You Never Can Tell - Act I

di George Bernard Shaw (1897)

ACT I

In a dentist's operating room on a fine August morning in 1896. Not the usual tiny London den, but the best sitting room of a furnished lodging in a terrace on the sea front at a fashionable watering place. The operating chair, with a gas pump and cylinder beside it, is half way between the centre of the room and one of the corners. If you look into the room through the window which lights it, you will see the fireplace in the middle of the wall opposite you, with the door beside it to your left; an M.R.C.S. diploma in a frame hung on the chimneypiece; an easy chair covered in black leather on the hearth; a neat stool and bench, with vice, tools, and a mortar and pestle in the corner to the right. Near this bench stands a slender machine like a whip provided with a stand, a pedal, and an exaggerated winch. Recognising this as a dental drill, you shudder and look away to your left, where you can see another window, underneath which stands a writing table, with a blotter and a diary on it, and a chair. Next the writing table, towards the door, is a leather covered sofa. The opposite wall, close on your right, is occupied mostly by a bookcase. The operating chair is under your nose, facing you, with the cabinet of instruments handy to it on your left. You observe that the professional furniture and apparatus are new, and that the wall paper, designed, with the taste of an undertaker, in festoons and urns, the carpet with its symmetrical plans of rich, cabbagy nosegays, the glass gasalier with lustres; the ornamental gilt rimmed blue candlesticks on the ends of the mantelshelf, also glass- draped with lustres, and the ormolu clock under a glass-cover in the middle between them, its uselessness emphasized by a cheap American clock disrespectfully placed beside it and now indicating 12 o'clock noon, all combine with the black marble which gives the fireplace the air of a miniature family vault, to suggest early Victorian commercial respectability, belief in money, Bible fetichism, fear of hell always at war with fear of poverty, instinctive horror of the passionate character of art, love and Roman Catholic religion, and all the first fruits of plutocracy in the early generations of the industrial revolution.

There is no shadow of this on the two persons who are occupying the room just now. One of them, a very pretty woman in miniature, her tiny figure dressed with the daintiest gaiety, is of a later generation, being hardly eighteen yet. This darling little creature clearly does not belong to the room, or even to the country; for her complexion, though very delicate, has been burnt biscuit color by some warmer sun than England's; and yet there is, for a very subtle observer, a link between them. For she has a glass of water in her hand, and a rapidly clearing cloud of Spartan obstinacy on her tiny firm set mouth and quaintly squared eyebrows. If the least line of conscience could be traced between those eyebrows, an Evangelical might cherish some faint hope of finding her a sheep in wolf's clothing - for her frock is recklessly pretty - but as the cloud vanishes it leaves her frontal sinus as smoothly free from conviction of sin as a kitten's.

The dentist, contemplating her with the self-satisfaction of a successful operator, is a young man of thirty or thereabouts. He does not give the impression of being much of a workman: his professional manner evidently strikes him as being a joke, and is underlain by a thoughtless pleasantry which betrays the young gentleman still unsettled and in search of amusing adventures, behind the newly set-up dentist in search of patients. He is not without gravity of demeanor; but the strained nostrils stamp it as the gravity of the humorist. His eyes are clear, alert, of sceptically moderate size, and yet a little rash; his forehead is an excellent one, with plenty of room behind it; his nose and chin cavalierly handsome. On the whole, an attractive, noticeable beginner, of whose prospects a man of business might form a tolerably favorable estimate.

THE YOUNG LADY: *handing him the glass.* Thank you. *In spite of the biscuit complexion she has not the slightest foreign accent.*

THE DENTIST: *putting it down on the ledge of his cabinet of instruments.* That was my first tooth.

THE YOUNG LADY: *aghast.* Your first! Do you mean to say that you began practising on me?

THE DENTIST: Every dentist has to begin on somebody.

THE YOUNG LADY: Yes: somebody in a hospital, not people who pay.

THE DENTIST: *laughing.* Oh, the hospital doesn't count. I only meant my first tooth in private practice. Why didn't you let me give you gas?

THE YOUNG LADY: Because you said it would be five shillings extra.

THE DENTIST: *shocked.* Oh, don't say that. It makes me feel as if I had hurt you for the sake of five shillings.

THE YOUNG LADY: *with cool insolence.* Well, so you have! *She gets up.* Why shouldn't you? it's your business to hurt people. *(It amuses him to be treated in this fashion: he chuckles secretly as he proceeds to clean and replace his instruments. She shakes her dress into order; looks inquisitively about her; and goes to the window.)* You have a good view of the sea from these rooms! Are they expensive?

THE DENTIST: Yes.

THE YOUNG LADY: You don't own the whole house, do you?

THE DENTIST: No.

THE YOUNG LADY: *taking the chair which stands at the writing-table and looking critically at it as she spins it round on one leg.* Your furniture isn't quite the latest thing, is it?

THE DENTIST: It's my landlord's.

THE YOUNG LADY: Does he own that nice comfortable Bath chair? *pointing to the operating chair.*

THE DENTIST: No: I have that on the hire-purchase system.

THE YOUNG LADY: *disparagingly.* I thought so. *Looking about her again in search of further conclusions.* I suppose you haven't been here long?

THE DENTIST: Six weeks. Is there anything else you would like to know?

THE YOUNG LADY: *the hint quite lost on her.* Any family?

THE DENTIST: I am not married.

THE YOUNG LADY: Of course not: anybody can see that. I meant sisters and mother and that sort of thing.

THE DENTIST: Not on the premises.

THE YOUNG LADY: Hm! If you've been here six weeks, and mine was your first tooth, the practice can't be very large, can it?

THE DENTIST: Not as yet. *He shuts the cabinet, having tidied up everything.*

THE YOUNG LADY: Well, good luck! *She takes our her purse.* Five shillings, you said it would be?

THE DENTIST: Five shillings.

THE YOUNG LADY: *producing a crown piece.* Do you charge five shillings for everything?

THE DENTIST: Yes.

THE YOUNG LADY: Why?

THE DENTIST: It's my system. I'm what's called a five shilling dentist.

