gertrude: What are you doing?

Peregrine: What am I doing?

Gertrude: What are you doing in your dressing gown at this hour?

Peregrine: Getting ready for the day ahead, Aunt Gertrude.

Gertrude: A large portion of the day is already behind you – evidently unused. *(Gertrude puts the box on the table. Peregrine considers it curiously.)*

Gertrude: And why do I hear running water?

Peregrine: That’s Aesop. I mean, he turned on the bath taps.

Gertrude: It is ten thirty and you have not yet had your bath?! You will never go far

if you don't start early.

Peregrine: You may well be right, Aunt G.

Gertrude: Of course I am right.

(Bath sounds cease.)

Peregrine: But I haven't been idle, you know. I have been...reading a letter. From Archibald. The cousin who looks after cows by some distant river.

Gertrude: Why?

Peregrine: The river Wye, yes.

Gertrude: *(With an impatient exhalation)* Why is he writing to you?

Peregrine: Haven't quite got to the nub yet.

Gertrude: The morning is almost gone and you haven't finished *one* letter?!

Peregrine: The doorbell rang. Er... *(Indicating the box)* What...?

Gertrude: You said you could do with one.

Peregrine: A cardboard box?

Gertrude: No, dunderhead! Look inside.

(Peregrine opens the box and looks inside with dropped jaw.)

Peregrine: It's...

Gertrude: *She* is...

Peregrine: A cat!

Gertrude: *Juniper*. She is the offspring of my favourite Burmese, Tabitha...

Peregrine: Good for her.

Gertrude: And she is now yours – to have and to feed.

Peregrine: Oh... *(Looking uncertainly into the box)* I don't know what to say.

Gertrude: You don't know what to say to a cat?

Peregrine: Er...

Gertrude: And don't say 'er'. Makes you look like a surprised haddock. Just pick her up, she won't bite...

(Peregrine lifts from the box a black, slowly moving shape.)

Gertrude: ... if she likes you. In the box I have put a litter and provender.

(Enter Left Aesop. He looks at Juniper with barely disguised alarm.)

Peregrine: *(Puts Juniper on a chair)* A marvellous present, Aunt Gertrude!

Gertrude: I trust she will bring some order and responsibility into your life. And you in turn must respect her needs and wishes. Let her come and go as she will.

Peregrine: We shall have a convenient cat-flap installed forthwith.

Gertrude: *(Taking a seat and peering at the letter)* Now what does Archibald ffield-Mouse have to report?

Peregrine: *ffield-Mouse?*

Gertrude: Yes, he has recently become a ffield-Mouse - with two small fs. His mother, Lady Elizabeth ffield, was concerned that the ffields were become few and far between, and so he has adopted her maiden name.

Peregrine: Was it a good idea for a Mouse to couple 'ffield' to his name?

Gertrude: No. Double-barreled names clutter up the address book. *(With a brusque gesture to the letter)* Read on. Unlike you, I have important things to do today.

Peregrine: *(Sits and resumes reading the letter)* Let's see... there's a bit about cows, as you would expect from a farmer... And warm references to his happy family. One or two children, I seem to remember.

Gertrude: Three boys. My charming nephews Makepeace, Goodwill and Sincerity.

Peregrine: Those are real names?

Gertrude: And very lively boys. But their mother is an old-fashioned and pious soul, who looks upon modern life with a disapproving eye. Does he mention the field?

Peregrine: The ffield with two small fs attached to his surname?

Gertrude: No, a real field with grass and mud which he wants to sell. It's causing an almighty hoo-ha.

Peregrine: Who's he selling this field to? The Devil?

Gertrude: May as well be, judging from the *furore*. Locals are up in arms, they don't want the area spoiled. His father, your Uncle Edmund, fears big trouble.

Peregrine: Local mob with pitchforks and torches sort of scenario?

Gertrude: Let's hope it doesn't come to that. *(Tapping the letter)* What further?

Peregrine: *(Reading on)* It is seldom possible for me to leave the farm nowadays; but could you be tempted to come and share a little time with us here in peaceful Radnorshire? What about that?! An invitation to the country!

Gertrude: Perfect! You must go. *(Standing up)* And so must I.

Peregrine: *(Standing)* Why, Aunt Gertrude?

Gertrude: The weekly meeting of the Kensington Cat Society.

Peregrine: I mean, why must *I* go?

Gertrude: It would do you good to spend time on his farm. See how hard your fellow men work to put the food on your dinner plate. And while you're there...

Peregrine: Yes, Aunt G?

Gertrude: Try to persuade Archibald not to sell that field.

Peregrine: Would he listen to *me*?

Gertrude: Good point. *(Calling Off)* Aesop...! Your brains are needed. *(To Peregrine)* Archibald may listen to his golden tongue. But the ones who

may listen to you...

Peregrine: Archibald's cows?

Gertrude: His *boys*... Their mother is most concerned that they be brought up properly. Best you do not disturb them with idle talk of the excitements of the town.

Peregrine: They'll learn about London one day.

Gertrude: But best not from you.

(Enter Left Aesop. He looks at Juniper with barely disguised alarm.)

Peregrine: Aesop, meet Juniper, our new house-mate.

Gertrude: She will expect a good meal twice a day, of course. Fortnum & Mason stock pet biscuits and tins of cat food of an acceptable quality. Juniper is especially partial to the herring.

Peregrine: Did you get that, Aesop? Fortnum & Mason? Herring and biscuits?

(Aesop is uncharacteristically at a loss for words.)

Gertrude: Toodle-pip then, laziest of Mouses! Goodbye, Aesop. Make sure Juniper is treated as well as your indulged master.

Aesop: I shall do my best to give the animal satisfaction, Lady Nonsuch.

(Gertrude strides Upstage. Aesop follows to see her out. Exeunt Gertrude and, for a moment, Aesop.)

Peregrine: Well, Juniper? What do you think of your new home? The perfect place for a cat, would you say?

(Enter Upstage Aesop.)

Peregrine: Certainly a bringer of surprises, Aunt G.

Aesop: Rather a white elephant, I should say, sir.

Peregrine: You are calling my Aunt Gertrude a white elephant?!

Aesop: No, sir, I refer to the cat. The expression is used to denote a gift which is more trouble than benefit for the recipient. In the old Kingdom of Siam

the possession of a white elephant...

Peregrine: I'll stop you there, Aesop. –Interesting though no doubt you were going to be, for my mind is astir with a plan. We are going to the country! A spell on my kind cousin's farm could prove to be the very 'rest-cure' you suggested.

Aesop: Do I understand by your use of the first person plural that you want me to accompany you?

Peregrine: You'd enjoy a trip to the country, wouldn't you?

Aesop: It would certainly be a refreshing diversion, sir. And far cheaper than Switzerland. When do you propose to...?

Peregrine: Now. *(Rising energetically)* Once I've had my bath.

Aesop: Very good, sir.

