

BISHOP'S MOVE

Plays by Alan Thornhill

THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR

MR WILBERFORCE MP

With Peter Howard

THE HURRICANE

MUSIC AT MIDNIGHT

BISHOP'S MOVE

A Play by

ALAN THORNHILL

WESTMINSTER PRODUCTIONS

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Characters

THOMAS FIELDING

DOROTHY HARCOURT

PRUDENCE HARCOURT

JOHN HARCOURT

EVELYN HARCOURT

GREGORY HARCOURT

WAYNE WELLMAN

1ST TV CAMERAMAN

2ND TV CAMERAMAN

TV PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

BISHOP'S MOVE

was first produced at the Westminster Theatre, London,
opening on 12 September 1968 with the following cast:

THOMAS FIELDING	Bryan Coleman
DOROTHY HARCOURT	Jo Maxwell-Muller
PRUDENCE HARCOURT	Alison Frazer
JOHN HARCOURT	Clement McCallin
EVELYN HARCOURT	Agatha Carroll
GREGORY HARCOURT	Roger Gale
WAYNE WELMAN	Gerard Green
1ST TV CAMERAMAN	Donald Simpson
2ND TV CAMERAMAN	Robin Browne
TV PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	Patricia Leslie

Directed by Henry Cass
Setting by W. Cameron Johnson
Lighting by Louis Fleming

*The action takes place in the study of
the Reverend John Harcourt at the present time*

ACT I

Scene 1 An Autumn Afternoon

Scene 2 After Supper

ACT II

Three weeks later

ACT III

Scene 1 A few hours later

Scene 2 One o'clock next morning

ACT ONE

SCENE I

A sunny afternoon in early autumn. The Rector's study. A comfortable, untidy, leathery kind of room full of books and papers. Doors at the back opening out to the garden are used by the family as the most convenient entrance and exit for the house. Another door leading to the hall and kitchen and the rest of the house.

As the curtain goes up the room is empty and then we hear Dorothy Harcourt, elder daughter of the house, about 25, ushering in a guest – Thomas Fielding. Dorothy could be an attractive girl but is now growing into more and more of a pseudo intellectual, but she's full of life when she feels secure and in control of the situation as she does now. Fielding is about 40, bow tie, tweedy, bachelor, plenty of polish but not much substance – a bit arty.

DOROTHY (*Off*) Do come in and sit down, won't you?
I'm sure my father will want to see an old friend.

FIELDING (*Off*) Look, I can perfectly well come back some other time when he's at home.

DOROTHY (*As they enter*) No, but you must come in and wait. Daddy'll be back soon. He's due on the 4.10 train. Look, I'll put the kettle on and make you some tea.

FIELDING That's very charming of you, but . . .

DOROTHY It's no bother. Mother's out at some parish 'do' or other.

FIELDING I meant to write and tell your father I'd be passing the Rectory and . . .

DOROTHY I know but you didn't. I open his letters, you see. I'm his sort of unofficial secretary, if you see what I mean. They've been giving him lunch at Television Centre.

FIELDING It seems like his second home, nowadays.

DOROTHY He hates it all really.

FIELDING (*Sceptical*) With that profile? Don't you believe it.

DOROTHY Daddy says you've got to co-operate if you want to communicate, if you see what I mean. I believe they want us all now on that new 'Meet the Family' programme.

FIELDING You mean the Wayne Wellman Show. People say he's a bit of a snake, but your father's quite a snakecharmer.

DOROTHY Oh, he is. Snakes simply adore him, if you see what I mean. I'll go and put on the kettle. Do sit down. *(She moves books and papers off a chair for Fielding to sit down)*

DOROTHY *(Off)* I know it's chaos, but it's a sort of organised chaos, if you see what I mean - I'm the only person supposed to touch anything. My mother is a born tidier, but Daddy refuses to put anything away except bills.

FIELDING *(At door, talking off)* If you work for a Prime Minister as I do, you have to put everything away. We even file his paper napkins if he doodles during meals.

DOROTHY *(Returning)* Do Prime Ministers use paper napkins?

FIELDING Democratic ones like mine do.

DOROTHY Were you really Daddy's pupil at Cambridge?

FIELDING I certainly was for two whole terms.

DOROTHY What happened then?

FIELDING I dropped Religion and went over to Political Science.

DOROTHY So now you are a Private Secretary instead of a budding bishop. How sad!

FIELDING Your father had a theory that men should lose their faith in order to find it. Unfortunately some of us only completed part one of the course.

(A schoolgirl of sixteen with books etc. comes bounding in through the garden doors. She is very pretty and very outspoken. While Dorothy has conformed to the rectory life, Prudence has rebelled against it.)

PRUDENCE Oh, pardon me. I say, Dot, there's been a most fantastic row at school over *The Lonely Pool*.

DOROTHY The what?

PRUDENCE The book, stupid. You know that lusciously lurid novel everyone's trying to ban.

DOROTHY Look, before you get totally immersed in the lonely pool, may I introduce Mr Fielding, an old friend of Daddy's. This is my sister, Prudence.

PRUDENCE Oh, hello.

FIELDING How do you do?

PRUDENCE Anyway I was having a nice quiet read in R I this morning.

FIELDING 'R' what?

PRUDENCE You know, Divinity, Religious Instruction.

FIELDING It all sounds eminently suitable.

PRUDENCE That's what I told Sinky - our Headmistress - when she caught me. I said, 'According to my father, who after all should know, "*The Lonely Pool* is a moral tract for our times.'" Quote unquote.' At which point she blew up.

DOROTHY You surprise me! Daddy's absolutely right about the book of course, but why on earth do you have to go out of your way to take it to school?

PRUDENCE Banned books are status symbols. Didn't you know? I use it to broaden people's minds. Anyway, she's returned it to Daddy with a note - all wrapped up in case somebody gets contaminated. I bet her note is a masterpiece. Shall I read it? (*She opens the parcel*)

DOROTHY No! Don't be so immature. And you'd better give me the book. (*She takes the book away from her*)

PRUDENCE I'd rather take it openly to school than go off in a corner, like you do, and gloat.

DOROTHY I do *not* gloat! (*Kettle whistles off*) I'll go and make the tea.

PRUDENCE Have you read *The Lonely Pool*?

FIELDING I've not got past the reviews yet. May I see?

(*He takes the book*) I gather this is the one that makes *Lady Chatterley* look like a Sunday School teacher.

PRUDENCE Well, not quite like the Sunday School teachers I've met.

FIELDING (*Looking at book*) Is this required reading for the daughters of the clergy?

PRUDENCE Dad is a great believer in the open mind. He says the heroine of this thing is searching.

FIELDING Hmmm! Quite successfully, I should think.

PRUDENCE I say, what are you? Press or a soul in torment?

FIELDING Neither, I'm glad to say.

PRUDENCE It's usually one or the other. A man turned up the other day. We thought he'd come to mend the washing machine. It turned out he had agonising doubts about the Trinity.

FIELDING He'd better stick to washing machines.

PRUDENCE Absolutely. I'm afraid I'm not what you'd call spiritual. In fact I'm fantastically earthy. Now my sister's just the opposite. Give her a book on the Dead Sea Scrolls or Original Sin and she'll positively drool. Daddy and she are alike. They get a fabulous kick out of doubting things. It makes them feel wiser than God.

(*Dorothy returns with tea*)

DOROTHY (*A broad hint*) Prue, dear, haven't you any homework?

PRUDENCE (*Cheerfully*) Not particularly. (*Passing cigarettes to Fielding*) Do you smoke? Or are you afraid of lung cancer?

FIELDING (*Taking one*) Both.

PRUDENCE (*Lighting up*) Oh, well, help solve the population explosion.

DOROTHY Prue, you *must* have homework. Please excuse my sister, Mr Fielding, we are anxiously waiting for her to grow up.

PRUDENCE Don't worry, it's happening. (*She retires to the book*)

DOROTHY How do you like your tea?

FIELDING Do you mind putting the milk in after?

DOROTHY Of course.

FIELDING It's a silly little fad of mine. I'm afraid I'm a fussy bachelor. Just a drop - no sugar.

DOROTHY (*Passing tea*) How does that suit you?

FIELDING Perfect. I must say I find it very peaceful around these parts.

DOROTHY It used to be peaceful here. But now, what with the Press and the TV, and furious letters all the time and seekers after truth and photographers.

PRUDENCE And just plain nut cases.

FIELDING Your father's becoming a well-known character.

PRUDENCE When a parson says he doesn't believe in God it's rather newsworthy and exciting.

DOROTHY You might take the trouble to find out just what Daddy does say.

PRUDENCE Well, he says it's all right to neck.

DOROTHY He says nothing of the kind.

PRUDENCE So long as it's an unselfish act of total self-giving. It always is with me actually.

DOROTHY (*Furious*) You're just being cheap and silly. (*To Fielding*) Honestly, that's what happens to original and untrammelled minds like my father's. You try to enlarge the frontiers of people's thinking and you get misunderstood and misquoted all the time, if you see what I mean.

PRUDENCE (*Chiming in*) If you see what I mean.

FIELDING Well, frankly I'm grateful to find a Minister of Religion who's not bound by dead dogmas and primitive taboos.

PRUDENCE That's just what I said, isn't it?

DOROTHY No, it isn't. I do think people admire terrifically a parson who dares to have doubts. (*Phone rings*)

PRUDENCE (*Answering*) Hallo! (*Enthusiastic*) Well. Hallo Bob! What do you know, sweetie? . . . Me! oh, I'm great. (*Puts hand over phone*) It's Bob.

DOROTHY We didn't think it was the Archbishop of Canterbury.

PRUDENCE Hold on a minute. My sister's nattering. (*To Dorothy*) He's ringing from London.

DOROTHY Please take your call upstairs and don't be all afternoon. Someone might even want to use the phone to say something. (*Prudence puts out her tongue and goes*) That will take care of her for a while. Do have some more tea.

FIELDING Thank you. Your sister is refreshingly honest.

DOROTHY Yes, that kind of honesty is refreshing for about five minutes. When you live with it it's as refreshing as a swarm of mosquitoes. (*She listens in to the phone, makes a face at what she hears, and hangs up*)

FIELDING Tell me more about your father. You obviously are one of the people who really understand him.

DOROTHY I wish I did. I admire him tremendously. He really is refreshingly honest. He constantly opens up new thresholds of sensitivity, if you see what I mean. And he isn't afraid to do unusual things. He shocks the village terribly. Mother spends most of her time soothing ruffled feathers. Of course it's the bomb and all that. Dad says it's exploded the preconceptions of a thousand years. Don't you agree?

FIELDING Oh yes. Two thousand at least. I think I'll have another bit of that excellent plum cake.

(*The Reverend John Harcourt comes in through the garden window. He wears an expensive suit and parson's collar. Handsome, attractive, in his fifties. He is vigorous and alert.*)

HARCOURT (*Suddenly stopping in his tracks*) Hallo! Now don't tell me. Fielding! - some rather peculiar ideas about

the Minor Prophets. Couldn't stay the course and went over to . . .

FIELDING Political Science. What a memory! Forgive my intruding but . . .

HARCOURT Of course. Let me see, didn't I read somewhere that you're one of the Prime Minister's bright young boys?

FIELDING Not so young now and not so bright.

HARCOURT Quite! So it appears at times. Isn't he supposed to pick your brains?

FIELDING Rather slim pickings, I'm afraid.

HARCOURT (*Gloomily*) Yes, when you were my pupil that's what I suspected. I'm afraid my wife is presiding over some bun-fight in the Parish Hall. I hope Dorothy has been looking after you.

FIELDING Most entertaining.

HARCOURT Jolly good. Do sit down.

DOROTHY Will you have a cup of tea, Dad?

HARCOURT Thank you my dear, I will. (*To Fielding*) Pity you gave up theology – the queen of the sciences.

FIELDING A bit 'wilted' don't you think? However, you've invested it with some extra glamour lately.

HARCOURT Nonsense, I just think aloud. People seem to be fascinated that a parson should think at all. What are you doing around here, anyway?

FIELDING Actually I've just bought a house not far from you – East Mitford. I was passing and . . .

HARCOURT And you decided not to pass. Let's see, I gave you beta plus for an essay on Moses. You concluded that Moses never existed. Everything was said and done by another man – of the same name.

FIELDING How do you do it?

HARCOURT My wife says I remember all the unimportant things and forget all the important ones.