THE YOUNG LADY: How nice! Well, here! *holding up the crown piece* a nice new five shilling piece! your first fee! Make a hole in it with the thing you drill people's teeth with and wear it on your watch-chain.

THE DENTIST: Thank you.

THE PARLOR MAID: *appearing at the door.* The young lady's brother, sir.

A handsome man in miniature, obviously the young lady's twin, comes in eagerly. He wears a suit of terra-cotta cashmere, the elegantly cut frock coat lined in brown silk, and carries in his hand a brown tall hat and tan gloves to match. He has his sister's delicate biscuit complexion, and is built on the same small scale; but he is elastic and strong in muscle, decisive in movement, unexpectedly deeptoned and trenchant in speech, and with perfect manners and a finished personal style which might be envied by a man twice his age. Suavity and self- possession are points of honor with him; and though this, rightly considered, is only the modern mode of boyish self-consciousness, its effect is none the less staggering to his elders, and would be insufferable in a less prepossessing youth. He is promptitude itself, and has a question ready the moment he enters.

THE YOUNG GENTLEMAN: Am I on time?

THE YOUNG LADY: No: it's all over.

THE YOUNG GENTLEMAN: Did you howl?

THE YOUNG LADY: Oh, something awful. Mr Valentine: this is my brother Phil. Phil: this is Mr Valentine, our new dentist. *Valentine and Phil bow to one another. She proceeds, all in one breath.* He's only been here six weeks; and he's a bachelor. The house isn't his; and the furniture is the landlord's; but the professional plant is hired. He got my tooth out beautifully at the first go; and he and I are great friends.

PHILIP: Been asking a lot of questions?

THE YOUNG LADY: *as if incapable of doing such a thing.* Oh, no.

PHILIP: Glad to hear it. *To Valentine.* So good of you not to mind us, Mr Valentine. The fact is, we've never been in England before; and our mother tells us that the people here simply won't stand us. Come and lunch with us. *Valentine, bewildered by the leaps and bounds with which their acquaintanceship is proceeding, gasps; but he has no opportunity of speaking, as the conversation of the twins is swift and continuous.*

THE YOUNG LADY: Oh, do, Mr Valentine.

PHILIP: At the Marine Hotel - half past one.

THE YOUNG LADY: We shall be able to tell mamma that a respectable Englishman has promised to lunch with us.

PHILIP: Say no more, Mr Valentine: you'll come.

VALENTINE: Say no more! I haven't said anything. May I ask whom I have the pleasure of entertaining? It's really quite impossible for me to lunch at the Marine Hotel with two perfect strangers.

THE YOUNG LADY: *flippantly.* Ooooh! what bosh! One patient in six weeks! What difference does it make to you?

PHILIP: *maturely.* No, Dolly: my knowledge of human nature confirms Mr Valentine's judgment. He is right. Let me introduce Miss Dorothy Clandon, commonly called Dolly. *Valentine bows to Dolly. She nods to him.* I'm Philip Clandon. We're from Madeira, but perfectly respectable, so far.

VALENTINE: Clandon! Are you related to —

DOLLY: *unexpectedly crying out in despair.* Yes, we are.

VALENTINE: *astonished.* I beg your pardon?

DOLLY: Oh, we are, we are. It's all over, Phil: they know all about us in England. *To Valentine.* Oh, you can't think how maddening it is to be related to a celebrated person, and never be valued anywhere for our own sakes.

VALENTINE: But excuse me: the gentleman I was thinking of is not celebrated.

DOLLY: *staring at him.* Gentleman! *Phil is also puzzled.*

VALENTINE: Yes. I was going to ask whether you were by any chance a daughter of Mr Densmore Clandon of Newbury Hall.

DOLLY: *vacantly.* No.

PHILIP: Well come, Dolly: how do you know you're not?

DOLLY: *cheered.* Oh, I forgot. Of course. Perhaps I am.

VALENTINE: Don't you know?

PHILIP: Not in the least.

DOLLY: It's a wise child —

PHILIP: *cutting her short.* Sh! *(Valentine starts nervously; for the sound made by Philip, though but momentary, is like cutting a sheet of silk in two with a flash of lightning. It is the result of long practice in checking Dolly's indiscretions.)* The fact is, Mr Valentine, we are the children of the celebrated Mrs Lanfrey Clandon, an authoress of great repute - in Madeira. No household is complete without her works. We came to England to get away from them. The are called the Twentieth Century Treatises.

DOLLY: Twentieth Century Cooking.

PHILIP: Twentieth Century Creeds.

DOLLY: Twentieth Century Clothing.

PHILIP: Twentieth Century Conduct.

DOLLY: Twentieth Century Children.

PHILIP: Twentieth Century Parents.

DOLLY: Cloth limp, half a dollar.

PHILIP: Or mounted on linen for hard family use, two dollars. No family should be without them. Read them, Mr Valentine: they'll improve your mind.

DOLLY: But not till we've gone, please.

PHILIP: Quite so: we prefer people with unimproved minds. Our own minds are in that fresh and unspoiled condition.

VALENTINE: *dubiously.* Hm!

DOLLY: *echoing him inquiringly.* Hm? Phil: he prefers people whose minds are improved.

PHILIP: In that case we shall have to introduce him to the other member of the family: the Woman of the Twentieth Century; our sister Gloria!

DOLLY: *dithyrambically.* Nature's masterpiece!

PHILIP: Learning's daughter!

DOLLY: Madeira's pride!

PHILIP: Beauty's paragon!

DOLLY: *suddenly descending to prose.* Bosh! No complexion.

VALENTINE: *desperately.* May I have a word?

PHILIP: *politely.* Excuse us. Go ahead.

DOLLY: *very nicely.* So sorry.

VALENTINE: *attempting to take them paternally.* I really must give a hint to you young people—

DOLLY: *breaking out again.* Oh, come: I like that. How old are you?

PHILIP: Over thirty.

DOLLY: He's not.

PHILIP: *confidently.* He is.

DOLLY: *emphatically.* Twenty-seven.

PHILIP: *imperturbably.* Thirty-three.

DOLLY: Stuff!

PHILIP: *to Valentine.* I appeal to you, Mr Valentine.