Peregrine: Dig out his number and set the telephone a-ringing.

Aesop: I doubt that your cousin possesses an electric telephone, sir. His wife is known to eschew modern appliances.

Peregrine: Send a telegram then.

(Peregrine sits down on the chair which Juniper is using, takes pen and paper and scribbles a message. Aesop's eyebrows rise with concern.)

Aesop: Sir, I shouldn't sit there.

Peregrine: *(Preoccupied in writing)* Mm...?

Aesop: I speak out of regard for the comfort and health of the cat, sir, who is currently serving you in the office of a cushion. *(Anguished miaow. Peregrine leaps up.)*

Peregrine: Dreadfully sorry, Juniper! *(Picks up the cat and cradles it.)* What are we to do with her, Aesop?

Aesop: *(Picking up the paper with the telegram message from the table)* Look for a more suitable home for the feline, sir.

Peregrine: Do I take it you are not filled with delight by Juniper's arrival?

Aesop: I do wonder whether this is a suitable place for a cat, sir. And if we are to vacate the flat for a sojourn in the country...

Peregrine: Which we are, once a bath has been had!

Aesop: The cat would be trapped alone in the flat with no egress.

Peregrine: You mean we haven't yet a cat flap?

Aesop: Precisely, sir.

Peregrine: Then Juniper comes with us. *(To Juniper)* You'd like that, wouldn't you? Picture the mice that need a good chasing through the hay bales! *(Moving Left)* To the rigging then! Pack the bags, prime the motor... Soon we'll be gobbling up the miles to the border. As long as *you* are not in the driving seat.

Aesop: *(Hurt)* Sir?

Peregrine: Sorry, Aesop, but with your extra careful hands at the wheel we risk being outpaced by bicycling postmen and schoolchildren on nature rambles.

Aesop: Slow but sure oft wins the day, sir. You will recall the fable of the hare and the tortoise...

Peregrine: *(With a smile)* That's just a fable, Aesop.

(Exeunt Left Peregrine, Upstage Aesop.)

2. The Hare and the Tortoise

The stage fills with 'animals' as music plays. The verse is spoken with one or two Narrators, and after each stanza short optional musical passages could give the chance for the animals to act.

Narrator: *The Hare lived a life that was racy and mad;
Thought of himself as a bit of a lad.*

Hare: *I get around, and much faster than most!*

Narrator: *And everyone knew this was no idle boast;
For the Hare was nimble and sprightly and quick,
Sure of his speed and he knew every trick.*

Hare: *If any there be who can rival my pace*

*I challenge him now to compete in a race.
Come on, ye cowards! Will none of you dare
To match your own speed against that of the hare?*

Narrator: *But everyone thought this a contest too steep
Till old Mr Tortoise awoke from his sleep.*

Tortoise: *Now I know I'm reputed to be rather slow,
But I'm game and determined, I'll give it a go!*

Narrator: *All were astounded:*

Animals: *You cannot be well!
Be quiet, Mr Tortoise! Get back in your shell!
Old reptile! You know what a slow-coach you are.
You're no competition! You'll never get far!*

Narrator: *But the hare was amused, and he said with a grin:*

Hare: *Mr Tortoise, you're on! And (who knows?) you may win.
Let's race to the oak on the top of that hill.
May the best creature win... (aside) and the best surely will!*

Narrator: *The Vole and the Shrew and the Water Rat laughed;
Whilst the Badger and Fox thought it all very daft.
Yet all of them gathered to witness the show
And it fell to the Badger to bark a loud Go!
Up sprang the Hare and he darted away,
Across the wide meadow, then through the thick hay.
With his slow, awkward plod Mr Tortoise began.*

Tortoise: *I may not be First – but I'll do what I can.*

Narrator: *The hare was quickly a furlong ahead,
And nearing the finish he cockily said:*

Hare: *Between me and my rival just look at the gap!
I'm doing so well... may as well take a nap.
A moment of shut-eye, then off I shall hare
To the oak on the hill with never a care.*

Narrator: *But while the young hare lay happily curled
In a soft, grassy hollow, dead to the world,
The tortoise stole by at a slow, steady creep,*

*Taking care not to trouble the hare's happy sleep.
And thus Mr Tortoise passed Mr Hare;
And by the rules of the race this was perfectly fair.*

Tortoise: *I'm in with a chance now!*

Narrator: *The crawling one said,
As the furry one slept in his casual bed.*

Tortoise: *Perhaps this will prove that the one who does best
Is the one who can wait till the finish for rest.*

Narrator: *On then he crawled with the end now in view,
An inch at a time: the best he could do.
And then with a start the hare woke to see
The tortoise approaching the finishing tree;
But scramble and scurry and sprint as he might
The contest was lost, forlorn was the fight.
The Furry One groaned as the One in the Shell
Reached the roots of the oak – to the ring of a bell.
The animals laughed and applauded the fun,
And cheered as the tortoise quite modestly won.*

Hare: *Well done, I suppose...*

Narrator: *The hare grudgingly sighed.*

Hare: *But my nap let you win.*

Narrator: *Mr Tortoise replied:*

Tortoise: *Perhaps, Mr Hare, but you know what they say:
Slow but dependable oft wins the day.*

3. Telegram

Inside the ffield-Mouses' farmhouse at Paradise Farm. Off Right yells and laughter.

Honesty: *(Off Left) What's going on?*

(Enter Right at a noisy run Makepeace. Enter Left their mother, Honesty, to quell the disturbance. Gasping and laughing Makepeace collides with Honesty.)

Honesty: Makepeace! Makepeace!

(Enter Right at a run the middle brother Goodwill. Makepeace puts Honesty between himself and his angry brother.)

Makepeace: Make him stop!

Honesty: What means this tumult? Goodwill... Why are you chasing your brother?

Goodwill: I need to pulverise and dismember him.

Honesty: Not in this house!

Goodwill: *(To Makepeace)* Outside then!

Honesty: *(To Goodwill)* What's this about?

Goodwill: The worms.

Honesty: Worms?

Goodwill: The worms he's been putting down my back.

Makepeace: Only one. And a small one.

Honesty: *(To Makepeace)* Why?

Makepeace: Don't know. Didn't eat enough when it was a wormlet, I guess.

Honesty: *(With an impatient sigh)* Why put a worm down your brother's back?

Makepeace: It slipped from my hand. You know how worms slip from hands.

Honesty: Enough, you two! Makepeace, go to the study and read the Bible.

Makepeace: Will there be time before lunch?

Honesty: The Epistle of James will do for now. You'll see why. And Goodwill, lay the table for lunch. Two extra places: we're expecting visitors. Go in peace. God abhors noisy houses.

(Exit Left Makepeace, Right Goodwill, with a menacing look at his brother. Enter Right Honesty's husband, Archibald, preoccupied and looking around for something.)

Honesty: What's bothering you, dear?