DOROTHY Like weddings for instance. (*Prudence puts her head in*)

HARCOURT I've been known to forget funerals.

PRUDENCE Hallo, Dad. Glad you're back. I say, Bob's up in town! He says he has a date for me to meet Dal Battersby tonight – a party after his new show.

HARCOURT Dal who?

PRUDENCE Dal Battersby, Dad, the director. He's always spotting future stars. It's a terrific chance. You can't say no.

HARCOURT But you can't go to London tonight. How would you get home?

PRUDENCE It's quite all right, Dad. Bob will drive me back afterwards.

HARCOURT What about 'A' levels?

PRUDENCE Battersby isn't looking for 'A' levels.

HARCOURT No, that's what I'm afraid of. Anyway, I should think a little elementary education would help even on the stage. I mean you're not trained in any way. You've no experience.

PRUDENCE How do you think I'm going to get experience sitting around here? You none of you take my artistic aspirations seriously.

HARCOURT Oh, we do, my dear, we do. But we can't have you trapesing about the country on a wild goose chase.

PRUDENCE (*Wheedling*) Come on, Dad. You know you love wild geese. Besides, you are always telling me to express myself.

DOROTHY Haven't you anything better than that to express?

PRUDENCE You keep out of this.

HARCOURT What time would you be back?

PRUDENCE Early (*pause*) – ish. You can trust Bob. He's quite a fan of yours. He'll be shocked to death if you're stuffy and act like a prude. You mustn't destroy your image, you know.

HARCOURT (*Weakening*) Well, the last thing I want is to be stuffy or stand in the way of your art.

DOROTHY Oh, Dad, it's not art. It's simply showing off.

PRUDENCE Of course some people don't have very much to show.

HARCOURT You'll have to talk to your mother about it. This is her department.

PRUDENCE All right, I'll go and talk to Mum and tell her you think it's all right.

HARCOURT (*Flaring up*) Tell her anything you like. Now go on. Leave us alone. You're wasting our time.

PRUDENCE Thanks for being so understanding, Dad, I'll tell Mum. (*Exit*)

DOROTHY Don't let her upset you, Dad. It's bad for you. Would you like one of your pills?

HARCOURT All right, yes, just one.

DOROTHY I'll get you a glass of water. (*Goes*)

HARCOURT (*To Fielding*) I apologise for all this. I'm just hedged about with other people's trivialities.

FIELDING Please don't mind me. I have to give the Prime Minister *his* pills.

HARCOURT I should think he might need them sometimes.

DOROTHY (*Returning*) Here you are. It's supposed to relieve tension almost instantly.

HARCOURT Thanks, dear girl. Look, your mother's out. Run along and talk to Prudence; there's an angel. Reason with her.

DOROTHY Are you sure there isn't anything I can do for you, Dad?

HARCOURT No thank you, my dear. Mr Fielding and I want to have a talk. (*Dorothy goes reluctantly*)

FIELDING Delightful daughters.

HARCOURT Dorothy is my pride and joy. She tries so

desperately hard to understand what I am saying.

FIELDING Difficult at times.

HARCOURT Between you and me, virtually impossible. But she makes valiant efforts. Of Prudence you can only say that she will probably go far. Too far, some people think, though I wouldn't necessarily agree. But you didn't come here to talk about my family.

FIELDING Actually I came about you.

HARCOURT Me? Don't tell me I've been shaking the Prime Minister's faith?

FIELDING The Prime Minister's faith must never be shaken. It would be as shocking to have a Prime Minister here who didn't believe in God as to have a dictator over there who did.

HARCOURT Both things could happen. It's an upside-down world.

FIELDING I must stress that my dropping in in this way is completely unofficial and informal.

HARCOURT Naturally, my dear fellow. Do continue in your delightfully unofficial and informal way.

FIELDING The government, as you must realise, is trying to give a new tone to the country, a new look.

HARCOURT Is that what it's doing?

FIELDING It's trying to break out of out-worn preconceptions.

HARCOURT Quite.

FIELDING In doing so we cannot entirely disregard the Church.

HARCOURT Very good of you.

FIELDING There is, for example, the whole question of ecclesiastical appointments.

HARCOURT Go on.

FIELDING A bishop, of course, is above politics. We all know that. None the less, to have a bishop or two who is even sympathetic with a - er - more progressive outlook would not be, shall we say, unhelpful.

HARCOURT Your essays used to be full of phrases like that, 'Not unhelpful'. Ugh!

FIELDING You know, of course, that Shefford is vacant. And I've been asked to sound you . . .

HARCOURT Shefford! I don't believe it. The Prime Minister must be completely out of his mind.

FIELDING Why?

HARCOURT First of all, I came here to write books. I'm finishing one now. If I were a bishop there'd be no more books.

FIELDING On the contrary. The books might sell better.

HARCOURT Anyway, I am not cut out for episcopal parish-crawling.

FIELDING But you'd be no ordinary bishop. Bishops nowadays are worthy men but they're office-wallahs, for the most part. They don't cut ice in the nation. There was a time when bishops thundered. Now they squeak.

HARCOURT I don't thunder.

FIELDING At least you rumble occasionally.

HARCOURT Yes, I rumble. Let's face it, Fielding. England's not going back to the Church as it is in our lifetime. She is not returning to her grandmother's knee, but she will still listen occasionally to someone who tries to think straight about God.

FIELDING What about a bishop who tried it?

HARCOURT The Establishment wouldn't stand for it. They would rope you round and fence you in. God, how I hate religion!

FIELDING May I quote you. That's rather an intriguing opening for a possible bishop.

HARCOURT But it's true. Don't you see the whole Bible is the story of God's fight against religion.

FIELDING Is that so?

HARCOURT Of course. The villains are always the Priests or the Pharisees, in other words the religious pros. The Prophets fought them all the time, and usually got killed for their pains. Now a bishop is a super-pro, in gaiters.

FIELDING Not necessarily in Shefford. Couldn't they do with a prophet?

HARCOURT You bet they could. A major prophet. Did you know Shefford is where I began my ministry?

FIELDING I did take the precaution of consulting Crockford's *Clerical Directory*.

HARCOURT In many ways the happiest years of my life. Real people facing real things. It was the aftermath of the depression. Some men in the parish hadn't had a job for three years. Think of it, Fielding, three years with nothing but the dole. Somehow the good worthy church people didn't feel it. It didn't seem to touch them. They just went on placidly attending services.

FIELDING Exactly.

HARCOURT It made me think desperately about the kind of religion that drugs men's consciences and smothers their will to reform.

FIELDING Why didn't you stay in Shefford

HARCOURT There was the war. I was right through North Africa, Italy and ended up in the Army of Occupation on the Rhine. There was Europe, the cradle of Christianity, devastated – not just the buildings, but the minds, the spirits. And what did we have to offer? The Bomb – and Coca Cola – and Church parades. What did my nice, tidy little God have to do with total collapse, total despair? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I had to rethink everything. God is dead! Long live God!

FIELDING How long, I wonder?

HARCOURT In your case, it was just about two terms. No, that experience of the war and after was absolutely shatter-

ing. I felt ashamed of my tabloid sermons – so dogmatic and cocksure. I was just whistling in the dark.

FIELDING I wonder you didn't give up the whole thing.

HARCOURT I was tempted to, I can tell you. But I had to accept that I was part of the darkness – part of the stygian black of this benighted century. And it is only when you are part of the darkness you may learn one day that the dark is its own kind of light.

FIELDING But you didn't go back to Shefford?

HARCOURT They asked me back to my old college as a don – told me I was cut out to deal with really intelligent people like you, Fielding.

FIELDING That was a mistake.

HARCOURT Yes, Fielding, in more ways than one. Finally I had to get away from it all and come here to a country parsonage and think. But then came the broadcasting. Ten to eight in the morning.

FIELDING And suddenly thousands of people stopped in the middle of dressing one morning and said, 'Good God! The man's human. He's not afraid to . . . wonder.'

HARCOURT It was the youth I was trying to talk to – all those budding technicians in their red brick laboratories – all those girls with mini skirts and peculiar hair-dos.

FIELDING Do they listen to religious broadcasts?

HARCOURT They actually started to – even wrote me letters about it.

FIELDING Then there were those talks on 'Morals for Moderns'.

HARCOURT And more letters came flooding in. The young have no use for 'Thou shalt not'. They want to find out for themselves. It's no good merely saying to them, 'The Church disapproves'.

FIELDING Your daughter Prudence seems to be a case in point.

HARCOURT (*Off hand*) Oh dear Prudence, she's going through a phase.

FIELDING Isn't the world going through a phase?

HARCOURT It's more than that. This is a cynical, sceptical age. It's the age of the satirist. That was the faith that was. Our coat of arms is a question mark rampant over three bishops dormant. Someone's got to wake the Church up.

FIELDING Exactly.

HARCOURT I want to strip the Church and the Faith and the Bible of so much humbug and show people the burning reality of . . . (*He hesitates*)

FIELDING Of what?

HARCOURT 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.' That means more to me than all the thirty-nine Articles and the Ten Commandments rolled into one. And people do respond, Fielding. You didn't, I know. But some do.

FIELDING And now you're on TV

HARCOURT Sometimes I curse the day it was born.

FIELDING They like your face. You seem to understand their weaknesses. You aren't too cocksure.

HARCOURT But bishops have to be cocksure.

FIELDING Not necessarily. I believe myself we are learning to do without your God - to come to terms with our natures and our nagging consciences and enjoy being just ourselves. All the same, if we've got to have bishops, you might be a good one. We have to cater for all tastes. Some people may occasionally need a star. Now you might be able to provide it.

HARCOURT Unfortunately one doesn't provide stars. One only locates them. You know, my wife would love Shefford. Did you know she was a Shefford girl?

FIELDING I had some idea of it.

HARCOURT You boys do your home work, I will say. Actually she was the only daughter of the vicar's warden. First she loved my sermons, then she loved me. The strange

thing is even with my elementary way of putting things I seemed to make faith a reality for her and in a manner of speaking it has stuck. By the way, what does the Archbishop think of this Shefford business? I'm not very *persona grata* with Lambeth.

FIELDING The Archbishop is tolerably broad-minded. 'All wings of the Church must be represented' – and all that. Well, I understand he's ready to – er – have a go. So shall I say that you're willing?

HARCOURT Just say that I'm thinking. To tell you the truth, I'm thinking a devil of a lot.

FIELDING Do you mind if I go out through the garden?

HARCOURT In fact you might let the Prime Minister understand, purely unofficially of course, that I'm interested. It's an immense challenge, you can't deny that. . . .

FIELDING I don't.

(He goes and Harcourt is left alone)

CURTAIN

SCENE II

The same evening after supper. Curtains are drawn. Harcourt, a cup of coffee at his side, is at his desk correcting long galley proofs. His wife, Evelyn, is talking and, as she does so, fighting an unending battle in the study against disorder. She is a practical, warm-hearted woman with a simple working faith, but operating in a narrow way. She is intensely loyal to her husband, though in her heart she is disturbed at his ideas and ways. The only thing that rouses her occasionally against him is the way he deals with their children.

EVELYN You know, I think it will be a lovely party. Mrs Jefferies is perfectly willing to do the urn, which is rather wonderful of her considering her gammy leg, not to mention all those children. But the real question is cups. I've told you before, John, and I tell you again, when it comes to putting on a really nice tea . . . (*She is now tidying the papers all around him*)

HARCOURT Not here, Evelyn, please.

EVELYN I'm sorry. I'm not talking of your run-of-the-mill mothers' meetings and the like. Let them use chipped ones, I say. But the Guild of St Michael's is different and they simply must have nice cups.

HARCOURT I couldn't agree with you more.

EVELYN And saucers that match. If there's one thing I cannot stand, it's a blue cup on a pink saucer or vice versa.

HARCOURT Evelyn.

EVELYN Yes, John.

HARCOURT (*Going to her*) What would you say if we were to leave St Michael's?

EVELYN What do you mean? Now, John, please don't start all that again about renouncing your orders. You say the Creed and you read the prayer book and you make the necessary mental reservations, and the Bishop understands perfectly.

HARCOURT Yes, bishops are notoriously understanding people – so are bishops' wives. How would you like to be one?

EVELYN One what?

HARCOURT A bishop's wife.

EVELYN But I'd never leave you, dear.

HARCOURT How would you like to be the wife of the Bishop of Shefford?

EVELYN But he already has a wife! (*Suddenly remembering*) Oh, no, he's dead . . . John, what do you mean? You mean . . .