VALENTINE: *remonstrating.* Well, really—[resigning himself.] Thirty-one.

PHILIP: *to Dolly.* You were wrong.

DOLLY: So were you.

PHILIP: *suddenly conscientious.* We're forgetting our manners, Dolly.

DOLLY: *remorseful.* Yes, so we are.

PHILIP: *apologetic.* We interrupted you, Mr Valentine.

DOLLY: You were going to improve our minds, I think.

VALENTINE: The fact is, your—

PHILIP: *anticipating him.* Our appearance?

DOLLY: Our manners?

VALENTINE: *ad misericordiam.* Oh, do let me speak.

DOLLY: The old story. We talk too much.

PHILIP: We do. Shut up, both. *He seats himself on the arm of the opposing chair.*

DOLLY: Mum! *She sits down in the writing-table chair, and closes her lips tight with the tips of her fingers.*

VALENTINE: Thank you. *He brings the stool from the bench in the corner; places it between them; and sits down with a judicial air. They attend to him with extreme gravity. He addresses himself first to Dolly.* Now may I ask, to begin with, have you ever been in an English seaside resort before? *She shakes her head slowly and solemnly. He turns to Phil, who shakes his head quickly and expressively.* I thought so. Well, Mr Clandon, our acquaintance has been short; but it has been voluble; and I have gathered enough to convince me that you are neither of you capable of conceiving what life in an English seaside resort is. Believe me, it's not a question of manners and appearance. In those respects we enjoy a freedom unknown in Madeira. *Dolly shakes her head*

vehemently. Oh, yes, I assure you. Lord de Cresci's sister bicycles in knickerbockers; and the rector's wife advocates dress reform and wears hygienic boots. *Dolly furtively looks at her own shoe: Valentine catches her in the act, and deftly adds* No, that's not the sort of boot I mean. *Dolly's shoe vanishes.* We don't bother much about dress and manners in England, because, as a nation we don't dress well and we've no manners. But - and now will you excuse my frankness? *They nod.* Thank you. Well, in a seaside resort there's one thing you must have before anybody can afford to be seen going about with you; and that's a father, alive or dead. *He looks at them alternately, with emphasis. They meet his gaze like martyrs.* Am I to infer that you have omitted that indispensable part of your social equipment? *They confirm him by melancholy nods.* Them I'm sorry to say that if you are going to stay here for any length of time, it will be impossible for me to accept your kind invitation to lunch. *He rises with an air of finality, and replaces the stool by the bench.*

PHILIP: *rising with grave politeness.* Come, Dolly. *He gives her his arm.*

DOLLY: Good morning. *They go together to the door with perfect dignity.*

VALENTINE: *overwhelmed with remorse.* Oh, stop, stop. *They halt and turn, arm in arm.* You make me feel a perfect beast.

DOLLY: That's your conscience: not us.

VALENTINE: *energetically, throwing off all pretence of a professional manner.* My conscience! My conscience has been my ruin. Listen to me. Twice before I have set up as a respectable medical practitioner in various parts of England. On both occasions I acted conscientiously, and told my patients the brute truth instead of what they wanted to be told. Result, ruin. Now I've set up as a dentist, a five shilling dentist; and I've done with conscience forever. This is my last chance. I spent my last sovereign on moving in; and I haven't paid a shilling of rent yet. I'm eating and drinking on credit; my landlord is as rich as a Jew and as hard as nails; and I've made five shillings in six weeks. If I swerve by a hair's breadth from the straight line of the most rigid respectability, I'm done for. Under such a circumstance, is it fair to ask me to lunch with you when you don't know your own father?

DOLLY: After all, our grandfather is a canon of Lincoln Cathedral.

VALENTINE: *like a castaway mariner who sees a sail on the horizon.* What! Have you a grandfather?

DOLLY: Only one.

VALENTINE: My dear, good young friends, why on earth didn't you tell me that before? A canon of Lincoln! That makes it all right, of course. Just excuse me while I change my coat. *He reaches the door in a bound and vanishes. Dolly and Phil stare after him, and then stare at one another. Missing their audience, they droop and become commonplace at once.*

PHILIP: *throwing away Dolly's arm and coming ill-humoredly towards the operating chair.* That wretched bankrupt ivory snatcher makes a compliment of allowing us to stand him a lunch - probably the first square meal he has had for months. *He gives the chair a kick, as if it were Valentine.*

DOLLY: It's too beastly. I won't stand it any longer, Phil. Here in England everybody asks whether you have a father the very first thing.

PHILIP: I won't stand it either. Mamma must tell us who he was.

DOLLY: Or who he is. He may be alive.

PHILIP: I hope not. No man alive shall father me.

DOLLY: He might have a lot of money, though.

PHILIP: I doubt it. My knowledge of human nature leads me to believe that if he had a lot of money he wouldn't have got rid of his affectionate family so easily. Anyhow, let's look at the bright side of things. Depend on it, he's dead. *He goes to the hearth and stands with his back to the fireplace, spreading himself. The parlor maid appears. The twins, under observation, instantly shine out again with their former brilliancy.*

THE PARLOR MAID: Two ladies for you, miss. Your mother and sister, miss, I think.

Mrs Clandon and Gloria come in. Mrs Clandon is between forty and fifty, with a slight tendency to soft, sedentary fat, and a fair remainder of good looks, none the worse preserved because she has evidently followed the old tribal matronly fashion of making no pretension in that direction after her marriage, and might almost be suspected of wearing a cap at home. She carries herself artificially well, as women were taught to do as a part of good manners by dancing masters and reclining boards before these were superseded by the modern artistic cult of beauty and health. Her hair, a flaxen hazel fading into white, is crimped, and parted in the middle with the ends plaited and made into a knot, from which observant people of a certain age infer that Mrs Clandon had sufficient individuality and good taste to stand out resolutely against the now forgotten chignon in her girlhood. In short, she is distinctly old fashioned for her age in dress and manners. But she belongs to the forefront of her own period say 1860-80 in a jealously assertive attitude of character and intellect, and in being a woman of cultivated interests rather than passionately developed personal affections. Her voice and ways are entirely kindly and humane; and she lends herself conscientiously to the occasional demonstrations of fondness by which her children mark their esteem for her; but displays of personal sentiment secretly embarrass her: passion in her is humanitarian rather than human: she feels strongly about social questions and principles, not about persons. Only, one observes that this reasonableness and intense personal privacy, which leaves her relations with Gloria and Phil much as they might be between her and the children of any other woman, breaks down in the case of Dolly. Though almost every word she addresses to her is necessarily in the nature of a remonstrance for some breach of decorum, the tenderness in her voice is unmistakable; and it is not surprising that years of such remonstrance have left Dolly hopelessly spoiled.