Archibald: The deeds.

Honesty: *(Nodding sagely)* We receive the due reward for our deeds.

Archibald: What?

Honesty: Luke 23.

Archibald: No, not the deeds of men, Honesty...

Honesty: The deeds of boys are often worse. Makepeace and Goodwill are at each other's throats again.

Archibald: The deeds of the farm.

Honesty: What's the farm done wrong?

Archibald: *(Patiently)* No, the *title* deeds are the documents showing that we own the land here. I put them down somewhere, and I really need to find them before the people from Webster Land Management arrive. They're due any minute.

Honesty: Oh. *(Sighs)* Archie...Must we sell Mallow Meadow?

Archibald: We've been through all this, Honesty! We need the money.

Honesty: It'll be so sad though, losing the old meadow. What'll they do with it?

Archibald: Develop it, they said.

Honesty: *Develop?*

Archibald: Put up a house or two. Won't be our business anymore, will it?

Honesty: It certainly will. Just think, outsiders living at the bottom of our garden.

Archibald: Nothing wrong with outsiders, dear. *(Looking Right)* Ah Sincerity! Come in; I need your young eyes.

(Enter Right the ffield-Mouses's eldest son, Sincerity. He stands at the side holding a piece of paper – a telegram, in fact – which he reads out in a loud and mannered voice.)

Sincerity: DELIGHTED TO ACCEPT INVITATION.

Archibald: *(Puzzled)* Well then, in you come.

Sincerity: *(With hand upraised in warning)* STOP!

(Puzzled looks between Honesty and Archibald)

Sincerity: BRINGING AESOP AND JUNIPER.

Archibald: Oh, it's from...

Sincerity: STOP!

Honesty: Come here, you daft urchin!

Sincerity: ARRIVING TONIGHT.

Honesty: What? Why are you speaking in capital letters?

Sincerity: That's how it's written.

Honesty: *(Moving briskly towards Sincerity)* How *what's* written?

Sincerity: *(Holding up hand)* STOP.

Archibald: It's a telegram. From...

Sincerity: Peregrine. *(Sudden realisation)* Cousin Peregrine!

Archibald: Do you remember him from...?

Sincerity: } *(Together)* Cousin Hickory's wedding!

Honesty: } *(Meaningfully)* Cousin Hickory's wedding.

Archibald: } ...Cousin Hickory's wedding?
(Archibald takes the telegram from Goodwill and reads it.)

Sincerity: How could we forget?!

Honesty: Peregrine Mouse! Coming here? Oh my word! Why?

Sincerity: Is he running away from the police?

Archibald: What a thing to say! I invited him...

Honesty: And didn't warn me!

Sincerity: Our wild London cousin! How exciting! *(Calling Off)* Goodwill...!

Archibald: And I'm very glad he's taken up the invitation.

Honesty: Why, in the name of Gomorrah? Why invite that rascal!

Archibald: My, you are in a grump today, my little thorn bush!

Sincerity: *(Calling Off)* Hey...! Makepeace! Goodwill!

Archibald: Don't think of Peregrine as the Cousin Who Made A Scene At Hickory's wedding. He's done other things with his life, you know.

Sincerity: *(Brightly)* I heard he went to prison.

Honesty: *(With a disapproving frown)* That's enough, Sincerity! *(Looking at the telegram)* 'Bringing Aesop and Juniper.' Does he mean a juniper bush?

Archibald: Just some berries, probably. Unusual gift. But that's Peregrine.

Honesty: And Aesop?

Sincerity: We have a copy in the study.

Archibald: Aesop is Peregrine's valet.

Honesty: His what?

Archibald: His manservant; his all-capable gentleman's gentleman with an attic bulging with brains, by all accounts.

(Enter Right Goodwill. At this point the dialogue of parents (Left) and brothers (Right) separates and interleaves briskly.)

Goodwill: What's the fuss?

Honesty: Lawks-a-mercy! If he's rich enough to have a manservant, whatever will he think of us ffield-Mouses and our simple ways?

Sincerity: Where's Makepeace?

Goodwill: Reading the Book of James where it says: "Thou shalt not put worms down thy brother's shirt." (*Looking Left*) Lo, he comes!

(*Enter Left Makepeace.*)

Honesty: What possessed you to invite him?

Sincerity: Here, Makepeace. You'll never guess!

Makepeace: Then you'll have to tell me, won't you.

Sincerity: Remember Cousin Peregrine?

Archibald: Families should keep in touch...

Sincerity: (*Grandly*) The Honourable Peregrine Mouse?

Goodwill: Do I?!

Archibald: ...not just shake hands at weddings and funerals.

Goodwill: Hickory's wedding!

(*The Brothers smile knowingly as they recall Hickory's wedding.*)

Honesty: Peregrine did more than *shake hands* at Hickory's wedding!

Goodwill: He threw Christmas pudding at Hickory when he was making his speech.

Honesty: Remember what he did during the speeches?

Sincerity: You don't throw Christmas pudding at weddings...

Honesty: I'll never forget the shrieks...

Sincerity: You throw wedding cake.

Goodwill: I think he missed.

Honesty: ...as it landed on the bride's mother's hat.

Archibald: Forgive and forget, I say.

Makepeace: I was young in those days, I don't remember what he threw.

Goodwill: What's he done now?

Sincerity: Sent a telegram.

Makepeace: Here?

Sincerity: Of course he sent it here. *(dramatically)* Because he's coming here!

Honesty: There's nothing for a smart Mouse about town at Paradise Farm.

Goodwill: Cousin Peregrine coming to Paradise Farm? Gosh!

Makepeace: Double gosh and two times goodness gracious!

Goodwill: How's he getting here?

Archibald: He'll have his car.

Goodwill: By motor car?

Honesty: That man worries me.

Sincerity: *(Shrugs)* Or black magic.

(Goodwill swings Makepeace around in a vigorous all-is-forgiven reel.)

Archibald: Why, my little tangle of fears?

Goodwill: We must think of some entertainment for him.

Honesty: We can't have him giving our sons *ideas*.

Goodwill: Any ideas?

Archibald: What ideas are you thinking of?

Makepeace: *I* know!

Honesty: *(Darkly)* You know the things I mean.

Archibald: Not sure I do, my little bundle of mysteries.

Goodwill: Let's write a play and perform it for him.

Honesty: Well, for a start...

Goodwill: A play about...

Honesty: *(With a look at the boys to check they are not listening)* Horses.

Goodwill: ... whatever rich townfolk like.

Sincerity: By this evening? I admire your ambition, Goodwill.

Archibald: Horses?

Honesty: *(Nodding meaningfully)* Horses.

(Goodwill moves Left, Sincerity and Makepeace follow; and they join their parents.)

Archibald: But they see horses every day.

Honesty: *(With a confidential whisper)* Racing horses. *(With some heat)* And if you are happy for this family to become a den of gamblers, what sort of a...