HARCOURT You haven't answered my question.

EVELYN (*Overwhelmed*) Oh, my dear, I can't believe it. You mean that man this afternoon actually came here to . . .

HARCOURT Bishops have to come from somewhere, you know. Do you approve of the idea?

EVELYN It's . . . it's amazing. But it's all so sudden. Shefford of all places.

HARCOURT Well, it's very far from settled yet, and it's a dead secret.

(*Enter Dorothy in an apron*)

DOROTHY What's a dead secret?

(*The Harcourts look at each other, each waiting for the other to speak. Then they answer simultaneously.*)

EVELYN Nothing at all, dear . . .

HARCOURT Never mind just now . . .

DOROTHY Mother, will you please make Prue stop sulking and help with the washing up. Just because you wouldn't let her go to London and meet Bob.

EVELYN Well, of course not. I wouldn't dream of it.

DOROTHY She swears Dad told her she might.

HARCOURT You know I did nothing of the kind.

DOROTHY She says you listened sympathetically – and you did.

HARCOURT Well, I've listened quite enough. Can't you settle these things yourselves?

DOROTHY How can we when you say one thing and Mother the exact opposite?

HARCOURT (*His temper rising*) For goodness' sake, Dorothy.

EVERYLYN She's right dear. You really mustn't go against me in simple matters of discipline. No child should go up to London alone at night.

DOROTHY Can I tell her that from you, Dad?

HARCOURT (*Impatient*) Tell her that she can go and jump in the lake. She's given me enough trouble already. I have a ridiculous note from her headmistress. Dorothy, get me one of my pills.

DOROTHY I've got one here all ready for you. Here's water. This will relieve tension, Dad.

EVERYLYN I sincerely hope so. And, Dorothy dear, you'd better tell Prudence your father and I have talked it over and it's far too late to think of London now, anyway.

DOROTHY I'll tell her. Watch out for the explosions, though. (*Exit*)

HARCOURT Now where were we before this completely frivolous interruption?

EVERYLYN Dear, there's no need to get excited. It's bad for your nerves. But what did the man say about Shefford?

HARCOURT He what is known as sounded me out. I don't know what he thought of the sound.

EVERYLYN Tell me truthfully, John, do you really want it – the job, I mean?

HARCOURT I wasn't sure, but the more I think of it, I believe I want it more than anything in the world.

EVERYLYN Then I want it for you, of course. Shefford! It would be going home. I shall pray that you get it. Only you don't approve of that kind of praying, do you?

HARCOURT (*Laughing*) Celestial Super Market? One Bishop-

ric, please. My husband likes them so much and wrap it up in a hand-embroidered cape. 'Certainly, Madam. Will there be anything more today, Madam?'

EVELYN (*Suddenly serious*) You can be as clever as you like, John, but it's the way millions pray. Ask and it shall be given to you. Seek and you shall find. And I'm going to pray for one more thing – that the man who *does* get that job may be a humble servant of God.

HARCOURT Do you actually think that could be John Harcourt?

EVELYN It would have been once – in Shefford. There was a servant of God there who helped to give a lot of people faith – including me.

HARCOURT And now?

EVELYN I don't know. You are always talking about depth. Well, it's all too deep for me.

HARCOURT (*Smiling*) 'If that young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me . . .'

EVELYN 'Why, what a very singularly deep young man that deep young man must be.' (*Kisses him*)
(*Enter Dorothy*)

DOROTHY Well, I must say, at your time of life. Greg's here.
(*Enter Greg, about 23, cheerful, down-to-earth, a friendly, wholesome, but not too profound rigger-playing type*)

GREG Hallo, Mum.

EVELYN Oh, Greg, how splendid! Why didn't you tell us you were coming?

DOROTHY He's got the club mentality. He likes dropping in.

GREG Glad to see you, Mum.

EVELYN Oh, Greg, I'm so glad.

GREG Hullo, Dad. How's the family glamour boy? Saw you on TV last night. Got to watch those whiskers, you know. They throw shadows all over the screen.

EVELYN Have you had supper?

GREG Thanks, on the train.

DOROTHY All the same, you'd like a cup of coffee anyway, wouldn't you?

GREG Thanks, Dot, I wouldn't mind.

(Dorothy goes)

GREG I'm only stopping one night, Mum. The firm have a surveying job for me down by the river, so I thought I'd look in.

EVELYN Well, I should think so. I'll go and put a bottle in your bed. *(Exit)*

GREG Where's Prue?

HARCOURT Doing her homework, I sincerely hope. How are you, my boy?

GREG Oh, I'm alright. Life in the big city is pretty much routine. It's people like you making the news. You know, Dad, everybody's talking about you. You've got a very good rating.

HARCOURT Oh, that. I believe it's been dropping lately. People still prefer 'Coronation Street'.

GREG Mind you, you seem to me to say some pretty rum things for a parson. But that's alright I suppose provided you keep the fans happy.

HARCOURT Heavens, Greg, I'm not after fans, I'm after Truth. If some people go overboard a bit you can't blame me.

GREG O, come off it, Dad. You're not as innocent as all that. You know if you hadn't been a parson, you'd have made a damn good actor.

HARCOURT Nonsense!

GREG Anyway, good luck to you I say. The Church could do with a bit of glamour. Box office hasn't been too good lately. You're probably just what's needed.

HARCOURT I wish I could really believe that.

GREG You know, one chap in the Club actually said you were being tipped for a bishopric.

(Enter Evelyn with hot bottle)

EVELYN We'll get your sheets well aired. It's dangerous this weather without.

GREG Thanks. Seriously Dad, that bishop bit might be worth thinking about.

HARCOURT I think we had better change the subject.

(Enter Dorothy with coffee)

DOROTHY What subject?

GREG How would you like to see Dad in gaiters?

DOROTHY Don't be ridiculous. *(Suddenly)* Oh, of course, Mr Fielding! I read somewhere he is the man who advises . . .

EVELYN *(Nervously)* I always say you read too much, Dorothy.

DOROTHY How could I have been so blind. Is it true, Dad, really?

HARCOURT My dear child, don't add two and two and make sixteen.

DOROTHY There are two vacancies now, Marlow and Shefford. Why it all makes sense. Which is it, Dad? Marlow's only a Suffragan of course.

EVELYN Have you finished the dishes, dear? *(She goes with bottle)*

GREG You two look about as innocent as detectives at a garden party. There *is* something in it.

DOROTHY *(Almost in tears)* All I can say is I think it is too wonderful for words, Dad, and very appropriate – and terribly overdue. *(She turns away to the window)*

GREG Good Lord! I thought it was all a joke or something. I don't know why she wants to get all emotional. Come to think of it, it's not a bad idea at all. You'd make a good bishop. You've jolly good calves. I'll get something to celebrate with. *(He starts to go)*

HARCOURT Greg, come back, and please call your mother. We seem to have got off to rather a bad start. Seeing the cat appears to be out of the bag, we may as well discuss the matter quietly and rationally.

GREG (*Shouting at door*) Mum, please will you come. Dad wants you.

DOROTHY I didn't mean to give anything away. It's just that . . .

HARCOURT It's all right, dear. No one can blame you for being an ecclesiastical *Who's Who*, a sort of clerical whiz-kid. It's very useful at times. Now what about Prudence? After all, she's part of the family. (*Evelyn has entered*)

DOROTHY The dear little after-thought is sulking in her room threatening to leave home.

HARCOURT Not again. It's becoming monotonous.

EVELYN I'd let her sulk, dear. At least, it's safe. A little quiet sulk never did anyone any harm.

GREG Now, Dad, you'd better tell us all the news.

HARCOURT It's not news yet, far from it.

DOROTHY Shefford or Marlow?

HARCOURT Shefford.

DOROTHY Good. You'd be lost as a Suffragan.

GREG You might let Dad explain for himself.

HARCOURT It's not an easy decision, you know. The Bishop of Shefford is – could be – a kind of architect of the Church – a man who could help to create a new image for a whole generation.

GREG It ruddy well needs it.

HARCOURT It needs it, Greg, and I think you all know me well enough to know that I wouldn't go around purring in pulpits.

DOROTHY (*Excited*) Not on your life! I bet you'd go on doing just what you are doing now.

HARCOURT Well, would I? That's the big question. As I am now I'm a kind of accepted rebel. I blow my lid. On the whole people don't mind.

DOROTHY They're very grateful.

HARCOURT But the Bishop of Shefford blowing his lid, that's serious business.

EVELYN Well, it's true you might have to be a little more tactful.

HARCOURT There you are, you see. From the word go, the voice of caution, the smoothing down, the modulated tone. That blessed word, tactful.

DOROTHY It's a miserable word, a measly word. Wait till we get your new book out. There'll be no going back on that.

GREG You don't have to hold a job down in the world, Dot. Actually I think you would have to pipe down quite a lot, Dad.

HARCOURT In what way?

GREG Well, it is none of my business really, but some of the things you've been saying about freedom and sex. You say you want to help people ask themselves the right questions. Well, my friends do, and they get some damn silly answers. What about all the illegitimate babies? That's what I want to know.

HARCOURT I'm trying to rise above the whole conception of legitimate and illegitimate.

GREG You can rise as much as you like, but you can't do away with the baby.

DOROTHY The pill can, you know that. Dad's facing the challenge of an age of scientific planning.

GREG Yeah. Whose plan? His, hers or its? And what about VD?

EVELYN We seem to be getting a long way from Shefford, dear.

GREG We're getting pretty near to it, if you ask me.

HARCOURT I so long to get the wavelength of these people, to get alongside them, not with preaching or probing but with a passionate giving of oneself in love.

GREG Passionate love's their problem, isn't it? That's why I think you'd be much wiser, Dad, just to tell people to mind their Ps and Qs and watch what they are doing.

DOROTHY Oh, you are insufferable, Greg. You talk about a thing like love as though it was a bit of boiled beef.

GREG Cheer up, Dot. Some of us may know a bit more about love than you do.

EVELYN Now then, Greg, that's very uncalled for. Besides I think Tom's such a nice boy - so reliable.

DOROTHY (*Blushing*) Mother, please.

GREG Tom's all right but you'd better get on with it. He won't wait for ever, you know.

DOROTHY (*Upset*) Oh, for goodness sake! Does every tender, intimate feeling have to be bandied around and trampled upon like a door mat, if you know what I mean.

GREG We know exactly what you mean.

HARCOURT All right, Greg. Love is a many splendoured thing, eh, Dorothy?

DOROTHY It'll have to wait till you've finished your book.

HARCOURT Do you think my book is as important as that?

DOROTHY Of course. Your books are just about the most important thing there is.

EVELYN You know, I was thinking, dear, we'd have to have a thorough weed-out of all our furniture. Some of it is bad enough in a rectory. In a bishop's house it would be downright impossible.

HARCOURT (*Thinking aloud*) I wonder if there'd be anything in the idea of encouraging heckling during sermons? And then have a talk-back programme in the vestry after. That would put some of those old canons on their toes. Shefford would be just the place to try that out.

DOROTHY And ballet in the Cathedral, Dad. It's so evocative, if you know what I mean.

GREG You know, I think this Bishop idea is a darn good proposition. You all need to get out of the backwater into the main stream more. With your TV connections and all else, you'll be a wow in Shefford. You'll have big executives tramping in and out of the Palace and girls swooning at the vestry door.

EVELYN It's an ugly-looking house, much too big of course, but with real possibilities, I'm sure . . .

(Prudence has entered and is standing in the doorway)

GREG Hallo, Prue.

HARCOURT Come in, dear. Come and join the family circle.

PRUDENCE I just want you to know that I have been thinking it all over. I have decided to leave home, Father.

HARCOURT Of course, dear, at the right time.

DOROTHY Just because they wouldn't let you go out with your little boy friend.

PRUDENCE Don't insult me, please Dot, with your immaturity and lack of understanding. The thing that gets me is the pitiful smallness and utter irrelevance of it all.

GREG Oh, come, come. We are getting hoity-toity.

PRUDENCE It's all very well for you. You can come and go as you please. I have to live in this dump.

EVELYN Prudence!

HARCOURT Wait a minute. This is the authentic voice of revolt, this is youth's prerogative.