Gloria, who is hardly past twenty, is a much more formidable person than her mother. She is the incarnation of haughty highmindedness, raging with the impatience of an impetuous, dominative character paralyzed by the impotence of her youth, and unwillingly disciplined by the constant danger of ridicule from her lighter-handed juniors. Unlike her mother, she is all passion; and the conflict of her passion with her obstinate pride and intense fastidiousness results in a freezing coldness of manner. In an ugly woman all this would be repulsive; but Gloria is an attractive woman. Her deep chestnut hair, olive brown skin, long eyelashes, shaded grey eyes that often flash like stars, delicately turned full lips, and compact and supple, but muscularly plump figure appeal with disdainful frankness to the senses and imagination. A very dangerous girl, one would say, if the moral passions were not also marked, and even nobly marked, in a fine brow. Her tailor-made skirt-and-jacket dress of saffron brown cloth, seems conventional when her back is turned; but it displays in front a blouse of sea-green silk which upsets its conventionality with one stroke, and sets her apart as effectually as the twins from the ordinary run of fashionable seaside humanity.

Mrs Clandon comes a little way into the room, looking round to see who is present. Gloria, who studiously avoids encouraging the twins by betraying any interest in them, wanders to the window and looks out with her thoughts far away. The parlor maid, instead of withdrawing, shuts the door and waits at it.

MRS. CLANDON: Well, children? How is the toothache, Dolly?

DOLLY: Cured, thank Heaven. I've had it out. *She sits down on the step of the operating chair. Mrs Clandon takes the writing-table chair.*

PHILIP: *striking in gravely from the hearth.* And the dentist, a first-rate professional man of the highest standing, is coming to lunch with us.

MRS. CLANDON: *looking round apprehensively at the servant.* Phil!

THE PARLOR MAID: Beg pardon, ma'am. I'm waiting for Mr Valentine. I have a message for him.

DOLLY: Who from?

MRS. CLANDON: *shocked.* Dolly! *Dolly catches her lips with her finger tips, suppressing a little splutter of mirth.*

THE PARLOR MAID: Only the landlord, ma'am.

Valentine, in a blue serge suit, with a straw hat in his hand, comes back in high spirits, out of breath with the haste he has made. Gloria turns from the window and studies him with freezing attention.

PHILIP: Let me introduce you, Mr Valentine. My mother, Mrs Lanfrey Clandon. *Mrs Clandon bows. Valentine bows, self-possessed and quite equal to the occasion.* My sister Gloria. *Gloria bows with cold dignity and sits down on the sofa. Valentine falls in love at first sight and is miserably confused. He fingers his hat nervously, and makes her a sneaking bow.*

MRS. CLANDON: I understand that we are to have the pleasure of seeing you at luncheon to-day, Mr Valentine.

VALENTINE: Thank you—er—if you don't mind—I mean if you will be so kind —*to the parlor maid testily* What is it?

THE PARLOR MAID: The landlord, sir, wishes to speak to you before you go out.

VALENTINE: Oh, tell him I have four patients here. *The Clandons look surprised, except Phil, who is imperturbable.* If he wouldn't mind waiting just two minutes, I—I'll slip down and see him for a moment. *Throwing himself confidentially on her sense of the position.* Say I'm busy, but that I want to see him.

THE PARLOR MAID: *reassuringly.* Yes, sir. *She goes.*

MRS. CLANDON: *on the point of rising.* We are detaining you, I am afraid.

VALENTINE: Not at all, not at all. Your presence here will be the greatest help to me. The fact is, I owe six week's rent; and I've had no patients until to-day. My interview with my landlord will be considerably smoothed by the apparent boom in my business.

DOLLY: *vexed.* Oh, how tiresome of you to let it all out! And we've just been pretending that you were a respectable professional man in a first-rate position.

MRS. CLANDON: *horrified.* Oh, Dolly, Dolly! My dearest, how can you be so rude? *To Valentine.* Will you excuse these barbarian children of mine, Mr Valentine?

VALENTINE: Thank you, I'm used to them. Would it be too much to ask you to wait five minutes while I get rid of my landlord downstairs?

DOLLY: Don't be long. We're hungry.

MRS. CLANDON: *again remonstrating.* Dolly, dear!

VALENTINE: *to Dolly.* All right. *To Mrs Clandon.* Thank you: I shan't be long. *He steals a look at Gloria as he turns to go. She is looking gravely at him. He falls into confusion.* I—er—eryes—thank you *he succeeds at last in blundering himself out of the room; but the exhibition is a pitiful one.*

PHILIP: Did you observe? *Pointing to Gloria.* Love at first sight. You can add his scalp to your collection, Gloria.

MRS. CLANDON: Sh—sh, pray, Phil. He may have heard you.

PHILIP: Not he. *Bracing himself for a scene.* And now look here, mamma. *(He takes the stool from the*

bench; and seats himself majestically in the middle of the room, taking a leaf out of Valentine's book. Dolly, feeling that her position on the step of the operating chair is unworthy of the dignity of the occasion, rises, looking important and determined; crosses to the window; and stands with her back to the end of the writing-table, her hands behind her and on the table. Mrs Clandon looks at them, wondering what is coming. Gloria becomes attentive. Philip straightens his back; places his knuckles symmetrically on his knees; and opens his case.) Dolly and I have been talking over things a good deal lately; and I don't think, judging from my knowledge of human nature—we don't think that you *speaking very staccato, with the words detached* quite appreciate the fact —

DOLLY: *seating herself on the end of the table with a spring.* That we've grown up.

