

THE LADDER

By

PETER HOWARD

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Characters

HERO

THE MAN WITH THE BAG

COCKNEY

HERO'S MOTHER

BUSINESSMAN

MARY

HERO'S WIFE

STATESMAN

The action takes place anywhere and everywhere at
any time in the past, present and future.

THE LADDER was produced at the Westminster Theatre, London, opening on 25 October, 1961, with the following cast:

HERO	Paul Campbell
THE MAN WITH THE BAG	Cecil Broadhurst
COCKNEY	Walter Farmer
HERO'S MOTHER	Phyllis Konstam
BUSINESSMAN	Donald Simpson
MARY	Ann Buckles
HERO'S WIFE	Jane Wax
STATESMAN	John Caulfeild

The song at the end was sung by Muriel Smith. The play was directed by Howard Reynolds, with settings by W. Cameron Johnson.

THE LADDER

Mid-stage is a ladder. It climbs up out of sight of the audience. Around the foot of it all the action and scenes happen.

As the curtain rises, the world is moving across the stage. Some hurry. Some go slow. Some love. Some hate.

A newspaper boy cries his wares. To the businessmen he shouts 'Stock Exchange prices'. To the mother, 'Horrible murder in a love nest'. To the young man, 'Football results, latest football results'. To the lovers on the bench, 'Terrible crisis. Threats of war. Terrible crisis'. All buy papers except the lovers on the bench, who simply pay money but take no paper.

Meanwhile one man has been steadfastly looking at the ladder. He speaks to another man, carrying a bag, who has been steadfastly looking at him.

HERO

Say, haven't we met somewhere before?

MAN WITH BAG

Have we?

HERO

I could have sworn I've seen you somewhere. Never mind. I'm busy.

MAN WITH BAG

At what?

THE LADDER

HERO

I'm going up that ladder.

MAN WITH BAG

Why?

HERO

To get to the top, of course.

MAN WITH BAG

Why?

HERO

Why what?

MAN WITH BAG

Why do you want to get to the top of the ladder?

HERO

You fool. Everybody wants to get up there.

COCKNEY

(One of a small crowd that has gathered round to listen to the conversation) Not me, cocky. Not on your perishing life. Once you start climbing ladders, you can't stop. Can't look back. Got to keep going. And if you slip, cor, it's just like strawberry jam all over the floor you'll be. Messy. Done for. Finished. I can't stick heights. I knows my place. Both feet on the ground for me, guvnor. *(He walks off singing: 'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road—Oyl' Some of the crowd join in)*

THE LADDER

MAN WITH BAG

(Laughing) Do you feel discouraged?

HERO

Not at all. I'm going up that ladder. And I'll tell you why if you really want to know.

MAN WITH BAG

I do.

HERO

I feel I can really do something if I get to the top. I'll see things up there that you can't see from down here. There's so much that's got to happen and so few people who can really see it does happen. Now I don't want to boast, but I've got certain qualities that the world needs. I've got a good brain. I've got a hide like a rhinoceros. The constitution of a cart-horse. And I've got the guts to get up there.

MAN WITH BAG

Things may look different when you get to the top. They often do.

HERO

What do you know about it?

MAN WITH BAG

I was up there once myself.

HERO

You?

THE LADDER

MAN WITH BAG

Yes. Me. Honestly. At least it wasn't exactly the top of the ladder. It was the top of a mountain. We could see towns, cities, factories, oil wells, farms, mines, cattle—and all the wealth and power and glory of the world like a map below us. It was fascinating.

HERO

My God, I must get up there. (*He starts to push his way through the crowd to the foot of the ladder*)

MAN WITH BAG

The point is that when I was up there, I found it easy to think not so much of what I could do for others as what I could do for myself.

HERO

But I'm not like that.

MAN WITH BAG

Aren't you? You may be when you get there. The person who took me to the top of the mountain offered me the biggest job this world can provide. It would have meant all the money a man can have. All the power a man can wield. All the glory a man can imagine.

HERO

What did you do?

THE LADDER

MAN WITH BAG

Turned it down.

HERO

You must have been a lunatic or a liar.

MAN WITH BAG

I'm not a liar.

HERO

Why turn it down?

MAN WITH BAG

I told him I had *another* job to do. I was under contract to somebody else.

HERO

Contracts can be broken.

MAN WITH BAG

Not this one.

HERO

What exactly is your job?

MAN WITH BAG

Carrying this bag. At least, that's one way of putting it. I suppose the truth is that it carries me.

HERO

You *are* a lunatic. Here. Let me feel the bag. (*He takes hold of it, and staggers under the weight. He puts it down*

THE LADDER

on the ground) My God. It's the heaviest thing I ever picked up in my life. You can't go on carrying that alone. You must need someone to help you. How far do you have to take it?

MAN WITH BAG

As far as I go. It goes with me everywhere.

HERO

Well, I'd certainly like to help. *(Pause)* But I'd never get a load like that up the ladder, would I? You've got to be reasonable, you know. You musn't press me.

MAN WITH BAG

But I didn't ask you for anything, did I?

HERO

You certainly did. You told me plainly I ought to carry that bag with you.