PRUDENCE I don't want to be a voice. I want to live. You have wonderful ideas, Father, about frankness and freedom and the sacred duty to rebel. They sound fine bandied about on TV or in a seminar for sixth formers. You try putting some of them into practice and see what happens. 'Hide that naughty book, dear. It'll shock the parish.' 'Don't go to the movies. It's an X film and someone might

see you.' 'Have fun at the party, dear, but don't forget who you are.' It's all so brave and bold in theory, but in practice it's the old kow-towing to what people think.

EVELYN But it *does* matter what people think.

PRUDENCE To you, yes, because your whole life is a little round of gossipy get-togethers. You're just a Parish Puss.

HARCOURT Prudence!

PRUDENCE It's true, and Dot's just as bad. She doesn't have any fun. She talks about launching out into the deep. She doesn't even get her feet wet.

DOROTHY Really!

PRUDENCE Well anyway, I am going. You can't keep me legally at school any more. I have my Savings Bank account Aunt Rose gave me and I'm going to get a job.

GREG What kind of a job?

PRUDENCE There are people who think I have at least some talent for the stage. I may have to start at the bottom and work up.

GREG So long as you don't start at the bottom and work down. Cheer up, Prue. I know how you feel. Anyway we may all be leaving here, isn't that right, Dad?

DOROTHY While you've been wrapped up with your silly little running away act Dad may be facing the supreme opportunity of his whole life.

HARCOURT Yes, I want you to know it, Prue, though it's a dead secret. They're talking about your father as Bishop of Shefford.

PRUDENCE That tears it! It's bad enough being the Rector's daughter. What do you think it would be like being the daughter of a bishop? Bishop! Shefford of all places. Socially it's Siberia.

EVELYN Meaning they wouldn't all go daft about you.

DOROTHY You're just unutterably selfish and beastly.

PRUDENCE Your Tom would probably enjoy trailing round a

Cathedral. It's about his speed. Well, my friends wouldn't.

GREG I've a mind to give you a darn good spanking.

PRUDENCE Just you try.

GREG (*Making a grab and picking her up*) I will - like when you were ten years old. (*He puts her over his knee*)

HARCOURT Pull yourself together, Greg.

EVELYN No, Greg, she's too big for that.

PRUDENCE Put me down, you great brute. (*Bites him, Greg yells and puts her down*)

EVELYN Go to bed at once, Prudence. You have said quite enough. It's inexcusable. Now go along.

HARCOURT That's right. You'll feel different in the morning. Remember this is all just a symptom of an age in revolt.

PRUDENCE (*Worked up*) I am not a symptom. I'm a girl, a woman, a human being. I think, I feel, I am alive. Isn't that enough? You can all discuss me and dissect me as much as you please. I have made up my own mind. (*At the door*) And I am not ten years old. (*Exit*)

EVELYN (*Starting to follow*) Well, really!

DOROTHY For goodness sake, don't go after her. It's what she wants you to do.

HARCOURT I'd leave her if I were you. She's got to find her way.

GREG I get the impression she knows her way. (*Nursing the bite*).

DOROTHY It's routine. She'll go and hold Bob's hand at the week-end and tell him how cruel and unsympathetic we all are. Then she'll find a new hair-do, or read a movie magazine and forget it all, until next time.

HARCOURT You know, that was a moving little speech, 'I am a human being. I think, I feel, I am alive.' I could use it almost word for word. It is the cry of the lost generation.

EVELYN John, she's our daughter.

HARCOURT Let her be, dear. She'll have to learn.

EVELYN Learn what? That's what I'd like to know. I have to say it, John – you're partly to blame for all this, with the silly ideas you give her and the trashy books you let her read.

DOROTHY Oh Mother, you haven't read them. You don't know.

EVELYN I may not read the latest books but I do talk with people – not your intellectual snobs perhaps or your bright young things, but ordinary mums and dads who can't make head or tail of what you're talking about. I saw Mrs Jessup today. Her husband's drinking again. She's selling the furniture. After much persuasion I got them both to church last Sunday. What did you preach about? Situational ethics, whatever that is! Well they have a situation all right. She'll walk out on him.

HARCOURT You should have told me.

EVELYN John, I do tell you.

HARCOURT It is all so mixed up with parish urns and chipped tea cups I simply don't get it.

DOROTHY You really can't expect Father to talk down to people all the time.

HARCOURT All the same, she's right really. The trouble is I have left the old familiar trenches. I have gone over the top but I'm not at grips yet with the enemy. I'm in 'no-man's-land'.

GREG (*Raising coffee cup*) The Bishop of 'no-man's-land'.

DOROTHY I say, that's a good title.

HARCOURT Not bad.

DOROTHY It'd go well on TV.

EVELYN Meanwhile your own child's in 'no-man's-land'.

GREG. 'No-man's-land' is the last place I'd expect to find Prue.

DOROTHY Don't drag everything down to your level. Dad's talking about the human predicament.

GREG Well so am I. I happen to live with the human predicament. I know a chap at the office who's in one hell of a mess. His home's busting up. He heard you on TV, Dad, saying rules are out of date and you can't have fixed standards of right and wrong, you've got to judge each case on its merits. Well, he's judged his case all right. We got together the other day over a pint and he laughed and said, 'Oh well, why shouldn't I sleep around? I gather even the parsons say it's quite all right now.'

HARCOURT That's ridiculous. I don't say anything of the kind. I am not breaking down morals. I am trying to build them up. (*The phone rings. Greg picks it up*)

GREG Yes . . . Oh, good evening, Knowles. How's things? Trains running on time? . . . Yes? . . . I see. Just now . . . Alone? . . . Oh, it's all right, I'm sure. I'll tell the folks. . . . No, don't bother. Thanks all the same. (*He hangs up*) That was the Station Master. He says it's none of his business but Prue just rushed on to the 9.17 to London. She was carrying a suitcase.

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

Three weeks later. It is about 7 pm and the evening light is failing. The familiar study is in an unusual turmoil as it is full of lights and TV equipment set in readiness for a broadcast. Two cameramen are lighting the Production Assistant in the various positions. Heavy cables run out through the garden doors to a generator (unseen) outside.

1ST CAMERAMAN O.K. Lovely. Beautiful.

(Enter Greg munching a sandwich)

GREG God, what a mess! Getting all set?

CAMERAMAN We are ready. Mr Wellman hasn't turned up yet.

GREG What, no script? No briefing? That chap's running things pretty fine.

CAMERAMAN More ways than one. He probably knows what he's doing.

GREG What's all this 'Meet the Family' idea anyway? What are we supposed to do?

CAMERAMAN Don't ask me. I'm just a technician. After all your father's in the heavyweight class now. He should be able to give Wayne as good as he gets.

GREG I thought this was a family evening, not a prize fight. I hope to goodness Wellman doesn't try to put *us* on the spot. *(He moves a chair and sits on it)*

CAMERAMAN You stay in the positions I showed you. Just be natural and we'll do the rest.

(Enter Dorothy very nervous and excited)

DOROTHY I say, no Wellman yet? *(To Cameraman)* You will watch your lighting with Mr Harcourt, won't you?

CAMERAMAN That's the third time you've mentioned it.

DOROTHY I know, but it's so important. The left side of the profile is on the whole the best, if you see what I mean.

CAMERAMAN Look, Miss, will you stick to your job and leave us to ours? We'll do him justice, bags under the eyes and all.

DOROTHY Really.

CAMERAMAN How far is the nearest local from here?

GREG Just down the road in the village, less than five minutes.

CAMERAMAN Right, tell Wayne when he comes we are all set. Terry, time for a quick one. Come on Madge. (*To Dorothy*) Don't touch anything while we're away, please. (*Technicians exit*)

DOROTHY Oh, these technicians, they're so rude.

GREG I wouldn't try and push them around if I were you. They have the last word you know. They can make you look like a Zombie.

DOROTHY (*Looking at watch*) Where's this man Wellman? Daddy wants to go through everything in advance.

GREG How is he, Dot? Dad, I mean.

DOROTHY He's always terribly tense and nervous before a broadcast.

GREG He's done plenty.

DOROTHY Never like this, in his own house, with the family. Thank goodness Mother is still down in the village. She drives him up the wall at a time like this.

GREG Mum seems unusually quiet for her.

DOROTHY It's Prue, not that there's any need to worry any more. You saw the latest I suppose, picture of the British Museum. (*She produces a postcard*)

GREG I only got Piccadilly Circus on mine. She is definitely going up in the world. (*Reads*) 'Everything is going O.K. Lots of openings. Meanwhile am studying art. Will let you know my address as soon as I get permanent digs. Prue.'
W1. 9 pm. Doesn't give you much to go on.

DOROTHY She is just keeping us on the rack deliberately. Sheer spite.

GREG You jealous of her, Dot?

DOROTHY Me, jealous of her!

GREG Maybe she goes out and does some of the things you would like to do.

DOROTHY What do you mean?

GREG Well, you and your Tom are always writing each other long soulful screeds about the mystics or something – seems pretty mystic to me.

DOROTHY And is it my fault that Daddy needs me so much? Some of us have to make sacrifices.

GREG (*Good-natured*) All right, Sis, I'm sorry. Skip it.

DOROTHY I suppose you'd have me walk out on him right at the crucial point of his life, with a new book and a new job. Someone has to stand by, even if others don't.

GREG Alright, alright, only don't be so hard on Prue.
(*Enter Harcourt*)

HARCOURT Do you think the vase is good there, or do you prefer just books. What about a simple wooden cross?

GREG Depends if you want to look arty, scholarly or spiritual – or all three. Anyway, Wayne will know.

DOROTHY When he comes.

HARCOURT Where's your mother?

DOROTHY Not back from the village yet.

HARCOURT Do you think she has any idea what is expected of her?

GREG I'm sure she will just be her own inimitable self.

HARCOURT That's what I'm afraid of. I don't think any of you realise how desperately important this thing is, coming right at this time.

DOROTHY Oh, but we do, don't we, Greg?

GREG Dad, you old showman, this will get you Shefford for certain, if you do it right.

HARCOURT I'm not thinking of myself. I am thinking of the thousands of people . . .

DOROTHY Millions.

HARCOURT Young people, especially, who look at me, God help me, almost as one of themselves. I so much want to reach out to them and help them to come to terms with life in a secular age. I want to say to them, 'I accept the universe'.

GREG You jolly well better had.

DOROTHY Shut up, Greg.

HARCOURT Look, sit down will you. I want to talk to you two. I'd rather say these things to you, while your mother's out. This is a hard time for her and she is not quite herself. All these long walks of hers - visiting the church all the time. Of course she's worried about Prue. But then so are all of us, though now, thank God, we know the girl is safe.

GREG You think so?

HARCOURT She'd hardly be sending us cheerful postcards if she was in serious trouble. If you ask me, she is getting a wee bit homesick already.

DOROTHY What was it you wanted to say to us, Dad?

HARCOURT This appointment has come to mean much more than I ever imagined. No, it's not the gaiters and the glamour, or the money. It's what I feel I can do. I know I'm not hitting the bull's-eye yet, but I believe I do get a few outers. Most of our people haven't even located the target. They are usually firing in the opposite direction. At least I haven't got the faith all wrapped up in a nice little pink packet marked 'This way up - with care'. If I once get the chance, I want to . . . to . . . *(He is lost for words)*

DOROTHY You are bound to get the chance, you've got to.

GREG The odds on are shortening, Dad, that's what I hear. Barring accidents . . .

HARCOURT That's it, barring accidents. There's many a slip . . .

(Enter Evelyn Harcourt from garden. She is in a dowdy coat and skirt and carries a large string bag, full of groceries. She talks slowly and quietly and with a certain authority)

GREG Hello, Mum, glad you have made it.

DOROTHY You are only just in time. You want to dress, I imagine.

EVELYN Why should I? Aren't they supposed to see us as we really are?

DOROTHY Yes, but they don't have to know what we are having for dinner tomorrow.

EVELYN It's just the sort of thing they like to know, isn't it? All right, put them away for me, dear.

(She hands the string bag to Dorothy, who goes to kitchen)

HARCOURT Now Evelyn, it's all perfectly simple and natural, just be yourself.

EVELYN *(Going to him)* Do you really mean that, John?

HARCOURT What?

EVELYN That I should be myself.

HARCOURT I most certainly do. It's the secret of good television.

EVELYN Well, it's funny you should say it because it is what I have been thinking about all the afternoon as I trudged around delivering parish magazines. By the way, the Hardy child has got measles – not the German kind either, the real thing. *(Dorothy returns)*

HARCOURT *(Exasperated)* What have you been thinking?