MRS. CLANDON: Indeed? In what way have I given you any reason to complain?

PHILIP: Well, there are certain matters upon which we are beginning to feel that you might take us a little more into your confidence.

MRS. CLANDON: *(rising, with all the placidity of her age suddenly broken up; and a curious hard excitement, dignified but dogged, ladylike but implacable—the manner of the Old Guard of the Women's Rights movement—coming upon her).* Phil: take care. Remember what I have always taught you. There are two sorts of family life, Phil; and your experience of human nature only extends, so far, to one of them. *Rhetorically.* The sort you know is based on mutual respect, on recognition of the right of every member of the household to independence and privacy *her emphasis on "privacy" is intense* in their personal concerns. And because you have always enjoyed that, it seems such a matter of course to you that you don't value it. But *with biting acrimony* there is another sort of family life: a life in which husbands open their wives' letters, and call on them to account for every farthing of their expenditure and every moment of their time; in which women do the same to their children; in which no room is private and no hour sacred; in which duty, obedience, affection, home, morality and religion are detestable tyrannies, and life is a vulgar round of punishments and lies, coercion and rebellion, jealousy, suspicion, recrimination—Oh! I cannot describe it to you: fortunately for you, you know nothing about it. *She sits down, panting. Gloria has listened to her with flashing eyes, sharing all her indignation.*

DOLLY: *inaccessible to rhetoric.* See Twentieth Century Parents, chapter on Liberty, passim.

MRS. CLANDON: *touching her shoulder affectionately, soothed even by a gibe from her.* My dear Dolly: if you only knew how glad I am that it is nothing but a joke to you, though it is such bitter earnest to me. *More resolutely, turning to Philip.* Phil, I never ask you questions about your private concerns. You are not going to question me, are you?

PHILIP: I think it due to ourselves to say that the question we wanted to ask is as much our business as yours.

DOLLY: Besides, it can't be good to keep a lot of questions bottled up inside you. You did it, mamma; but see how awfully it's broken out again in me.

MRS. CLANDON: I see you want to ask your question. Ask it.

DOLLY AND PHILIP: *beginning simultaneously.* Who—*They stop.*

PHILIP: Now look here, Dolly: am I going to conduct this business or are you?

DOLLY: You.

PHILIP: Then hold your mouth. *Dolly does so literally.* The question is a simple one. When the ivory snatcher—

MRS. CLANDON: *remonstrating.* Phil!

PHILIP: Dentist is an ugly word. The man of ivory and gold asked us whether we were the children of

Mr Densmore Clandon of Newbury Hall. In pursuance of the precepts in your treatise on Twentieth Century Conduct, and your repeated personal exhortations to us to curtail the number of unnecessary lies we tell, we replied truthfully the we didn't know.

DOLLY: Neither did we.

PHILIP: Sh! The result was that the gum architect made considerable difficulties about accepting our invitation to lunch, although I doubt if he has had anything but tea and bread and butter for a fortnight past. Now my knowledge of human nature leads me to believe that we had a father, and that you probably know who he was.

MRS. CLANDON: *her agitation returning.* Stop, Phil. Your father is nothing to you, nor to me *vehemently.* That is enough. *The twins are silenced, but not satisfied. Their faces fall. But Gloria, who has been following the altercation attentively, suddenly intervenes.*

GLORIA: *advancing.* Mother: we have a right to know.

MRS. CLANDON: *rising and facing her.* Gloria! "We!" Who is "we"?

GLORIA: *steadfastly.* We three. *Her tone is unmistakable: she is pitting her strength against her mother for the first time. The twins instantly go over to the enemy.*

MRS. CLANDON: *wounded.* In your mouth "we" used to mean you and I, Gloria.

PHILIP: *rising decisively and putting away the stool.* We're hurting you: let's drop it. We didn't think you'd mind. I don't want to know.

DOLLY: *coming off the table.* I'm sure I don't. Oh, don't look like that, mamma. *She looks angrily at Gloria.*

MRS. CLANDON: *touching her eyes hastily with her handkerchief and sitting down again.* Thank you, my dear. Thanks, Phil.

GLORIA: *inexorably.* We have a right to know, mother.

MRS. CLANDON: *indignantly.* Ah! You insist.

GLORIA: Do you intend that we shall never know?

DOLLY: Oh, Gloria, don't. It's barbarous.

GLORIA: *with quiet scorn.* What is the use of being weak? You see what has happened with this gentleman here, mother. The same thing has happened to me.

MRS. CLANDON: What do you mean?

DOLLY: Oh, tell us.

PHILIP: What happened to you?

GLORIA: Oh, nothing of any consequence. *(She turns away from them and goes up to the easy chair at the fireplace, where she sits down, almost with her back to them. As they wait expectantly, she adds, over her shoulder, with studied indifference.)* On board the steamer the first officer did me the honor to propose to me.

DOLLY: No, it was to me.

MRS. CLANDON: The first officer! Are you serious, Gloria? What did you say to him? *correcting herself* Excuse me: I have no right to ask that.

GLORIA: The answer is pretty obvious. A woman who does not know who her father was cannot accept such an offer.

MRS. CLANDON: Surely you did not want to accept it?

GLORIA: *turning a little and raising her voice.* No; but suppose I had wanted to!

PHILIP: Did that difficulty strike you, Dolly?

DOLLY: No, I accepted him.

GLORIA: Accepted him!

MRS. CLANDON: Dolly!

PHILIP: Oh, I say!

DOLLY: *naively.* He did look such a fool!

MRS. CLANDON: But why did you do such a thing, Dolly?

DOLLY: For fun, I suppose. He had to measure my finger for a ring. You'd have done the same thing yourself.

MRS. CLANDON: No, Dolly, I would not. As a matter of fact the first officer did propose to me; and I told him to keep that sort of thing for women were young enough to be amused by it. He appears to have acted on my advice. *She rises and goes to the hearth.* Gloria: I am sorry you think me weak; but I cannot tell you what you want. You are all too young.

PHILIP: This is rather a startling departure from Twentieth Century principles.