(Dialogue reunites as Goodwill interrupts Honesty, addressing Archibald.)

Goodwill: } *(Together)* Father, do you think...?

Honesty: } ... father do you think...? *(Leaves the obvious unsaid)*

Archibald: Yes, Goodwill?

Goodwill: ... we should put on some entertainment for Cousin Peregrine?

Archibald: Splendid idea. I'm sure he'll be pleased with whatever turn you sparklers of fun present. Now why did I come in here?

Honesty: The deeds.

Archibald: Oh yes, the deeds.

Honesty: If you can't find them perhaps we shan't be able to sell the meadow.

Archibald: Are you going to lend your eyes to the search?

Honesty: My eyes will be watching my hands working themselves to the bone, *(moving Upstage, rambling and grumbling)* getting the place ready, cleaning and airing the spare room, rustling up extra food... And did you know we have a farm to run?! All for an ill-behaved wastrel from Town! *(Exit crossly Upstage.)*

(Subdued pause)

Makepeace: What's Town like, father?

Archibald: Mm? You know what Town is like, Makepeace. You don't need me to tell you.

Makepeace: I know what Hay is like, and Hereford. But what about London?

Archibald: London is big and noisy... More people than you can imagine... Horses and cars and carriages...

Goodwill: And the streets aren't paved with gold.

Archibald: If they were you wouldn't be able to tell, they are covered in so much filth.

Sincerity: I'll bet it's fun though.

Archibald: Your mother wouldn't want to hear that word.

Sincerity: *Fun?*

Archibald: Bet.

Sincerity: I wish *we* lived in a town.

Makepeace: Or a city.

Goodwill: Or the metropolis. Whatever that is.

Archibald: It's not that wonderful, my clamorous nestlings: be careful what you ask for. Remember the story of the old man and his wish...

Sincerity: What story?

Goodwill: What old man?
Makepeace: What wish?
Archibald: The old man who wished for death...?
Boys: } No.
Archibald: It's a short tale.
Goodwill: Short and cheerful?

(They all begin to move Upstage.)

Archibald: Not entirely. You see, once upon a time there was an old man...

Goodwill: *(Looking at Archibald)* There still is.

Archibald: *(With a reproving smile)* And this *truly* old man, he was so weary with age that he felt he had had enough of life; indeed he wished for death...

(Exeunt Upstage. Enter Left Old man, burdened with a heavy sack. Makepeace, last to leave, gives the old man a curious look.)

4. Death and the Old Man

Old Man: *Doubled up beneath this load,
With shoulders hunched against the cold,
Too many times I've walked this road:
I've had enough – I'm tired and old.
Death, please come in sweet release!
And then would all life's trouble cease.*

(He drops his sack and slumps to the ground.)

*I sigh and mumble, curse and moan,
And carry on – I know not why.
I gasp and grumble, wince and groan:
It's all too much! Please let me die!
Give me one last breath to say:
Come now, Death, take me away!*

(Enter Right a sinister figure in cloak and hood: Death.)

Death: *You summoned me, you poor old man;
From far away I heard you cry.
What ails you? I'll do what I can.
You called me here – now tell me why.
Would you all life's troubles cease?
Tell me: would you death's release?*

Old Man: *Why, good stranger, who are you?
No one lives in this drear place;
And travellers here are rare and few.
Come close, let me see your face.*

Death: *You know of me, you know my name:
Amongst mankind I hold dread fame.*

(Old Man looks on the face of Death, and trembles and stutters in terror...)

Old Man: *My friend, I have one small request:
Help me lift this heavy sack.
I set it down for needful rest,
Now must replace it on my back.*

Death: *This is not a thing to ask
Of me; mine is another task!*

(Old Man backs away.)

Old Man: *Then, friend, I shall take my load,
And carry on my weary way.
My home is far along this road...
Perhaps we'll meet again some day.
(Aside) But not too soon! What should we do
If once our wishes all came true?!*

(Exit Right Old Man briskly. Death dissolves disappointed Upstage into the darkness.)

5. Arrival of Webster and Spragg

The study at Paradise Farm; forenoon. A few chairs and piano. Enter Sincerity and Goodwill. Goodwill paces up and down, urgently thoughtful.

Goodwill: What shall we do?

Sincerity: Have a fight with Makepeace. *(Walking to the piano.)* I'm going to play piano. *(He sits down at the piano and plays a few notes.)*

Goodwill: I mean, for Cousin Peregrine? He'll think us so dull unless we put on something special.

Sincerity: Not so, Goodwill. *(Playing piano)* He'll want to see us as we are. No point in trying to be what we're not.

Goodwill: *(Clicking fingers)* That's it!

Sincerity: That's *what*?

Goodwill: *(Sings)* Don't try to be what you're not, little bird... That song!

Sincerity: Oh yes...*(Sings)* Don't try to be what you're not, little bird... You're a Jay... *(Looks through the music on top of the piano.)* Here it is, *Three Fables – for voice and piano.* *(He opens the music book ...)* *The Boy who cried Wolf... The Ant and the Cricket... Here we are, The Jay and the Peacock Feathers. (...and plays a few notes.)*

Goodwill: We could perform it.

Sincerity: *(Singing)* Peacock feathers lay strewn across the yard... We need a silly show-off to play the Jay...

Goodwill: } *(Together)*

Sincerity: } Makepeace!

(Sincerity plays and sings exploratively. Enter Left Makepeace. He comes towards the piano.)

Sincerity: *Peacock feathers lay strewn about the yard,
Fine long feathers, in a colourful mess.*

Goodwill: *(Sings)* Along came a Jay, a ...

Makepeace: You called?

Sincerity: Do you know what I'm playing?

Makepeace: The piano.

Sincerity: This song, you turnip! *The Jay and the Peacock Feathers?*

Makepeace: No.

Goodwill: It's very easy...

Makepeace: Then why's he playing it so badly?

Sincerity: Hey! *(Plays an annoyed discord.)*

Goodwill: Sincerity improves with practice. Now you have to be a Jay...

Makepeace: Why?

Goodwill: *(Patience thinning)* Because... it's about a Jay.

Sincerity: *(Singing)* You're a Jay, and it's right that you stay that way...

Makepeace: Is there a song about a pterodactyl?

Goodwill: You find peacock feathers on the ground, and you wear them. You know the fable.

Makepeace: No. May I go now?

(Doorbell)

Makepeace: *(Moving eagerly and briskly)* I'll see who it is. *(Exit Right.)*

Sincerity: I don't think Makepeace is hungry for a performing career.

(Sincerity idly plays a few more bars. Goodwill looks Right expectantly.)

Goodwill: Do you remember what he looks like?

Sincerity: Jolly and dapper and cheery... sparkling eyes... mischievous grin...

(Enter Makepeace with Clifton Spragg, dressed in a serious grey suit and carrying a serious briefcase. Sincerity and Goodwill approach him curiously, while Makepeace puts the arrival ill at ease.)