EVELYN Whether I could ever have the courage to be myself.

DOROTHY What on earth do you mean?

EVELYN Your father is such a great believer in everyone thinking for themselves, even though it shocks and distresses people. I wonder what would happen if I tried. I'd do it badly of course, probably make a fool of myself. But you talk so much about being honest, don't you, John? You believe it's a sacred duty.

DOROTHY For goodness sake go upstairs, Mother. At least tidy yourself up and do your hair.

GREG What do you want to be honest about, Mum?

EVELYN Well, it isn't easy. You see, I've always gone along with your father. I haven't understood half of what he's saying, but I am his wife. I've loved and admired you so much, John, but now I'm beginning to question many things.

DOROTHY Mother, don't be silly! Father's ideas are so far in advance . . .

EVELYN It's not your ideas, John – you're much wiser than I – it's you; you don't seem to be a real man any more, you never seem to give a straight answer to a straight question – not even whether you believe God exists or not. You wrap it all up in words. You won't say a simple 'Yes' to anything, whether it's the story of the Resurrection or the need to find your own daughter. By the way, I met that nice Inspector this afternoon from the County Police. You know the one I mean, who comes sometimes to Evensong?

DOROTHY Oh, Mother, stick to the point!

EVELYN He was telling me all about what they call the Bureau of Missing Persons.

HARCOURT Why was he talking about that?

EVELYN Because I told him about Prue.

HARCOURT (*Angry*) Evelyn, I distinctly told you to leave all that to me!

EVELYN I've left it to you for three whole weeks! I couldn't leave it any longer.

HARCOURT You've no idea what I've been doing. Do you realise I have people looking for her right now – people I trust. Do you know I have written every single art college in London?

EVELYN Yes, but have you told the Police?

HARCOURT No, not yet.

EVELYN Why not?

HARCOURT Because next minute we'd have them round here making enquiries, asking everybody questions. The whole village would start gossiping. Then it would be in the Press. For God's sake, woman, don't you realise I'm national news?

DOROTHY Dad, please don't lose your temper before the broadcast. Don't you understand, Mother, what an important time this is for Dad? You could have wrecked everything by talking to the Inspector.

EVELYN Wrecked what?

DOROTHY Dad's future. The new image of the Church. Can't you understand?

EVELYN But this is Prudence, our child. I really believe, John, that Shefford means more to you than your own daughter.

HARCOURT For goodness sake, think what you're saying!

EVELYN I have been thinking, day after day and night after night. Doubts that have been lurking in my mind for years have all started bursting and bubbling out: I try to keep them back, but I can't keep them back any longer.

HARCOURT Don't be hysterical, Evelyn.

GREG Better steady down, you know, the broadcast will be on us before we know it.

EVELYN Yes, the broadcast will be on us. We're supposed to be ourselves, aren't we?

HARCOURT Now listen, you're not supposed to be anything except my wife, and act as a wife should.

EVELYN And how should a wife act?

HARCOURT To love, honour and obey, remember?

EVELYN Oh, is that one of the lines in the Prayer Book you still believe in? I thought it was supposed to be rather old-fashioned. Well, I'll tell you another one, it comes from the service of the Consecration of a Bishop. I have been study-

ing it a lot lately. 'If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?' I'm not sure I think you ought to become a bishop, John, I think it might be as fatal for the Church as it seems to be for us. I wish we had never heard of Shefford. You're not fit to be a Father in God, why, you're not a father at all!
(*They all protest simultaneously*)

HARCOURT Evelyn, I absolutely forbid you to talk like this . . .

DOROTHY Mother, you must be completely out of your mind . . .

GREG Look, I think you owe it to Dad to . . .

(*In the midst of this combined outburst, a young man, casual but alert, smooth but arrogant, walks in through the french windows. It is Wayne Wellman*)

WELLMAN That's perfect - a real natural family circle. Good evening everyone! I'm Wayne Wellman. (*He greets each one in turn*)

HARCOURT For goodness sake, you might at least knock.

GREG I should jolly well think so; run it a bit fine, haven't you?

WELLMAN Did it deliberately! For this kind of show, the great thing is spontaneity - give the impression of just dropping in and catching the family unawares.

GREG You've done that alright.

HARCOURT Well, now you are here what do you want us to do?

WELLMAN Everything set? The boys have shown you each your places, I imagine. There's really nothing to it, just sit back and enjoy yourselves.

GREG (*Ironically*) Splendid!

DOROTHY Mr Wellman, my mother has had a busy day and there's hardly time for her to dress . . .

WELLMAN (*To Evelyn*) Don't let it worry you, you look just right (*Very smooth*). I know what a nuisance my

fellows must have been all day in your home, but try and picture those millions of other homes spread all over the land, Dad with his pipe and his slippers, Mum popping her head in from the kitchen door, the children pretending to do their homework, the young couple holding hands in the half-light. You're going to talk to them tonight as a family.

EVELYN But what about?

WELLMAN The things that interest you most, your husband, your children, your hopes for the future. Just sit down, will you?

HARCOURT For goodness sake, let's get on with it, Wellman. Now I've prepared a list of possible questions on my position as a Theologian and as a Churchman, you may want to . . .

WELLMAN (*Taking them - a very cursory glance, then rolls up paper and puts it in his pocket*) Excellent! Now, if you'll take your place please, Miss Harcourt. (*Calls*) Terry! Jo! Let's have a final check on the positions and lighting. (*Enter cameramen and assistant*)

HARCOURT What about a touch of powder and make-up? I usually do.

WELLMAN I think I'd go on exactly as you are, the man himself, naked and unashamed! (*To the family*) Now relax, you're at home. (*To Dorothy*) If you want to kick off your shoes, kick off your shoes!

DOROTHY (*Primly*) I never kick off my shoes, Mr Wellman.

WELLMAN Oh, call me Wayne. Everybody does. Now, if your nose itches, scratch it! Anything that comes natural. Here you have your own family TV set, the one you always look at of an evening, just like the sets everyone else will be looking at tonight. You'll see what they see. I hope they'll feel what you feel. All set, Madge?

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Three minutes to go, Wayne.

WELLMAN Now, any final questions?

EVELYN What are you going to ask me (*hesitating*) Wayne?

WELLMAN What would you like me to ask you, Mrs Harcourt?

EVELYN (*Slowly*) Ask me . . . ask me (*looks around at all the family, then turns away*) no, I don't think you had better ask me anything at all.

HARCOURT I think that would be a lot wiser, Wayne. My wife gets pretty nervous.

DOROTHY That's right. For goodness sake behave.

WELLMAN Oh, bring in the drinks, Madge. Drinks for all; on the house!

GREG Which house? (*Madge comes in with wine in glasses*)

HARCOURT You think that's a good idea?

WELLMAN I think it's natural.

HARCOURT No thanks.

GREG (*Taking one*) Personally, I need it.

DOROTHY I think I'd like to hold one, and take an occasional sip.

EVELYN (*Refusing*) I never drink.

WELLMAN I guessed as much. The coffee's for you, Mrs Harcourt.

EVELYN You really are a very understanding young man.

WELLMAN I try to be, it's my job.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Two minutes to go.

WELLMAN Now, if you'd turn on the set then, Madge. Everybody comfortable? You alright, Padre?

HARCOURT (*Nervous*) Yes, I think so. Give me plenty of time, don't rush me.

(A blare of sound comes up on the TV, a roar of raucous laughter and the voice of some well-known comedian)

GREG Charming introduction.

WELLMAN Perfect, they'll all be in a happy frame of mind.

GREG Well, I hope to God we'll keep them that way.
(*Drinking*) Cheers, Mum!

DOROTHY You don't have to say anything at all, you know, just smile.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT One minute to go.

EVERLYN I'll be praying for you, John.

GREG Yes, but don't close your eyes. You never know when the camera is on you, you don't want to look soulful.

EVERLYN I'm not ashamed to be seen praying. I'd like them to see the whole family praying, we need it.

WELLMAN Alright, stand by, everyone! (*We hear the programme come to an end, with loud applause, brassy music, etc. The music swells louder and louder.*)

GREG (*Raising glass*) Cheers, Dad! (*Harcourt does not reply. He is very nervous.*)

DOROTHY You're going to be wonderful, Dad. I know you are.

GREG (*To Evelyn*) Chin up, eyes wide open, don't forget.
(*The music stops. There is complete silence.*)

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four . . . (*She gives sign as they are on the air*)

WELLMAN (*With mike*) Good evening, everyone! (*We hear music and the sound of church bells*) This is Wayne Wellman inviting you once more to Meet the Family.

EVERLYN (*Watching screen*) That's our church! (*Everyone hushes her*)

WELLMAN (*Speaking into mike*) The bells ring out over farm and village and country lane – the church porch, the post office, the local shop, the pub, the school, the new houses by the railway station and the parish rectory – over large perhaps, a little antiquated, but that most lived-in of homes. A country parsonage, the place that has sent so many notable and notorious people out into the world and so tonight in the Rectory of Upton St Michael, we invite you

to meet the family – the Rector, the Rev John Harcourt.

HARCOURT Good evening.

WELLMAN His wife, Evelyn Harcourt –

EVELYN (*after a nudge from Dorothy*) Good evening –

WELLMAN Gregory, their son –

GREG Hello –

WELLMAN And Dorothy, their daughter –

DOROTHY (*Breathless*) Good evening.

WELLMAN This is no usual rector, I may say, but a figure widely known in the great world beyond; a figure considerably in the news at this precise moment. (*He goes over to Evelyn*) Mrs Harcourt, good evening, it's good of you to ask me into your home tonight.

EVELYN Well, actually I didn't!

WELLMAN That's a delightfully honest start. No, you didn't but at any rate here we all are. And this is your son?

EVELYN Yes, of course it's our son.

WELLMAN (*To Greg*) Do you live in the Rectory?

GREG No fear, I'm in town. Drop in occasionally though, see how the folks are behaving themselves.

WELLMAN That's wise. Your father's occasionally in hot water, I gather.

GREG He usually manages to come out alright.

WELLMAN (*Laughing*) And reasonably clean, I hope! (*To Dorothy*) You're the oldest of the children. What's it like being a parson's daughter?

DOROTHY (*Eager-beaver*) Of course I've tried my best from an early age to understand and appreciate what my father's out to do.

WELLMAN Do you find that easy?

DOROTHY I think in the spiritual and intellectual tensions of our day, my father is pioneering a way ahead, if you see what I mean.

WELLMAN Yes, I think I do. It's a purely hypothetical question of course, but do you think he'd make a good bishop, for instance?

DOROTHY (*Sincerely*) I think he'd make a wonderful bishop, Wayne.

WELLMAN Well, that's reassuring from a daughter. Mrs Harcourt, is this all the family?

EVELYN Yes - I mean - no. There is another of course, our youngest.

WELLMAN Oh. (*He waits*)

EVELYN She's away, just at the moment.

WELLMAN I see. (*Again waiting*)

HARCOURT She's studying art.

WELLMAN A very worthy occupation. Well, that completes the family circle. (*He goes to a chair opposite Harcourt, Mother closes her eyes in prayer, Greg gives her a nudge.*) Mr Harcourt, you've given us on numerous occasions in broadcasts and books the fruits of your theological thinking. Tonight by your own fireside, with your family gathered round you, let's be a little more personal. I wish you'd tell us what you really feel about your life and your job.

HARCOURT Well, naturally I feel it's the greatest job in the world.

WELLMAN And likely to become greater still, I imagine, but we must not talk about that. Could you tell us in a sentence or two what you're out to do?

HARCOURT That's a large question for a sentence or two, Wayne, but I think it's to come down closer to reality. I want to help people strip away the false images, the non-essentials, and concentrate on the real, the actual. 'See life steadily and see it whole', that's how the old Greeks understood it.

WELLMAN And how do you actually advise us to get that very necessary viewpoint?

HARCOURT (*Thoughtfully*) I would say first of all, by honesty; it's a common enough word, but it's actually a supremely difficult thing to be really honest, in one's thinking about religion, for instance.

WELLMAN Some people say, I believe, you're a bit too honest for a parson.

HARCOURT I don't think a parson can be too honest, Wayne. I've never been a person who can believe a thing just because the Church says so. If there are uncomfortable facts I have to try and look them straight in the face.

WELLMAN Shall we say you sometimes like to shock people?

HARCOURT I don't deliberately try and shock people. All the same it's sometimes salutary. Shock treatment is a recognised form of cure for certain kinds of hallucination, unreality and the like.