DOLLY: *quoting.* "Answer all your children's questions, and answer them truthfully, as soon as they are old enough to ask them." See Twentieth Century Motherhood—

PHILIP: Page one—

DOLLY: Chapter one—

PHILIP: Sentence one.

MRS. CLANDON: My dears: I did not say that you were too young to know. I said you were too young to be taken into my confidence. You are very bright children, all of you; but I am glad for your sakes that you are still very inexperienced and consequently very unsympathetic. There are some experiences of mine that I cannot bear to speak of except to those who have gone through what I have gone through. I hope you will never be qualified for such confidences. But I will take care that you shall learn all you want to know. Will that satisfy you?

PHILIP: Another grievance, Dolly.

DOLLY: We're not sympathetic.

GLORIA: *leaning forward in her chair and looking earnestly up at her mother.* Mother: I did not mean to be unsympathetic.

MRS. CLANDON: *affectionately.* Of course not, dear. Do you think I don't understand?

GLORIA: *rising.* But, mother—

MRS. CLANDON: *drawing back a little.* Yes?

GLORIA: *obstinately.* It is nonsense to tell us that our father is nothing to us.

MRS. CLANDON: *provoked to sudden resolution.* Do you remember your father?

GLORIA: *meditatively, as if the recollection were a tender one.* I am not quite sure. I think so.

MRS. CLANDON: *grimly.* You are not sure?

GLORIA: No.

MRS. CLANDON: *with quiet force.* Gloria: if I had ever struck you—*Gloria recoils: Philip and Dolly are disagreeably shocked; all three start at her, revolted as she continues—*struck *you purposely, deliberately, with the intention of hurting you, with a whip bought for the purpose! Would you remember that, do you think? Gloria utters an exclamation of indignant repulsion. That would have been your last recollection of your father, Gloria, if I had not taken you away from him. I have kept him out of your life: keep him now out of mine by never mentioning him to me again. (Gloria, with a shudder, covers her face with her hands, until, hearing someone at the door, she turns away and pretends to occupy herself looking at the names of the books in the bookcase. Mrs Clandon sits down on the sofa. Valentine returns.).*

VALENTINE: I hope I've not kept you waiting. That landlord of mine is really an extraordinary old character.

DOLLY: *eagerly.* Oh, tell us. How long has he given you to pay?

MRS. CLANDON: *distracted by her child's bad manners.* Dolly, Dolly, Dolly dear! You must not ask questions.

DOLLY: *demurely.* So sorry. You'll tell us, won't you, Mr Valentine?

VALENTINE: He doesn't want his rent at all. He's broken his tooth on a Brazil nut; and he wants me to look at it and to lunch with him afterwards.

DOLLY: Then have him up and pull his tooth out at once; and we'll bring him to lunch, too. Tell the maid to fetch him along. *She runs to the bell and rings it vigorously. Then, with a sudden doubt she turns to Valentine and adds* I suppose he's respectable—really respectable.

VALENTINE: Perfectly. Not like me.

DOLLY: Honest Injun? *Mrs Clandon gasps faintly; but her powers of remonstrance are exhausted.*

VALENTINE: Honest Injun!

DOLLY: Then off with you and bring him up.

VALENTINE: *looking dubiously at Mrs Clandon.* I daresay he'd be delighted if—er—?

MRS. CLANDON: *rising and looking at her watch.* I shall be happy to see your friend at lunch, if you can persuade him to come; but I can't wait to see him now: I have an appointment at the hotel at a quarter to one with an old friend whom I have not seen since I left England eighteen years ago. Will you excuse me?

VALENTINE: Certainly, Mrs Clandon.

GLORIA: Shall I come?

MRS. CLANDON: No, dear. I want to be alone. *She goes out, evidently still a good deal troubled. Valentine opens the door for her and follows her out.*

PHILIP: *significantly—to Dolly.* Hmhm!

DOLLY: *significantly to Philip.* Ahah! *The parlor maid answers the bell.*

DOLLY: Show the old gentleman up.

THE PARLOR MAID: *puzzled.* Madam?

DOLLY: The old gentleman with the toothache.

PHILIP: The landlord.

THE PARLOR MAID: Mr Crampton, Sir?

PHILIP: Is his name Crampton?

DOLLY: *to Philip.* Sounds rheumaticky, doesn't it?

PHILIP: Chalkstones, probably.

DOLLY: *over her shoulder, to the parlor maid.* Show Mr Crampstones up. *Goes right to writing-table chair.*

THE PARLOR MAID: *correcting her.* Mr Crampton, miss. *She goes.*

DOLLY: *repeating it to herself like a lesson.* Crampton, Crampton, Crampton, Crampton, Crampton. *She sits down studiously at the writing- table.* I must get that name right, or Heaven knows what I shall call him.

GLORIA: Phil: can you believe such a horrible thing as that about our father—what mother said just now?

PHILIP: Oh, there are lots of people of that kind. Old Chalice used to thrash his wife and daughters with a cartwhip.

DOLLY: *contemptuously.* Yes, a Portuguese!

PHILIP: When you come to men who are brutes, there is much in common between the Portuguese and the English variety, Doll. Trust my knowledge of human nature. *He resumes his position on the hearthrug with an elderly and responsible air.*

GLORIA: *with angered remorse.* I don't think we shall ever play again at our old game of guessing what our father was to be like. Dolly: are you sorry for your father—the father with lots of money?

DOLLY: Oh, come! What about your father—the lonely old man with the tender aching heart? He's pretty well burst up, I think.

PHILIP: There can be no doubt that the governor is an exploded superstition. *Valentine is heard talking to somebody outside the door.* But hark: he comes.

GLORIA: *nervously.* Who?

DOLLY: Chalkstones.

PHILIP: Sh! Attention. *They put on their best manners. Philip adds in a lower voice to Gloria* If he's good enough for the lunch, I'll nod to Dolly; and if she nods to you, invite him straight away.