Makepeace: *(To his brothers)* This is not our cousin...

Spragg: *(Flatly)* I don't believe I am.

Makepeace: We are expecting our cousin, you see. Have you seen him?

Spragg: I'm afraid not.

Sincerity: Makepeace, be polite. Say hello before you interrogate.

Makepeace: *(To Spragg, perfunctorily)* Hello. *(To his brothers)* There's another one coming. But he's not our cousin either.

Goodwill: They could be remote cousins, you know. And as Mr Darwin explained, if you go back far enough in your family tree you find you are related to the apes.

Makepeace: Speak for yourself.

Goodwill: I speak for all mankind.

Sincerity: I shall fetch Father. *(To Spragg)* Who shall we say has arrived?

Spragg: *(With deliberate enunciation)* Clifton Spragg.

(Exit Left Sincerity. Awkward pause. Goodwill coughs for something to do.)

Goodwill: Is it an unusual name?

Spragg: What?

Goodwill: Spra-... Your name.

Spragg: No, all my brothers have it.

Goodwill: Oh.

(Pause – as if someone has forgotten lines or a cue. Goodwill is clearly uncomfortable.)

Goodwill: I'll go and see what's happening. *(Exit briskly Left.)*

(Pause)

Makepeace: Do you like rabbits?

Spragg: What?

Makepeace: Rabbits.

Spragg: I've no objection to them.

Makepeace: I have a rabbit.

Spragg: Is that so?

Makepeace: Yes. Yes, it is so.

(Pause)

Makepeace: Do you want to know his name?

Spragg: Mm?

Makepeace: The name of my rabbit?

(Enter Right Webster with loud energy.)

Webster: And here I am! Just been havin' a lil nose pokey around. How yer doin', sonny?

Makepeace: *How* am I doing? I'm doing my best. I'm making conversation with Mr Spragg.

Webster: *(With a smile at Spragg)* Good luck with that! What's your name?

Makepeace: Adam Makepeace Aloysius ffield-Mouse.

Webster: Is that so?

Makepeace: Yes, it is so.

Webster: Quite a mouthful. Know who I am?

Makepeace: Thumper.

Webster: Wha-...?

Makepeace: Thumper. The name of my rabbit. He only has one name.

Webster: Is that right?

Makepeace: Yes, it is. He only needs one.

(Enter Left Archibald with Goodwill and Sincerity. Spragg stands Left, and so is introduced first.)

Archibald: Ah! Good day to you!

Goodwill: *(With awkward formality)* Father...May I introduce you to...?

Spragg: Clifton Spragg.

(Goodwill and Makepeace barely repress sniggers. Archibald and Spragg shake hands.)

Archibald: Archibald ffield-Mouse.

Webster: Hi there, Archie! May I call you Archie?

(Webster grabs Archibald's hand in what is clearly a bone-crunching handshake.)

Webster: Webster. Wilfrid Webster.

Archibald: Mister Webster himself?! We are honoured! You have come all this way just to see our little meadow?

Webster: I enjoy looking around England. So much unused potential!

Goodwill: We're in Wales.

Webster: All the same country, isn't it?

Goodwill: Have you come from across the Ocean?

Webster: Not today. Drove from London.

Makepeace: You didn't see our cousin on the road?

Webster: Saw a fair number on the road. What does he drive?

Makepeace: A motor car.

Webster: You don't say!

Archibald: Would you like to see the meadow before lunch?

Webster: Sure would! *(With a large gesture)* Take us to your field, Mr ffield-Mouse!

Archibald: *(Leading Right)* This way.

Makepeace: Can we come?

Archibald: Just business talk, Makepeace. Wouldn't be of interest to you.

Webster: No, sonny! But this will be. Get something for your rabbit.
(Webster gives Makepeace a coin.)

Webster: So long, little guys!

(Exeunt Right Archibald, Webster and Spragg.)

Sincerity: *(Unimpressed, mimicking) Little guys!*

Goodwill: *(To Makepeace) What did the Webster give?*

(Makepeace shows the coin in his hand.)

Goodwill: Wow! A half-crown! That makes... ten pence each.

(Makepeace tosses it in the air. Goodwill catches it. A tussle ensues. Sincerity clips Goodwill's ear.)

Sincerity: Goodwill! Render unto Makepeace the coin that is Makepeace's.

(Goodwill renders unto Makepeace the half crown.)

Goodwill: *(Rubbing his sore ear) Maybe we'll get a crown each if he likes the look of the meadow. I must say, though... I am not... not quite sure about him.*

Sincerity: I'm quite sure about him. He's a wolf.

Makepeace: A wolf? *(Howls)* That kind of wolf? *(With a worried tone)* And I told him the name of my rabbit!

Sincerity: The kind of bullying wolf who's used to getting his way – whether he does it with a toothy smile or a snarl.

Makepeace: Like the fable of the wolf and the lamb?

Sincerity: Exactly. *(Moves purposefully Right.)*

Goodwill: Where are you going?

(Exit Right Sincerity. Goodwill shrugs to Makepeace, and they move Left.)

Makepeace: What did the wolf do to the lamb?

Goodwill: Look it up in Aesop.

(Exeunt Left.)

6. The Wolf and the Lamb

(Enter Left Mr Wolf, an office line manager. He takes a seat at a desk, puts on reading spectacles and picks through papers with a disapproving frown. Enter Right Mr Lamb, a junior clerk, who waits apprehensively Right.)

Lamb: Mr Wolf...? Mr Wolf?

Wolf: *(Wearily)* Ah, Mr Lamb...

Lamb: You wanted to see me, Mr Wolf?

Wolf: I don't particularly *want* to see you, Mr Lamb but I have to. *(He gives Lamb a jaundiced look.)* Come in then.

(Mr Lamb approaches the table and takes hold of the chair as if to sit.)

Wolf: Don't sit, this won't take long. *(Inhales and exhales coldly)* You see, Mr Lamb, ours is a cut-throat business. There's no room for slackness, idleness, insubordination...

(Wolf gives Lamb a long, cold stare. Lamb shifts uncomfortably.)

Wolf: We need to run a tight ship in this branch. Keep the company's workforce up to scratch. And you, Mr Lamb...

Lamb: *(Scratching his ear nervously)* Yes, Mr Wolf?

Wolf: ...are a very, very long way from scratch.

Lamb: *(Stops scratching)* In what way, Mr Wolf?

Wolf: *(Facetiously quoting)* 'Let me count the ways...' No, I haven't time. Let's begin with this, shall we? *(He picks up a sheaf of papers from his desk.)* Recognise it?

Lamb: No, Mr Wolf.

Wolf: Well you should. *(He drops the sheaf disdainfully on the floor by Lamb.)*
It's your report or rather, your *rubbish*.

Lamb: Sir? *(Bends down to examine the papers)* Are you sure, sir?