WELLMAN You've been quoted as encouraging youngsters to read pornographic books, for example.

HARCOURT Some of the classics we studied at school are pretty pornographic. No, I have a good opinion of the young people of today. They can absorb the good and the bad and make up their minds which is which. It's no use fencing them around with rules.

WELLMAN Some people have complained that in your book *Reaching Beyond the Stars* you are down on rules altogether and rather keen on exceptions.

HARCOURT Not at all. It's just that I don't like to think in terms of rules and exceptions. It's too easy, too glib.

WELLMAN You have been accused sometimes of being glib; so to clear the air shall we be more specific? Would your freedom from rules apply to murder, for example?

HARCOURT Naturally I don't believe in murder. All the same, when you've lived as I have through two world wars, you can't help asking yourself, 'What is murder?'

WELLMAN Would it be fair to say you've shown a sneaking

sympathy for this cult of violence that seems to be spreading today?

HARCOURT Violence, I notice, seems to be natural and justified when you or your side practise it, but it's terrible and wrong when practised by somebody else.

WELLMAN What about theft?

HARCOURT Of course I don't believe in theft. Nonetheless, if you and your family were starving . . .

WELLMAN Fornication, then? Isn't that what you Christians would describe as a sin?

HARCOURT Well, it depends, Wayne, what you mean by fornication and it depends what you mean by sin.

WELLMAN Adultery?

HARCOURT People are always trying to pin me down on these things, just as they tried to pin Our Lord down. I don't say I approve of adultery, but it's no use merely telling the youngsters of today it's wrong, because I say so, or even because God says so. In any event, I am not sure anything is necessarily wrong in itself. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it may be, but you have to understand the circumstances.

WELLMAN So what you're saying is that the Bible, on some of these points, is a little out of date?

HARCOURT Parts of the Bible are very up-to-date indeed, but you can get into trouble, as our forefathers discovered, by taking the Bible too literally.

WELLMAN So if you believe there are no rules and if the Bible is no longer valid, what do you teach people?

HARCOURT I teach the need for responsible human relationships, for genuine compassion, to ask what is the human predicament? As a young person said to me only the other day, 'I'm a human being. I think. I feel. I am alive.'

WELLMAN That's very interesting. A young person said something like that to me only yesterday. (*He rises*) You

say, Mrs Harcourt, that one of the family is missing. Has she been away long?

EVELYN No, not long. Only about two or three weeks.

WELLMAN All the same, you'd probably like to see her again, wouldn't you?

EVELYN Oh yes, I would. I would.

WELLMAN Well, as a little surprise for you, we've arranged just that. In these 'Meet the Family' programmes we try if we can to make the family circle complete. So yesterday we got in touch with your daughter. As you say, she is studying Art.

EVELYN Oh!

WELLMAN Her work wouldn't allow her to come here tonight, so we're doing the next best thing in bringing her to you on the screen. Last night I visited the place where she . . . er, studies art, and we had a little chat. We recorded the scene for you, and if you will watch your television set . . .

(We hear the sound of jazzy music and raucous laughter, with one or two shrill screams. The lights on the stage fade completely and come up very brightly on the stage apron, far left, close to the TV set)

WELLMAN *(stepping into bright spot)* Here we are in Soho, in a well-known strip-club. Oh, Prudence.

(Prudence steps into the scene. She is in an evening gown and is wearing an enormous feathered headdress on her head.)

WELLMAN Have you a moment?

PRUDENCE Well, I have to go on in a minute. You must excuse my get-up.

WELLMAN It's very becoming. Can I have a word before you go on stage?

PRUDENCE *(Laughing)* I don't miss a chance to be on TV.

WELLMAN Smart girl! Tell me, how do you find it here?

PRUDENCE Not bad for a start.

WELLMAN How old are you, Prudence?

PRUDENCE I'm sixt . . . I don't think I'm supposed to say.

WELLMAN (*Laughing*) That's alright. I won't tell anyone. Tell me, I did hear a rumour that you're a parson's daughter.

PRUDENCE (*Impatient*) Oh, forget the parson's daughter bit. What does that matter?

WELLMAN This is quite a far cry from the Rectory, isn't it?

PRUDENCE No. My father's always talking about being yourself. I suppose he's pursuing his career. I'm pursuing mine.

WELLMAN All the same, there's quite a difference, surely, between preaching and peeling?

PRUDENCE I dunno. Dad strips his mind in public. Well I . . . (*laughs*)

WELLMAN Quite. So you'd describe your father's work as a kind of spiritual strip-tease, is that it?

PRUDENCE Well, I suppose it is, sort of. I mean the excitement is to see what belief he'll step out of next. Then when there's just about nothing left, all the lights go out. (*We hear a bell ringing*) Sorry, that's my call.

WELLMAN One last question. I'll be seeing your family tomorrow. Is there anything you'd like me to say to them?

PRUDENCE I didn't know this was about my family - I wish you wouldn't drag them into this.

WELLMAN You seem to feel rather strongly about your home.

PRUDENCE (*Bursting out*) Who wouldn't. It's all talk, talk, talk and nothing ever happens. It's stifling! It's so damned unreal and . . . and unconvincing and . . . after all, I'm a human being, aren't I? I just couldn't stick it any longer. But for heaven's sake don't put all that in. (*We hear a bell ring loudly*) I'll have to go.

WELLMAN Don't worry, Prudence, I'm sure everybody will understand. So long, and good luck. (*The lights go out and come up on the family*)

WELLMAN Meet the Family! And I guess that makes the family complete.

HARCOURT What do you mean by this, Wellman?

WELLMAN I don't think you've anything to worry about, Mr Harcourt. After all, one could say Prudence is simply acting out your whole philosophy.

HARCOURT Don't be ridiculous.

EVELYN (*Rising from her chair*) He's right, John. It is your philosophy.

HARCOURT Evelyn! Look here, Wellman . . .

DOROTHY Do be careful, Mother.

EVELYN I'm not going to be careful at all. I'm not shocked, Mr Wellman, and I'm not ashamed of Prudence. I hate to see her like that. Most mothers would. But I think I understand why she did it.

DOROTHY Mother!

HARCOURT We've had about enough of this.

WELLMAN Just a minute. Yes, Mrs Harcourt?

EVELYN While we talk about honesty, I suppose she's trying it. But I'm desperately ashamed of us.

WELLMAN But why?

EVELYN Prudence did in thirty seconds what you, John, talk about for hours and never do.

HARCOURT I think my wife is . . .

WELLMAN It's her turn, Mr Harcourt.

EVELYN Prudence has torn away the humbug and pretence from our family. She has shown us up for what we are. She's sick of both of us and this is the result.

DOROTHY Nonsense, Mother. She is an ungrateful little slut.

GREG She's your sister, Dot, and mine. She's a decent kid. I hate to see her in a place like that. It's one thing to paw other people's sisters about, it's quite another when people do it to yours. (*To his father*) If whatever we've been as a

family lands Prue in a place like that, it stinks. We may as well face the truth, all of us. (*He walks out through the garden door*)

WELLMAN Well, now we come again to the head of the family. What do you have to say?

HARCOURT (*We see he is speechless and shaking with anger*)
You . . . You . . . You scavenger . . .

WELLMAN Mr Harcourt, come, come, they'll cut us off the air.

HARCOURT It's people like you who should be cut off the air.

WELLMAN I didn't think you would object. It's in line with all that you've been saying this evening . . . reality . . . looking facts in the face . . . seeing things whole . . . even shock.

HARCOURT It's my family. You deliberately ferreted out my daughter and exposed her and our whole family before the entire nation for the sake of your scurrilous programme.

WELLMAN It's not going to help the image of the Church to see a priest in a flaming temper.

HARCOURT Christ lost His temper, didn't He? He flayed the money changers in the temple.

WELLMAN Well, then pardon me, do you feel you identify yourself with Christ?

HARCOURT (*Confused*) Yes . . . No, of course, I don't. But all I know is people like you are deliberately destroying everything that matters, decency, faith, why, you're out to destroy God.

WELLMAN Mr Harcourt, it seems sometimes as if you are the one doing that. In one of your books you have a chapter headed 'God is dead'. Tell us now honestly – a straight answer to a straight question. Do you believe in God?

EVELYN Yes, John, do you or don't you? That is the point.

HARCOURT Of course I . . . I . . . (*He hesitates and cannot find*

the words) I . . . (He struggles and then suddenly breaks)
God forgive me! God help me! God give me another
chance! *(His head falls forward on his arms as the light fades*
and the curtain falls).

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

SCENE I

Two hours later. The room is in a half light. All the TV equipment has been cleared away. As the curtain rises, we hear the front door bell ringing furiously. Then the phone starts to ring. Enter Dorothy, harassed. She picks up the telephone.

DOROTHY No, Mr Harcourt has retired for the night . . . No, he has nothing to say . . . No!! (*She hangs up. Phone immediately rings again.*) No! Nothing. (*She hangs up, then takes the phone off the hook and leaves it*) Honestly. (*Door bell rings. She goes to answer it.*) Please go away. We've had people ringing and banging for the last hour.

VOICE But I must see Mr Harcourt. It's urgent.

DOROTHY (*Off*) Mr Harcourt is seeing no one. Please leave us alone.

VOICE This is Fielding here. You really must let me in. Believe me, it's very important.

DOROTHY (*Off*) Oh, Mr Fielding. I'm terribly sorry. You see, we've been plagued with reporters. Do come in.

FIELDING I know it's a bad time to call, and I hate disturbing you but you do realise, don't you, the seriousness of the situation?

(Enter Fielding and Dorothy)

DOROTHY I do indeed. It's terrible. What are we to do?

FIELDING That's why I came over. It's absolutely essential that your father takes some immediate action.

DOROTHY Did you see the programme?

FIELDING Oh, yes, I saw it. So did a lot of other people.

DOROTHY Did it look as bad as it seemed?

FIELDING It couldn't have been worse. We've been so careful to build up your father as a fundamentally reliable, balanced

man, a man who in spite of unorthodox views can keep his head.

DOROTHY It was all my sister's fault, the little so and so.

FIELDING It was awkward, of course – appalling taste to present her in that manner – but nothing to get excited about, surely. The spiritual strip-tease bit was rather charming, I thought. Your father should have taken it in his stride.

DOROTHY I know. Father usually puts things so well in his broadcasts.

FIELDING Quite! I could imagine your mother getting a little upset – she's the type who sees everything through the blinkers of an outworn morality. But for *him* to lose his temper, to become quite hysterical.

DOROTHY He was caught unawares.

FIELDING But prominent men in public life must not be caught unawares. And his turning on Wellman like that. That was incredibly stupid. Men like Wellman can make or break you if you don't go along with them. Believe me, it may not be only a bishopric he'll lose. He could have his time cut.

DOROTHY His time?

FIELDING On the air. The paper will drop him. He'll just be nothing.

DOROTHY But surely they wouldn't ruin a good man's influence?

FIELDING Oh, wouldn't they? I believe an immediate statement to the Press is the only thing. We can still catch the main editions.

DOROTHY The Press have been at us all evening, but Daddy's locked in his room and won't give them a thing.

FIELDING If he still wants that bishopric, he'll have to move fast – simply say it was an unfriendly interview. Your mother was unwell. He was caught unprepared and wants

it to be understood that his impromptu remarks about the interviewer, still more those deplorable admissions about himself, were completely unpremeditated and are not to be taken too seriously. I have jotted something down. (*He gives her a paper*) Something like this might save him. Otherwise, well . . . (*He shrugs*)

DOROTHY You're right. This is it.

FIELDING Now, will he agree or at least let me speak to him?

DOROTHY So far he won't see anyone, but I'll do my very best. We can't let one lunatic ten minutes destroy the work of a lifetime. Oh, Mr Fielding, I'm so glad you're here.

FIELDING If anyone can help him to understand, I'm sure you can.

EVELYN (*Entering with tray*) Oh, Dorothy dear, do try and see if you can . . . Oh, excuse me.

DOROTHY This is Mr Fielding, Mother. You know, Dad's friend.

EVELYN Oh, yes, of course.

FIELDING Good evening. I came to see if I could help in this unhappy situation.

EVELYN (*Distraught*) That's very kind. Though I must say I don't quite see what you can do. Dorothy, see if you can make him take a little soup even.

DOROTHY Yes, Mother, I'll take it to him.

FIELDING You will stress the urgency of the matter, won't you?