Valentine comes back with his landlord. Mr Fergus Crampton is a man of about sixty, tall, hard and stringy, with an atrociously obstinate, ill tempered, grasping mouth, and a querulously dogmatic voice. Withal he is highly nervous and sensitive, judging by his thin transparent skin marked with multitudinous lines, and his slender fingers. His consequent capacity for suffering acutely from all the dislike that his temper and obstinacy can bring upon him is proved by his wistful, wounded eyes, by a plaintive note in his voice, a painful want of confidence in his welcome, and a constant but indifferently successful effort to correct his natural incivility of manner and proneness to take offence. By his keen brows and forehead he is clearly a shrewd man; and there is no sign of straitened means or commercial diffidence about him: he is well dressed, and would be classed at a guess as a prosperous master manufacturer in a business inherited from an old family in the aristocracy of trade. His navy blue coat is not of the usual fashionable pattern. It is not exactly a pilot's coat; but it is cut that way, double breasted, and with stout buttons and broad lappels, a coat for a shipyard rather than a counting house. He has taken a fancy to Valentine, who cares nothing for his crossness of grain and treats him with a sort of disrespectful humanity, for which he is secretly grateful.

VALENTINE: May I introduce—this is Mr Crampton—Miss Dorothy Clandon, Mr Philip Clandon, Miss Clandon. *Crampton stands nervously bowing. They all bow.* Sit down, Mr Crampton.

DOLLY: *pointing to the operating chair.* That is the most comfortable chair, Mr Ch—crampton.

CRAMPTON: Thank you; but won't this young lady—[indicating Gloria, who is close to the chair]?

GLORIA: Thank you, Mr Crampton: we are just going.

VALENTINE: *bustling him across to the chair with good-humored peremptoriness.* Sit down, sit down. You're tired.

CRAMPTON: Well, perhaps as I am considerably the oldest person present, I—*(He finishes the sentence by sitting down a little rheumatically in the operating chair. Meanwhile, Philip, having studied him critically during his passage across the room, nods to Dolly; and Dolly nods to Gloria.)*

GLORIA: Mr Crampton: we understand that we are preventing Mr Valentine from lunching with you by taking him away ourselves. My mother would be very glad, indeed, if you would come too.

CRAMPTON: *gratefully, after looking at her earnestly for a moment.* Thank you. I will come with pleasure.

GLORIA: } *(politely { Thank you very much—er—*

DOLLY: } murmuring).{ So glad—er—

PHILIP: } { Delighted, I'm sure—er—

The conversation drops. Gloria and Dolly look at one another; then at Valentine and Philip. Valentine and Philip, unequal to the occasion, look away from them at one another, and are instantly so disconcerted by catching one another's eye, that they look back again and catch the eyes of Gloria and Dolly. Thus, catching one another all round, they all look at nothing and are quite at a loss. Crampton looks about him, waiting for them to begin. The silence becomes unbearable.

DOLLY: *suddenly, to keep things going.* How old are you, Mr Crampton?

GLORIA: *hastily.* I am afraid we must be going, Mr Valentine. It is understood, then, that we meet at half past one. *She makes for the door. Philip goes with her. Valentine retreats to the bell.*

VALENTINE: Half past one. *He rings the bell.* Many thanks. *He follows Gloria and Philip to the door, and goes out with them.*

DOLLY: *who has meanwhile stolen across to Crampton.* Make him give you gas. It's five shillings extra: but it's worth it.

CRAMPTON: *amused.* Very well. *Looking more earnestly at her.* So you want to know my age, do you? I'm fifty-seven.

DOLLY: *with conviction.* You look it.

CRAMPTON: *grimly.* I dare say I do.

DOLLY: What are you looking at me so hard for? Anything wrong? *She feels whether her hat is right.*

CRAMPTON: You're like somebody.

DOLLY: Who?

CRAMPTON: Well, you have a curious look of my mother.

DOLLY: *incredulously.* Your mother!!! Quite sure you don't mean your daughter?

CRAMPTON: *suddenly blackening with hate.* Yes: I'm quite sure I don't mean my daughter.

DOLLY: *sympathetically.* Tooth bad?

CRAMPTON: No, no: nothing. A twinge of memory, Miss Clandon, not of toothache.

DOLLY: Have it out. "Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow:" with gas, five shillings extra.

CRAMPTON: *vindicatively.* No, not a sorrow. An injury that was done me once: that's all. I don't forget injuries; and I don't want to forget them. *His features settle into an implacable frown.*

re-enter Philip: to look for Dolly. He comes down behind her unobserved.

DOLLY: *looking critically at Crampton's expression.* I don't think we shall like you when you are brooding over your sorrows.

PHILIP: *who has entered the room unobserved, and stolen behind her.* My sister means well, Mr Crampton: but she is indiscreet. Now Dolly, outside! *He takes her towards the door.*

DOLLY: *in a perfectly audible undertone.* He says he's only fifty- seven; and he thinks me the image of his mother; and he hates his daughter; and—*She is interrupted by the return of Valentine.*

VALENTINE: Miss Clandon has gone on.

PHILIP: Don't forget half past one.

DOLLY: Mind you leave Mr Crampton with enough teeth to eat with. *They go out. Valentine comes down to his cabinet, and opens it.*

CRAMPTON: That's a spoiled child, Mr Valentine. That's one of your modern products. When I was her age, I had many a good hiding fresh in my memory to teach me manners.

VALENTINE: *taking up his dental mirror and probe from the shelf in front of the cabinet.* What did you think of her sister?

CRAMPTON: You liked her better, eh?

VALENTINE: *rhapsodically.* She struck me as being—*He checks himself, and adds, prosaically* However, that's not business. *He places himself behind Crampton's right shoulder and assumes his professional tone.* Open, please. *Crampton opens his mouth. Valentine puts the mirror in, and examines his teeth.* Hm! You have broken that one. What a pity to spoil such a splendid set of teeth! Why do you crack nuts with them? *He withdraws the mirror, and comes forward to converse with Crampton.*

CRAMPTON: I've always cracked nuts with them: what else are they for? *Dogmatically.* The proper way to keep teeth good is to give them plenty of use on bones and nuts, and wash them every day with soap—plain yellow soap.

VALENTINE: Soap! Why soap?

CRAMPTON: I began using it as a boy because I was made to; and I've used it ever since. And I never had toothache in my life.

VALENTINE: Don't you find it rather nasty?