Wolf: Yup, I'm sure it's rubbish. Every page, riddled with errors...

Lamb: But, Mr Wolf...

Wolf: You see, our company cannot put up with shoddy work indefinitely.
There has to come a time when we say, enough is enough.

Lamb: I am sorry but... this report... it was produced in *your* office. It has not
yet come through to my department for checking and so the errors are
all... Well, none of them are mine.

Wolf: I wouldn't try talking yourself out of trouble, Mr Lamb. Words are not
your friends at this moment; words have already landed you in the soup.

Lamb: What... *soup*?

Wolf: *(Fixes eyes on Lamb)* I gather you've been making jokes at my expense.

Lamb: Jokes, Mr Wolf?

Wolf: For instance, 'What's the difference between *Mr* Wolf and a *real* wolf?'

Lamb: I don't know. What *is* the difference between you and a real wolf?

Wolf: A real wolf is kinder and has better teeth. Your joke, apparently.

Lamb: When am I meant to have said that?

Wolf: At the office party at Christmas. You were overheard by my secretary,
Miss Tippex.

Lamb: Miss Tippex stands in need of correction. I wasn't at the Christmas party.
I only joined the company last month.

Wolf: *(Ignoring Lamb's protestations)* And she says you... *howl*.

Lamb: I *howl*? What...?! Why should I howl?

Wolf: Like a wolf. It hardly takes a genius to see that it is your juvenile way of making fun of me behind my back.

Lamb: Look, I don't howl...I don't tell jokes about you...

Wolf: *Someone* did. If it wasn't you it was one of your cronies.

Lamb: My *cronies*?

Wolf: Your subversive pals – (*generating anger in himself*) your gang of malcontents, who conspire night and day to bring this company to its knees...

Lamb: You're mad!

Wolf: Not mad, Mr Lamb, just very disappointed. (*Coldly*) You can trot off now. I'm going to let you go.

Lamb: (*Begins to move away, then does double take*) You mean...I'm *-fired*?

Wolf: Yes, Mr Lamb, you're for the chop! This company cannot tolerate inefficient, disloyal and impertinent employees.

Lamb: You can't do this!

Wolf: It's exactly what I *can* do, Mr Lamb. The moral is, keep on the right side of your boss or face the music.

Lamb: No, Mr Wolf. (*With a look to the audience*) Anyone watching this episode will know what the true moral is.
(*Exit Right Mr Lamb.*)

Wolf: Little innocent Lamb! Still believes in morals!
(*Exit Left Mr Wolf with a lupine lope and grin.*)

7. Surveying the Land

Outside, on a rise overlooking Mallow Meadow, just before lunch. Enter Left Archibald's farm manager, Derwyn Williams, with Spragg, who holds a clipboard.

Spragg: All this...?

Derwyn: Belongs to the farm, yes.

(They come downstage Right, looking over the audience.)

Spragg: And the wood?

Derwyn: *(With a nod)* Down to the river.

(Spragg writes thoughtfully on his clipboard. Enter Left Webster in top gear, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and brandishing a fat cigar. Enter Left Archibald. They take up position Downstage Left.)

Webster: Well would ya take a look at that view!

Spragg: We're looking, Mr Webster.

Webster: A prize county, this Radshire! Why have I never heard of it?

Archibald: Radnorshire.

Webster: Shy, beautiful, trying to hide away...

Spragg: *(Still Left, calling over)* The wood down there, Mr Webster...

Webster: Uh huh?

Spragg: *(Meaningfully)* It's waiting.

Webster: Interesting. Archie, my friend, would you be prepared to...?

Archibald: Sell the wood? I suppose... It's just sitting there... growing.

Webster: And the land between?

Archibald: We call that The Chase. I'm not sure about throwing in The Chase... The cows use it to get to the pasture by the river.

Webster: Do your cows usually go along with your business decisions?

Archibald: They are a co-operative herd.

(Webster puts his arm over the shoulder of Archibald, who tries to look friendly and comfortable – not easy with Webster's cigar troublingly close to his face.)

Webster: Then with the cows on our side what's to stop us making one humdinger of a deal? Let's say we chuck in another...eight hundred pounds.

Archibald: I'll have to think about it...

Webster: Did I say eight hundred pounds? Oh, I meant eight hundred and *fifty*...

(Archibald's eyes open wide.)

Webster: And did I say *pounds*? I meant *guineas*! *(Moves Right to join Spragg)*
What do you think, Spragg? Near on fifteen hundred guineas for a few acres of rural Radshire! Is that generous? Or madness?

Spragg: Generous to a fault, Mr Webster. An offer no one could refuse.

(Webster strides across to join Spragg while Derwyn moves Left to Archibald. Separate but interleaving dialogue. Enter Right furtively Sincerity, to eavesdrop on Spragg and Webster.)

Derwyn: No, no, sir... not Briars Wood!

Webster: Briars Wood! I have such plans for you!

Archibald: What about the wood, Derwyn?

Spragg: We'll have a branch line of the Midland Railway...

Derwyn: They'll cut it through with a railway line.

Webster: *(As train guard)* Next stop, *Briars Wood*. Alight here for *Websterville*.

Archibald: They could hardly cut down ancient woodland to build a railway.

Spragg: And a road leading from the station...

Derwyn: And they put a road through The Chase...

Webster: And you're sure you can get it through the Council?

Archibald: They wouldn't get planning permission.

Spragg: We'll make sure the plans are passed, Mr Webster.

(Webster claps Spragg on the back, and the two of them join the others. Exit discreetly Right Sincerity.)

Derwyn: Here they come, loping like wolves.

Webster: I just love this place, Archie! If you wanted to sell the farm entire...

Archibald: *(Shaking head)* The cows would have something to say about that.

Webster: *(With a chuckle)* Yeah, cows can be conservative creatures. So... Back to your cosy farmhouse and we'll sew things up mighty tight, shall we?

(All move Upstage.)

Archibald: Mr Spragg, do you have family in this area? Your name rings a bell.

Spragg: It's a common name.

(Exeunt Webster and Spragg Upstage. Derwyn holds Archibald back.)

Derwyn: All my working life I've served this farm, sir. Close on thirty years, man and boy, as the saying goes.

Archibald: Well done, Derwyn.

Derwyn: *(Shaking head sadly)* Ah you can't let them have Briar's Wood, sir! A great shame, that would be. You know, in that wood there are such ancient oaks!

Archibald: I'm sure. It's hard to beat an oak when it comes to being ancient.

Derwyn: Old enough to have been climbed by King Offa when he was a lad.

Archibald: Before he moved on to building his dyke.

Derwyn: And you will see pine martens, and you'll hear owls... nightingales...

Archibald: That's good to hear.

Derwyn: They won't be good to hear if you let Webster have his building way. No, sir, you can bid farewell to the martens and the owls and the nightingales...

Archibald: No, Derwyn! They wouldn't be allowed to damage the wood.