DOROTHY I'll do my very best. Please wait. (*She goes*)

EVELYN You must sit down.

FIELDING Thank you. But don't let me be in your way. I'm sure you're busy.

EVELYN I'm not really. I'm only making myself busy. There comes a point at the end of a day like this when to cook something or clean something is the only balm left for the

spirit. Without it you simply burst into tears, and that doesn't do much good, does it? Now, can I get you a drink or something?

FIELDING Nothing, thanks, Mrs Harcourt. I'm involved in this too you know. I've done a lot to support this appointment. I've staked my reputation on it with the Prime Minister. I'm bound to say your exhibition on the television did not help, to say the least. It's probably lost your husband the job.

EVELYN Mr Fielding, do you really think *that* is the tragedy?

FIELDING I do indeed.

EVELYN No, no, no. Losing Shefford, if we have lost it . . .

FIELDING Without immediate action you have, believe me.

EVELYN That may be the one good thing that comes out of this terrible day.

FIELDING You can't mean that.

EVELYN I do. I think to go to Shefford as we are now would be to go as a lie.

FIELDING Well, Mrs Harcourt, if your remarks on the air tonight were deliberately intended to ruin your husband, you certainly succeeded.

EVELYN You can't believe that.

FIELDING You exposed what you pleased to call his failure publicly before five million people.

EVELYN But it's my failure - far more than his.

FIELDING Your failures don't matter to anyone but yourself. His failure, so-called, matters to the whole Church, I would even say to the whole nation.

EVELYN Mr Fielding, I just had to say what I did. You see, I have never spoken the truth to John for years.

FIELDING You should know that a television appearance is the very last place to tell the truth. No, seriously, at this precise moment it is a disaster. And, if I may say so, your

son didn't help either or that rather silly appearance of your daughter in that night club. I am glad at least her sister sees the situation clearly. She might still be able to rectify things.

(Enter Dorothy, still with the tray)

DOROTHY *(Indignant)* Mother! Dad's impossible! I've never been spoken to like that in my whole life.

EVELYN What is it now, dear, wouldn't he take the soup?

DOROTHY He wouldn't even open the door or listen to a word I said.

FIELDING Didn't he understand the point? Did you read him the statement?

DOROTHY I read it to him, and I reasoned with him.

FIELDING What did he say?

DOROTHY He said I was to tell you to go to hell – and then, Mother, he actually told me to go to hell, too. Me.

(Enter Greg through the outside doors. He has had a good many drinks.)

GREG That is exactly what I have had the pleasure of telling a certain Mr Wayne Wellman and all his minions several times, only in more colourful language. *(To Fielding)* What are you doing here? Are you the Press?

FIELDING I was under the impression I was a friend.

EVELYN This is Mr Fielding.

GREG Who started this whole blasted thing, I understand.

FIELDING I can't think why you're attacking me. I have acted from the beginning in the purest good faith. I was under the impression that your father was the man for the job. I am only here now to try and get him to issue a statement explaining . . .

GREG I don't see why any of us should explain anything. We've been badgered and harried enough as it is.

DOROTHY But, Greg, for his own good Dad must issue this statement. Read it for yourself.

GREG What's all this? Wife ill . . . caught unprepared . . . much regret impromptu remarks . . . But this is pure grovel.

FIELDING Unfortunately, your father has grovelled already on TV in front of the public.

GREG What does Dad think of this?

DOROTHY He told us to go to hell.

GREG Good for Dad. (*To Fielding*) Well, are you going to take the hint?

FIELDING Your rudeness, young man, is not going to help your father. I shall be seeing the Prime Minister in the morning, and will give him a full report of the whole sorry business. Good night.

GREG Hey, wait a minute. Why are you here anyway? And why are you so ruddy keen on my father becoming a bishop?

FIELDING Yes, I have been keen, frankly. Some of us thought that as a bishop your father would help make the Church a useful adjunct to the kind of progressive reforms we have in mind. That is why we pressed his claims with the Prime Minister. We hoped he would give a kind of spiritual support for a more liberal society.

EVELYN Don't you mean a more immoral society?

FIELDING Let's say permissive.

GREG Call it what you like, you simply want to use my father for your ends.

FIELDING I want to help the Church keep in tune with the times.

EVELYN Keep in tune! Shouldn't the Church be setting the tune?

FIELDING It's a long time since that happened, and I hope it never happens again. No! To be quite honest, I see very

little future either for your Church or for your faith, or for your husband. Good night. Don't bother. I'll see myself out.

(Exit. Dorothy goes with him.)

GREG He'll see himself thrown out, if he isn't careful.

FIELDING *(Off - to Dorothy)* I really feel very sorry for you.

EVELYN Greg, have you drunk too much?

GREG Nothing of the kind.

EVELYN You have had one or two too many, dear.

GREG Wrong again. I haven't had nearly enough. If I'm intoxicated at all, it's with the satisfaction of giving Master Wayne Doublecross large chunks of my mind all the way to his natty little red sports car. I've at least sent him zooming back to town with a considerable hopperty of fleas in his car. *(Dorothy returns)* Then, it's quite true, Mother, I went to the local and drowned my feelings in several gins.

EVELYN You know, Greg, I think I understand just how you feel.

DOROTHY Mother! You know it was your disgraceful outburst that stirred up the whole trouble. And Greg, you were almost as bad.

GREG You weren't exactly a little ray of sunshine yourself, if you know what I mean.

DOROTHY You've probably wrecked the last hope of saving Dad, that's all.

GREG I haven't the slightest intention of trying to save Dad or anybody else. I am going to bed, and I suggest you do the same. It's the end of a perfect day. *(To Evelyn)* You'd better sleep in the spare room.

EVELYN I'll be all right. Greg, you're rather a comfort to me just now.

DOROTHY Mother.

GREG O.K. Maybe you could do with a nightcap yourself. Good night all.

EVELYN Shall we put the telephone back on the hook?

DOROTHY No, I think we'll leave it off.

GREG I certainly would. I don't want those buzzards spoiling my beauty sleep. Come on, Mum, things may seem better in the morning. They certainly couldn't be worse.

EVELYN *(To Dorothy)* Good night, dear. Go to bed.

(Dorothy takes the statement from Greg's hand, as he and Evelyn leave. Then she picks up the phone. Lights fade.)

SCENE II

The stage is dark for a moment to denote the passing of some hours. We hear the hall clock outside chiming one. Then a light goes on in the hall. We hear footsteps and Harcourt comes in. He turns a light on in the study. As he does so, we see him getting into his overcoat. He suddenly remembers something and snatches off his parson's collar, replacing it with a white scarf from his overcoat pocket. Then he goes to a little box on the mantelpiece and fumbles in it.)

HARCOURT Damn those car keys. *(He goes to the desk, looking frantically for the keys)* Damn and blast. *(He gets more and more desperate, turning over papers, etc. He puts the phone back on the hook. As he is absorbed in his search, Prudence comes in. She is carrying a little case and has on a raincoat. She stands looking at her father.)*

PRUDENCE Lost something, Dad?

HARCOURT *(Not looking up)* The keys, damn it.

PRUDENCE Can I help?

HARCOURT *(Looking up, bewildered)* Prudence. *(He goes towards her, hardly able to believe his eyes, touching her coat very lightly)* Prudence.

PRUDENCE *(Goes over to box on mantelpiece, finds key and hands it to him)* This it?

HARCOURT *(Confused)* Yes, yes it is.

PRUDENCE You're always losing keys, aren't you?

HARCOURT Yes, yes, I'm always losing . . . O well, I may as well . . . *(He puts the key back in the box)*

PRUDENCE Dad, are you all right?

HARCOURT Yes, of course. Are you all right, that's the point? Oh, Prudence.

PRUDENCE Look, I haven't come back like a prodigal daughter or anything like that.

HARCOURT But you've come. That's what matters. I must tell your mother.

PRUDENCE Wait a moment, Dad. I'm not quite ready for Mum yet. I thought coming in at this hour you'd all be asleep and I'd face you in the morning.

HARCOURT How did you get here?

PRUDENCE Hitch-hiked.

HARCOURT (*Shocked*) Hitch-hiked? At this hour of night?

PRUDENCE If you really want to know, I've been fired.

HARCOURT Fired? Why?

PRUDENCE Well, my boss didn't like the broadcast tonight.

HARCOURT I don't wonder. You were pretty . . .

PRUDENCE It wasn't me. It was you. He thought you made rather an exhibition of yourself. He thought you might give his club a bad name.

HARCOURT Me give *him* a bad name?

PRUDENCE Well, he says it's a very respectable joint, and he's rather particular about the background of his girls. He was hopping mad at what Greg said, too. Don't you want to take your coat off?

HARCOURT Yes. I'm not going out after all.

PRUDENCE Dad, you were coming to look for me, weren't you?

HARCOURT Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact I was.

PRUDENCE Thank's a lot. Half of me hoped you wouldn't come and half of me hoped like the dickens you would.

HARCOURT Look, I must go and fetch your mother. She's had a pretty awful time lately.

PRUDENCE I know. Me.

HARCOURT Partly. And partly me.

PRUDENCE You?

HARCOURT She's seen through me, Prue, right through me, at last.

PRUDENCE (*Cheerfully*) Well, good grief, that's not so hard to do. I've seen through you for years.

HARCOURT What?

PRUDENCE Of course. Your ideas are a bit foggy but as a person, you're fantastically transparent, didn't you know?

HARCOURT Oh, really?

PRUDENCE Sure. You're just a frustrated rebel, exactly like me.

HARCOURT I see. It's odd, but you seem to have grown up all of a sudden.

PRUDENCE Dad, if you'd seen half the things I have lately, you'd grow up.

HARCOURT What kind of things, Prudence?

PRUDENCE Well, I've talked with a lot of older men lately in . . . my work. People like . . . well, never mind. People who ought to know better. There was even a parson once – in mufti. They're all people who are scared stiff of being found out. That's why they're so desperate. So if Mum's actually found you out, perhaps you're lucky after all.

HARCOURT Prue, for God's sake, why didn't we ever talk like this before? It's almost like talking to someone of my own age.

PRUDENCE Well, I'm not quite in the grave yet. Of course, women are notoriously more mature than men.

HARCOURT I don't think I've ever understood you.

PRUDENCE Oh, I don't know. You were always treating me as a trend or symptom or something – typical of this or an illustration of that. Besides, you and Mum never wanted me much, did you?

HARCOURT Of course we did.

PRUDENCE Be honest. Wasn't I a little bit of an afterthought? A kid senses these things, you know. (*Moved*) She feels them quite a lot, actually.

HARCOURT Is that why you ran out?

PRUDENCE Partly. Also I was crazy to get a job in films or TV or something.

HARCOURT (*Grim*) You seem to have got one on TV all right.

PRUDENCE Yes, I just fell for it when Wayne asked me. I never dreamed he'd use it the way he did. Trouble was I'd do anything to get my face on that little screen. I didn't mean it to do you harm, really.

HARCOURT I think it's probably wrecked my whole reputation, and lost me a bishopric. Whether it's done me harm is another matter.

PRUDENCE I suppose I've never thought of anybody much but myself - kind of narrows the horizon. I'm hungry.

HARCOURT Of course. Now I am going to fetch . . . (*Greg's voice and heavy step are heard coming down the stairs*)

GREG I say, what's going on here? (*He comes in*) Prue! (*He puts his arms round her and swings her right off her feet*)

PRUDENCE (*Breathlessly*) Oh Greg!

GREG All the same you've given us one hell of a bad time, you know. (*He puts her down with a bump*) What the devil do you think you've been up to?

PRUDENCE If you're going to act the heavy brother and ask masses of questions, I'm going back where I came from. I mean it!

GREG Alright! Alright! Now don't start practising your dramatic exits and entrances any more. We've had quite enough melodrama for one night. Look, I think I'll go and fetch Mother. (*He goes*)

HARCOURT Prue, I don't want to ask questions, and I think I understand why you left, but what made you come back?

PRUDENCE I wanted a bath and a decent meal, I guess, and some clean sheets.

HARCOURT Is that all?

PRUDENCE That TV show had something to do with it. I saw it tonight, in my landlady's sittingroom. It seemed so odd seeing all of you right there in the room. I'd never known the family honest before. In one way it was rather marvellous.

HARCOURT You actually thought it was marvellous.

PRUDENCE Then you came on again at the end.

HARCOURT That was pretty awful, wasn't it?