CRAMPTON: I found that most things that were good for me were nasty. But I was taught to put up with them, and made to put up with them. I'm used to it now: in fact, I like the taste when the soap is really good.

VALENTINE: *making a wry face in spite of himself.* You seem to have been very carefully educated, Mr Crampton.

CRAMPTON: *grimly.* I wasn't spoiled, at all events.

VALENTINE: *smiling a little to himself.* Are you quite sure?

CRAMPTON: What d'y' mean?

VALENTINE: Well, your teeth are good, I admit. But I've seen just as good in very self-indulgent mouths. *He goes to the ledge of cabinet and changes the probe for another one.*

CRAMPTON: It's not the effect on the teeth: it's the effect on the character.

VALENTINE: *placably.* Oh, the character, I see. *He recommences operations.* A little wider, please. Hm! That one will have to come out: it's past saving. *He withdraws the probe and again comes to the side of the chair to converse.* Don't be alarmed: you shan't feel anything. I'll give you gas.

CRAMPTON: Rubbish, man: I want none of your gas. Out with it. People were taught to bear necessary pain in my day.

VALENTINE: Oh, if you like being hurt, all right. I'll hurt you as much as you like, without any extra charge for the beneficial effect on your character.

CRAMPTON: *rising and glaring at him.* Young man: you owe me six weeks' rent.

VALENTINE: I do.

CRAMPTON: Can you pay me?

VALENTINE: No.

CRAMPTON: *satisfied with his advantage.* I thought not. How soon d'y' think you'll be able to pay me if you have no better manners than to make game of your patients? *He sits down again.*

VALENTINE: My good sir: my patients haven't all formed their characters on kitchen soap.

CRAMPTON: *suddenly gripping him by the arm as he turns away again to the cabinet.* So much the worse for them. I tell you you don't understand my character. If I could spare all my teeth, I'd make you pull them all out one after another to shew you what a properly hardened man can go through with when he's made up his mind to do it. *He nods at him to enforce the effect of this declaration, and releases him.*

VALENTINE: *his careless pleasantry quite unruffled.* And you want to be more hardened, do you?

CRAMPTON: Yes.

VALENTINE: *strolling away to the bell.* Well, you're quite hard enough for me already—as a landlord. *Crampton receives this with a growl of grim humor. Valentine rings the bell, and remarks in a cheerful, casual way, whilst waiting for it to be answered.* Why did you never get married, Mr Crampton? A wife and children would have taken some of the hardness out of you.

CRAMPTON: *with unexpected ferocity.* What the devil is that to you? *The parlor maid appears at the door.*

VALENTINE: *politely.* Some warm water, please. *(She retires: and Valentine comes back to the cabinet, not at all put out by Crampton's rudeness, and carries on the conversation whilst he selects a forceps and places it ready to his hand with a gag and a drinking glass.)* You were asking me what the devil that was to me. Well, I have an idea of getting married myself.

CRAMPTON: *with grumbling irony.* Naturally, sir, naturally. When a young man has come to his last farthing, and is within twenty-four hours of having his furniture distrained upon by his landlord, he marries. I've noticed that before. Well, marry; and be miserable.

VALENTINE: Oh, come, what do you know about it?

CRAMPTON: I'm not a bachelor.

VALENTINE: Then there is a Mrs Crampton?

CRAMPTON: *wincing with a pang of resentment.* Yes—damn her!

VALENTINE: *unperturbed.* Hm! A father, too, perhaps, as well as a husband, Mr Crampton?

CRAMPTON: Three children.

VALENTINE: *politely.* Damn them—eh?

CRAMPTON: *jealously.* No, sir: the children are as much mine as hers. *The parlor maid brings in a jug of hot water.*

VALENTINE: Thank you. *He takes the jug from her, and brings it to the cabinet, continuing in the same idle strain* I really should like to know your family, Mr Crampton. *The parlor maid goes out: and he pours some hot water into the drinking glass.*

CRAMPTON: Sorry I can't introduce you, sir. I'm happy to say that I don't know where they are, and don't care, so long as they keep out of my way. *Valentine, with a hitch of his eyebrows and shoulders, drops the forceps with a clink into the glass of hot water.* You needn't warm that thing to use on me. I'm not afraid of the cold steel. *Valentine stoops to arrange the gas pump and cylinder beside the chair.* What's that heavy thing?

VALENTINE: Oh, never mind. Something to put my foot on, to get the necessary purchase for a good pull. *Crampton looks alarmed in spite of himself. Valentine stands upright and places the glass with the forceps in it ready to his hand, chatting on with provoking indifference.* And so you advise me not to get married, Mr Crampton? *He stoops to fit the handle on the apparatus by which the chair is raised and lowered.*

CRAMPTON: *irritably.* I advise you to get my tooth out and have done reminding me of my wife. Come along, man. *He grips the arms of the chair and braces himself.*

VALENTINE: *pausing, with his hand on the lever, to look up at him and say.* What do you bet that I don't get that tooth out without your feeling it?

CRAMPTON: Your six week's rent, young man. Don't you gammon me.

VALENTINE: *jumping at the bet and winding him aloft vigorously.* Done! Are you ready? *(Crampton, who has lost his grip of the chair in his alarm at its sudden ascent, folds his arms: sits stiffly upright: and prepares for the worst. Valentine lets down the back of the chair to an obtuse angle.)*

CRAMPTON: *clutching at the arms of the chair as he falls back.* Take care man. I'm quite helpless in this pos—

VALENTINE: *deftly stopping him with the gag, and snatching up the mouthpiece of the gas machine.* You'll be more helpless presently. *(He presses the mouthpiece over Crampton's mouth and nose, leaning over his chest so as to hold his head and shoulders well down on the chair. Crampton makes an inarticulate sound in the mouthpiece and tries to lay hands on Valentine, whom he supposes to be in front of him. After a moment his arms wave aimlessly, then subside and drop. He is quite insensible. Valentine, with an exclamation of somewhat preoccupied triumph, throws aside the mouthpiece quickly: picks up the forceps adroitly from the glass: and —the curtain falls.)*

Le note di scena sono tra parentesi *quadre* o *(tonde).*

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