Derwyn: Webster will use his money to oil the planning wheels and they'll be building a small town before long. And small towns grow, look you. You may have another Birmingham on your doorstep before your boys are men.

Archibald: Quieten your rumbling fears, Derwyn Williams, you doom-laden soul! You always say things are about to get worse – but it never happens. You know what you are? *The Boy who cried Wolf*.

Derwyn: Well I may be, Mr ffield-Mouse – but the boy was right in the end.

(Exeunt Left.)

8. The Boy who cried Wolf

A shepherd boy bemoans the dullness of his life.

Boy: *Here am I upon the hills,
Watching over this flock of sheep.
Nothing happens, no one comes;
Nothing to do; I just sing and sleep.*

*How should I liven up this life?
What would bring me some laughs and fun?
Perhaps if I were to cry out 'Wolf!'
All the villagers would come at a run.*

*Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
There's a fearsome wolf about!
Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
You there can you hear me shout?*

(Villagers rush on anxiously, armed with pitchforks, hoes, spades &c.)

Villagers: *What is the matter? What's going on?
Are you all right, little lad?*

Boy: *Yes, it's just a bit of fun – just to cheer me up.
I was feeling lonely and sad.*

(The Villagers disperse, muttering crossly.)

Boy: *How they yelled! How they ran!
What a spectacle, what a sight!*

*Faces rippled with grave concern!
Voices raised in alarm and fright!*

*Well why not try it one more time?
Make them believe that I'm under attack.
See if I manage once again
To lure those gullible villagers back.
Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
There's another wolf about!
Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
There's a wolf without a doubt!*

(The Villagers return dubiously.)

Villagers: *What is the matter? Where is this wolf?
Are you telling lies, shepherd boy?*

Boy: *Yes, I was not serious: don't be too concerned.
It's a little joke I enjoy.*

(As the Villagers again drift away a Wolf appears.)

Wolf: *Hallo there, shepherd boy.
Let's just see if you earn your keep.
What do you plan to do
When you see me devour your sheep?*

Boy: *Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
You must all come right away!
Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
I mean just what I say!*

(A frightened pause – but no one comes to help.)

*Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
It's a real wolf I see!
Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
This time you must believe me!*

(Silence. The wolf approaches.)

*Hiya wolf! Hiya wolf!
HI-YA WOLF!*

(The boy flees - to the wolf's evil delight.)

9. Peregrine is entertained

The parlour at Paradise Farm. Evening. Enter Right Archibald leading in Peregrine.

Peregrine: A delight to see you again, Archibald! *(Looking around)* And by Jove, the quintessential farmhouse! Low timber ceilings to put tall chaps in their place, strange ironware in the smoky fireplace, smell of dogs and bread...

Archibald: I hope supper was not too plain for you.

Peregrine: Lentil soup with an honest country loaf, ideal for the surfeited stomach.

(Enter Left Honesty bearing a tray with cups of cocoa.)

Peregrine: And to crown the feast, *cocoa!*

(Honesty gives the cocoa to Peregrine and Archibald. All sit and sip.)

Honesty: I hope we are worth your journey, your honourable Mouse. I was saying to Archibald I'm afeared you'll find us terrible dull, with our simple ways.

Archibald: And I've been telling my fretful soulmate not to worry so, you'll doubtless be wanting a break from the exhausting excitement of the town.

Peregrine: Too true! Honestly, Honesty, I've been looking forward to a taste of your contented country life.

Archibald: Would Aesop care to join us?

Peregrine: At this time of day he prefers to tend to his addiction.

Archibald: Addiction? To...?

Peregrine: Reading. *(Shaking head)* What can one do?

(Upstage Goodwill puts his head around the door.)

Goodwill: Ready.

Archibald: Ah! Our boys would like to present an entertainment.

Peregrine: Right-ho!

(Enter Left Sincerity with a few peacock feathers, which he lays on the floor. Sincerity goes to the piano to play or to pretend to play. All sing or recite, Sincerity taking the narration, joined by Goodwill for the other birds; Makepeace plays the role of the Jay, adorning himself with the feathers. Their performance, if not flawless, has obviously benefited from rehearsal.)

Sincerity: *(Announcing the entertainment) The Jay and the Peacock Feathers.*

(Flutter of applause from the adults. The boys bow and the song commences.)

The Jay and the Peacock Feathers

*Peacock feathers lay strewn about the yard,
Fine long feathers, in a colourful mess.
Along came a Jay – a silly young jay,
Rather vain, so he was, and eager to impress.
Saw the feathers lying on the ground,
Thought to himself: ‘What a treasure I have found!
Yes, what a grand new set of clothes I have found!*

*‘Oh how fine these feathers are!
And what a fine bird I’d be
Wearing feathers such as these!
What’s to stop me putting them on?
Whatever is to stop me dressing as I please?’
And he put those feathers on his tail, so he did;
Yes, he put those feathers on his tail.*

*‘Oh how fine these feathers are!
Look at me, look at me, I’m the Prince of the Yard!
Quite the handsome bird about the farm -
Adorned with such feathers for my noon promenade!’*

*The peacocks gathered and they watched the silly Jay
As he strutted through the yard, quite a dandy, so he thought.
But the peacocks were not at all impressed, no they weren’t.
He may sport their feathers but he wasn’t their sort!*

*Pecked at the feathers sticking from the Jay,
Stripped him of the feathers and tossed them all away
Pulled the feathers out, they did, and tossed them all away.*

‘Oh how mean you peacocks are, robbing me,

*Robbing me of some harmless livery!
Quite the selfish birds you be!
But the peacocks replied with a stern homily:*

*'Don't try to be what you're not, little bird;
You're a jay, and it's right that you stay that way!
Don't try to be what you're not little bird!'
Said the peacocks and strutted away.*

*The Jay, he was quite distraught, so he was,
And he pattered back over to the other jays and daws;
But they too were reproachful, they too were unimpressed
And they didn't have much sympathy, they didn't back his cause.*

*Instead they scoffed at his short-lived display,
And joined as one in upbraiding the Jay -
All together crossly they upbraided the poor Jay:*

*'Don't try to be what you're not, little bird!
You're a jay, and it's right that you stay that way!
Don't try to be what you're not little bird!'
And with that they left the poor Jay.*

(Enthusiastic applause from the adults. The boys bow. A miaow.)

- Peregrine:** Top-hole! And Juniper approved.
- Goodwill:** We hope you enjoyed our humble offering.
- Peregrine:** Rather!
- Archibald:** *(Proudly)* My little stars!
- Peregrine:** Felt a bit sad for the Jay but I'm sure he's learnt a good lesson.
- Honesty:** *(Collecting the cocoa cups.)* Now, boys, to bed. *(Exit Upstage.)*
- Archibald:** Yes, it's near eight.
- Goodwill:** May we talk to Cousin Peregrine a moment, father?
- Archibald:** Your cousin has had a long journey and he needs a rest...
- Peregrine:** Oh, I'm up for a little chinwag.