PRUDENCE Yes, it was pretty awful – to see your own father stripped, if you know what I mean. I suppose you might have felt that way if you'd seen me at the club. But for the first, first time, at least I could understand what you were talking about. And there was another thing.

HARCOURT What?

PRUDENCE You looked like you really needed help – somebody's help – even mine. I suppose I'd been wanting that for a long, long time! Oh Dad. *(She runs to him, buries her head on his shoulder, and is convulsed with tears)*

(Enter Dorothy)

DOROTHY Well, at least you've come to your senses at last.

PRUDENCE *(Indignant)* I've not come to my senses at all, I've been fired.

DOROTHY Serve you jolly well right. What are you doing here, anyway?

PRUDENCE What do you think? This is my home, isn't it?

DOROTHY No, it isn't. You've forfeited the right to call it your home.

(Evelyn comes in, followed by Greg)

PRUDENCE Since when have you been the mistress of the house? Hello, Mum.

EVELYN *(Kissing her)* She's forfeited nothing. Oh, Prudence,

I'm so glad, but you're so thin. You've lost weight, and you've cut your hair. And here's a handkerchief, dear.

PRUDENCE Thanks, Mum. I'm alright.

EVELYN Why, why didn't you tell us where you were?

PRUDENCE You know, you'd have worried more if you knew, than if you didn't.

EVELYN I'll put a hot water bottle in your bed.

GREG Now you're really home.

PRUDENCE Got something to eat, Mum? I haven't had a decent meal for days.

EVELYN Of course - I'll get you something. How about baked beans and sausage?

PRUDENCE Sounds alright.

DOROTHY Do we really have to kill the fatted calf, Mother?

EVELYN I wouldn't exactly call baked beans a fatted calf.
(*Evelyn goes*)

DOROTHY You realise what you've done, don't you? You've ruined Dad's chances of the one thing he wanted most in the whole world - to be Bishop of Shefford.

PRUDENCE Have I, Dad?

HARCOURT I think you have. But then it seems I've lost you your job, too.

PRUDENCE It kind of makes us quits, doesn't it?

DOROTHY Really!

PRUDENCE You know, I've mixed with a lot of people since I left here - strippers, dancers, pimps, landladies - and customers, you'd be surprised at the customers. You sit with them in that lousy club and they paw you around a lot, but they like to talk about all sorts of things.

HARCOURT What sort of things?

PRUDENCE Often they want to talk about their wives or their kids or their childhood days - and about God. When they've

had a few drinks they love talking about God. Some even get around to you.

HARCOURT To me?

PRUDENCE Oh, they've heard about you. Some of them admired you, but I'm afraid most of them didn't.

DOROTHY I would hardly expect those sort of people would.

HARCOURT Go on.

PRUDENCE It's funny, but one thing they've no use for is a Christian minister who doesn't stand up for his faith. They're crooked as corkscrews themselves, but they hate a parson who isn't straight, who waffles and wobbles all the time, who tries so desperately hard to be with it – and is so painfully without it. I had quite a job defending you.

HARCOURT Oh, did you? Thanks very much.

PRUDENCE One thing I've discovered. When you're in some awful digs, you're all alone, and you're as lonely as hell, you don't want the New Morality then, or Christian atheism, or a parson who's terribly trendy and recommends the latest dirty book. You want one or two simple things to hold on to, a few 'do's' and 'don'ts'. I read the Bible occasionally, Dad. You long for a bit of 'thus saith the Lord' in your life. You need something to live for.

DOROTHY Whatever you've lived for, you've done your best to ruin Dad.

PRUDENCE Actually, I thought Dad cut rather more ice after I came on the air than before. I was quite proud of you when you tore strips off that fellow.

HARCOURT You really mean that? There wasn't much 'thus saith the Lord' about it.

GREG There was a certain amount of 'thus saith Dad'.

PRUDENCE You know, you've always talked about honesty. One felt at the end you were trying it out for a change.
(*The phone rings*)

GREG Damn it, somebody's put the phone back on the hook.
(Picks it up. Evelyn enters with baked beans.)

EVELYN Here you are dear, piping hot, your favourite.

PRUDENCE Thanks, Mum. (She starts to eat ravenously)

EVELYN I'll go and get you some apple pie. (Exit)

GREG Be quiet, all of you. (At the phone) No, tell them we don't want to talk to anyone in Television Centre . . . What? . . . Good Heavens!

HARCOURT What's the matter?

GREG Be quiet! (Phone) Just say that again. (Puts his hand on the phone) All the phones have been ringing non-stop since your broadcast. It's the biggest avalanche they've had for months.

HARCOURT I feared as much.

GREG (Phone) How many? . . . (To family) So far they've had nearly 200 calls, most of them pro.

HARCOURT Pro what?

GREG Pro you, Dad.

HARCOURT What do you mean?

GREG What I say, you silly old idiot! (Phone) Sorry, I didn't mean you. People are ringing in shoals to say that they're on your side. (Phone) Yes, I would. Give me one or two samples, my father would like to know. (Repeating what he hears on the phone) 'Good for the parson. About time someone told that fellow, Wellman, where to get off.' 'Please tell the clergyman God will answer his prayer.' Yes, we left our phone off the hook. Anyway thanks for ringing. If you've any more, try us again. Goodbye. (He hangs up) Looks as if we're going to have a busy night, their phones are still ringing. (Dorothy has risen, much disturbed)

HARCOURT Take it off the hook again, please. I don't want any more calls.

GREG But, Dad, it's the voice of the people. It's the real thing. They'll make you a bishop after all.

HARCOURT Not me! Bishops aren't made by popular vote or TV rating, they're supposed to be chosen by God. They're shepherds, they're fathers, they're prophets. I'm not one of those things, not one.

GREG All the same, you're not going to let the Wellmans and Fieldings of life have it all their own way, are you Dad? Seems to me people need you.

HARCOURT It's no use, Greg, I've seen myself as I really am – a total failure.

DOROTHY (*Excited*) You're not a failure. You can go on just as you did. All that's happened tonight will be forgotten. You can lecture and write just as you've always done. You can *be* the Bishop of Shefford. People want you.

HARCOURT Dorothy, dear, you don't understand. It's not people, it's what has happened to me.

DOROTHY Nothing's happened, nothing that can't be put right in the morning.

HARCOURT What do you mean?

DOROTHY (*More and more confused*) You'll understand when you see it, you'll be grateful.

HARCOURT Grateful for what?

DOROTHY You'll still be Bishop of Shefford and you'll come to me and say 'Thank you'.

GREG (*Going to her, putting his hands on her shoulders*) What the hell are you talking about?

DOROTHY You'll never understand. No one understands except me.

GREG (*Shaking her*) You're hiding something.

DOROTHY Leave me alone!

GREG Not till you tell me what you've done, come on now. (*Dorothy starts to laugh hysterically*) Stop it! (*Slaps her*) Be quiet! Now, what is it?

DOROTHY It's really rather funny. I've saved Dad, in spite of you all, in spite of Wellman, in spite of Prue. Even in spite of

himself. You can't stop it now, any of you. Look in the paper tomorrow morning, you'll see.

(She throws down the statement defiantly)

HARCOURT You mean you have given something to the Press in my name? How dare you! How dare you!

DOROTHY *(Still hysterical)* Because I know you better than you know yourself, I understand you better than you understand yourself. Your work is my life, it means more to me than anything in the world. I'm not going to let you throw it away.

HARCOURT But how could this miserable thing help my work?

DOROTHY Because it will enable it to go on exactly as before.

GREG Please give that to me, Dad. *(To Dorothy)* Now pull yourself together. Who did you give it to? Come on, who?

DOROTHY All the Dailies. You'll see in the morning.

GREG I'll do what I can, Dad. I'll use the phone upstairs. Prue, come and help me look up the numbers, will you? *(To Dot)* You twittering old maid! *(Prue and Greg exit)*

HARCOURT That was a wicked thing to do.

DOROTHY I did it for your sake. Don't you see every single thing I've done for the last five years has been for your sake? I've read to you and answered your letters for you and sorted your files and kept your appointments straight and corrected your proofs and remembered when you forgot things. You've depended on me for everything.

HARCOURT Good God, what have I done?

DOROTHY I even gave up Tom for you . . . *(She is unable to speak)*

HARCOURT Go to him, Dorothy. Marry him. He's a good man.

DOROTHY No, I won't - not while you need me so much. *(Weeps)*

HARCOURT I think I can bear what I've done to Prue, she's

pretty level-headed and I hope to God she'll get through it in spite of everything. But you, oh my dear, I'm so deeply ashamed, I've made you somehow small and twisted and only half a woman; can you forgive me?

DOROTHY I'll forgive you anything, Father, except what you've done tonight. You've gone back on the work of twenty years, you've broken faith, not just with me, but with all the people who look to you for a lead. This new book of yours is going to help millions.

HARCOURT I'm not sure I'm going to publish it now.

DOROTHY (*Fiercely*) But you must publish it . . . people need it.

HARCOURT Do they? Do people need what we have here?

DOROTHY You're doing your utmost to destroy my faith. Well, you won't succeed. I'm not going to break like you did. I still believe in your ideas, even if you don't.

HARCOURT But ideas are not enough. 'By their fruits shall ye know them.'

DOROTHY Look at the letters that pour in. Here's another lot you haven't even read yet.

HARCOURT I've just been an idol, Dorothy - a kind of symbol of our age - the latest model of a do-it-yourself Christian. Well, that idol is smashed, finished.

DOROTHY (*With venom*) You traitor!

HARCOURT Yes, that's right. Far beyond what you know - Traitor!

DOROTHY Here are the proofs of your book - our book - I'll have them finished in the morning. (*She goes, slamming the door. Harcourt is left staring after the shut door. His world is shattered. He feels humble and ashamed.*)

EVELYN (*Comes in with a tray in her hand*) Here's Prudence's apple pie. Oh dear, where is everyone?

HARCOURT Evelyn, could you sit down for a minute?

EVELYN I think I'd better go and keep it hot.

HARCOURT For God's sake stop rushing around and sit down, here.

EVELYN Yes, John?

HARCOURT (*Speaking with difficulty*) I've just had a terrible talk with Dorothy. Evelyn, what do you do when everything and everyone you touch, you only seem to destroy? (*There is no answer and he looks at her searchingly*) You too. I've pretty well destroyed you too, haven't I? Dorothy and I have shut you out. (*No answer*) Look at the havoc here. God has been dead all right.

EVELYN Long live God.

HARCOURT No! Sometimes I think I'd prefer Him dead. It's too costly and painful, and generally inconvenient to have Him alive. He's too uncompromising. He makes too many demands.

EVELYN He's waiting, you know.

HARCOURT For what?

EVELYN Well, we all talk about Him so much – dissect Him, dispute Him, dilute Him. Then clever people say we'd better put Him on ice for twenty or thirty years while they get on with His work. Why don't the clever people put themselves on ice for a little and give Him a turn?

HARCOURT To do what?

EVELYN To talk to *us*. I don't know. Work a miracle.

HARCOURT That's strange.

EVELYN What?

HARCOURT Funny you should say that about a miracle. There was a moment . . .

EVELYN Yes?

HARCOURT Upstairs. After the broadcast. I was still in a furious temper. Everything was blank. I'd lost Shefford – made an utter fool of myself in public – destroyed my image – (*laughs*) my image! I knelt down and tried to pray. It was no use. Then it happened. Out of the blackness

someone seemed to speak to me. 'You have been so full of yourself and so empty of God.' And then, quite practical and matter-of-fact, 'Get up. Go and find Prudence, now.' It took all my courage to get up off my knees. But I did. And I found her. Or rather, she found me.

EVELYN It was God – opening the door. (*Pause*) You can be a prophet, John.

HARCOURT Not me! Prophets are not frustrated rebels. They are not pop idols of religion. They are revolutionaries. They attack evil in all its strongholds. They shake rulers, they rouse nations, they turn the world upside down. I haven't begun to do any of that. I'm not fit for it, Evelyn.

EVELYN No true prophet ever is. But when God says to them 'Go!' no power on earth can stop them.

(*Enter Greg*)

GREG We've been ringing the papers like mad. Goodness knows what they'll print. The one thing they all want to know is what *you* have to say now.

HARCOURT What I have to say now? Greg, would you mind telling those newspapers when they call back that I have a statement to make after all. I would like their readers to know that I may be finding what I asked for in front of the whole nation – another chance.

CURTAIN