Archibald: Very well, just a minute or so. As long as it takes me to tell Honesty about today's... developments.

(Exit Archibald Upstage. The boys gather around Peregrine with an air of conspiracy, looking to see that their parents have indeed left.)

Makepeace: Cousin Peregrine...?

Peregrine: Cousin Makepeace?

Makepeace: May I ask a question?

Peregrine: Question away!

(Pause)

Makepeace: What's it like in prison?

Peregrine: Prison?

(The boys' questions follow quickly, now the topic is in the open.)

Sincerity: We heard you went to prison...

Peregrine: Well...I did spend a night behind bars, yes; but...

Goodwill: Was it dark and dank and dismal?

Makepeace: Did you let the scampering rats eat your vile prison gruel?

Sincerity: And were you kept awake at night by the howls of tormented inmates echoing down the corridors?

Peregrine: *(With a nonchalant shrug)* I went to boarding school, I was prepared.

Goodwill: But what did you... *do*?

Peregrine: Borrowed a policeman's helmet.

Sincerity: Why?

Peregrine: It was the night of the Boat Race.

Goodwill: Between Oxford and Cambridge?

Peregrine: That one, yes.

Makepeace: *Night* of the race? Don't they race during the day?

Peregrine: Oh, the heaving and the splashing happen before tea, of course; but the celebrations properly kick off in the evening. Assuming Oxford has won.

Sincerity: And if Cambridge...?

Peregrine: If Cambridge has won, we celebrate to drown out the light blue cheers. I can't remember who had won when the policeman's helmet was in question.

Sincerity: The night you went to...

Peregrine: Now let's be clear, I didn't go to gaol...

Makepeace: *(Disappointed)* Oh.

(Enter Honesty Upstage. Her face registers horror as she hears the conversation.)

Peregrine: I spent a night at the police station. That's the sum of it.

Sincerity: In a cell?

Peregrine: A very small cell, yes. But the duty officer was a decent cove. Gave me an excellent tip for the 3.30 at Chepstow...

Honesty: *(With severity)* That's enough! To bed!

(Enter Upstage Archibald. Exeunt Boys Left.)

Honesty: *(Shaking her head at Peregrine)* Please...!

Archibald: What's the matter, my dear?

Honesty: *(With a meaningful look towards Peregrine)* Police cells, racing...

Archibald: Oh. *(To Peregrine)* Honesty would rather you keep your... *adventures* under your hat.

Peregrine: Right-ho, sorry. But they had had a tip-off. Who told them I had been detained at His Majesty's Pleasure?

Archibald: Gossip was kindled at Hickory's wedding...

(Enter Sincerity Left.)

Sincerity: Father...

Archibald: What is it, Sincerity?

Sincerity: I have been hearing things.

Archibald: Don't you worry, my little innocent. No gaol for you.

Sincerity: No, about Webster's plans.

Archibald: To buy the meadow?

Sincerity: And Briars Wood...and The Chase...

Archibald: *(Surprised that he knows)* Who told you that?

Sincerity: And they are going to have a building spree: houses, roads, railway...

Archibald: *(Surprised at this unexpected information)* Who told you that?

Sincerity: I heard it from the horses' mouths. Webster and the Spragg man... And they don't want you to know.

Honesty: There, I knew it! You can't sell the land, Archie. You can't sell it now!

Archibald: I'm afraid it's... it's pretty much a done deal.

Peregrine: I'm no lawyer...

(Honesty and Archibald give Peregrine beady looks.)

Peregrine: ...but I imagine that, now you know his game, you can simply tell this Webster chap to put his pipe back into his mouth...

Sincerity: He smokes cigars.

Peregrine: Put his cigar back... or better, tell him to give up smoking and to take his money bags off to buy pastures new. Putting your meadow behind him.

(Honesty and Sincerity are evidently pleased with this suggestion. Archibald smiles uneasily.)

Sincerity: O well said, cousin!

Peregrine: As long as you haven't signed anything...

(Archibald has a sheepish look.)

Sincerity: Doesn't that seem the right thing to do, Father?

Archibald: *(Uneasily)* I'll do what's best, you can be sure. Now off you go.

(Exit Sincerity doubtfully Left. Archibald looks in the direction of the departing Sincerity for a moment.)

Archibald: Sincerity no doubt misunderstood what they were saying.

Honesty: Maybe but I don't trust Webster. The very name speaks of an evil spider weaving his webs to ensnare. Sell Mallow Meadow to Thomas Williams.

Archibald: We need more money than Thomas, bless his gloomy socks, can offer.

Honesty: *(Shaking head)* 'Riches profit not in the day of wrath.' *(Exit unhappily Left.)*

(Awkward pause. Peregrine looks down, then up at Archibald for the next move.)

Archibald: Proverbs, I think. *(Moving Left)* Well, Peregrine, I shall bid you goodnight.

Peregrine: Good*what*?

Archibald: It's bedtime.

Peregrine: For the boys, yes, but...

Archibald: And for farming adults, Peregrine. Cows don't want to see us bleary eyed at milking. Is there anything more you want?

Peregrine: Er.... well, I...

Archibald: Then enjoy your first night in the quiet of the country.

(Exit Left Archibald. Peregrine paces up and down. Enter Upstage Aesop. He waits awhile, then coughs – at which Peregrine jumps in surprise.)

Aesop: Is everything all right, sir? You appear to be in a quandary.

Peregrine: *(With an aghast tone)* They have all gone to bed!

Aesop: It is past eight o'clock, sir. And this is a farm.

Peregrine: I may be on a rest-cure but nightcaps at eight is taking things too far!

Aesop: If you wish to enjoy some local society, I understand that the nearest hostelry is The Fox and Grapes – a mile along the road to Hay.

Peregrine: Fancy a stroll thither?

Aesop: No thank you, sir. I should prefer a little reading before retiring.

Peregrine: Oh. What is it this time? Shakespeare? Some solemn Russian?

Aesop: A volume of philosophy by the great Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard, sir.

Peregrine: And that's an evening's entertainment?

Aesop: Each to his own, sir. Some read philosophy, some play billiards, some visit public-houses....

Peregrine: And that's where I'm going now, Aesop. Better to meet your fellow men than squander time in books, I say. After all, what's philosophy ever achieved? I mean, geography has discovered that the world is round, history has found out who blundered in the Crimean War, and mathematics now knows why $2a$ equals b squared; but philosophy...? Philosophy has been trying for centuries to discover the meaning of life – and still doesn't know! *(Moves Right.)* Will the door be locked?

Aesop: Probably not, sir. Burglary is not here, the hazard it is in town.

Peregrine: Toodle-pip, then. You can tell me over breakfast if the great Dane has given you any of the answers to life's questions.

Aesop: I look forward to that, sir.