MAN WITH BAG

(Laughing again) I didn't say a word. It must be your conscience.

HERO

Yes, perhaps you're right. My mother always says I've got a great conscience. Don't you, mother?

MOTHER

(From crowd) Yes, dear. You've always had a *wonderful* conscience.

THE LADDER

HERO

What's in the bag anyway? Lead or gold or something?

MAN WITH BAG

No. Only wood.

HERO

Wood?

MAN WITH BAG

Yes.

HERO

A funny kind of wood.

MAN WITH BAG

Here, take a look. *(He opens the bag. Hero looks in. Then, shading his eyes with his hand as if there were a strong light, he looks again)*

HERO

I can't see anything there except a sort of wooden cross.

MAN WITH BAG

That's all it is.

HERO

Shut it. Shut it quickly. *(The Man with the Bag does so)*
You can't tell me a cross is as heavy as that.

MAN WITH BAG

It's not heavy to me.

THE LADDER

HERO

Anyway, I've no more time to waste now. I've got to get to the top.

He begins to fight his way to the foot of the ladder. He has to knock one man down, who stands in his way. As he starts to climb, he shouts to the Man with the Bag. With a struggle, he mounts a rung between each speech, and the crowd watch and roar.

I'd like to help you, mind—And I will—I can do far more for you when I get up there—It's a great work you're doing—Here, take some money—*(He pauses on the ladder and throws a purse to the man with the bag who catches it.)*

MAN WITH BAG

Thank you. Thank you very much.

HERO

I'll have more to give as I get higher. Much more. *(He climbs up and when almost out of sight shouts)* Keep it up. It's a great work you're doing. *(He disappears. The crowd are peering up at him. The man he has hit is shouting, 'Damn him. Damn him. I hope he falls and breaks his blasted neck.')*

MOTHER

He's going to the top! He's nearly there!

THE LADDER

BUSINESSMAN

He's going up!

OTHERS

Yes! He's going up! He's going up! He's going up!

They are all staring upwards. Mother breaks the spell by coming forward.

MOTHER

I always knew he'd get to the top. I planned it all from the very start.

MAN WITH BAG

Even before he was born?

MOTHER

Yes. That's true. How did you know? I loved his father, of course. Or at least I liked him. But I decided to marry him because I thought he was the man who could give me a perfect son. And he did.

MAN WITH BAG

What happened to the father?

MOTHER

He died. Died quite soon after the boy was born, as a matter of fact. Sad in a way, wasn't it? But I didn't mind as much as I pretended. You see I still had my son. He was my whole life. He *is* my whole life.

THE LADDER

MAN WITH BAG

He has a life of his own, you know.

MOTHER

You men are so selfish. And so stupid. You never understand that a son belongs to a mother. You can't understand the pain and the wonder, the thought and tears and triumph that we put into the character of our menfolk. Why, that son owes everything to me, even life itself, don't forget. And he's mine. Mine for ever.

MAN WITH BAG

I thought he got married?

MOTHER

What's that got to do with it? She always understood that I came first. That's why I chose her as his wife. She was very suitable in many ways. But she always knew I could do so much for him that she could never do. All the same, getting him married was the one time I had any serious trouble with him. He was emotionally upset. If I hadn't stood firm then, he'd never have got to the top.

MAN WITH BAG

I'd like to hear about that.

MOTHER

I'd like to tell you. It really is a most interesting story.

THE LADDER

He came to see me one morning many years ago. Of course I knew what he was going to say. I'd heard much of it, and guessed the rest. But he thought it was all news to me.

As she speaks, she takes the centre of the stage and all the other characters form an audience looking at her as the following scene is played.

HERO

(Enters eagerly) Mother! Mother! I've got wonderful news for you.

MOTHER

Have you, darling? Sit down and tell me all about it.

They sit on the bench.

HERO

Mother, I'm going to be married. I'm going to be married to the most wonderful girl in the world—except you, of course. As a matter of fact, she's the only girl I ever met who is rather like you. I know you're going to love her.

MOTHER

Tell me about her.

HERO

It's a funny thing to say, but I feel safe when I'm with her. She doesn't fuss about all the little things, the

THE LADDER

many things that seem to trouble so many women. She's like a mountain stream, mother, gay and deep, swift and unexpected. Yes, Mother, she's an unexpected person. That's one of the things I like so much about her. So many people I know are like duck ponds—always the same, always stuck in one place. You never quite get to the bottom of them, but you know what you'd find if you did. Mary's not like that.

MOTHER

So, it's Mary.

HERO

Yes. Do you like her, Mother? Say you like her.

MOTHER

Oh yes. Yes indeed. I like her very much.

HERO

Thank God. I knew you would. I just knew you would. I told Mary so.

MOTHER

What did she say?

HERO

One of those things she often says that I don't quite understand.

MOTHER

What was it?

THE LADDER

HERO

Mary laughed a bit and then she said, 'No. I'll never do for your mother. Never in this world. I'm afraid you'll have to choose between her and me.' So of course I told her that was all nonsense, that you'd love her as much as I do, and you'd be so happy that I am so happy. But Mary said, 'No. No. No. I'm content with far too little to please your mother.'

MOTHER

(Getting up and moving away) She's a shrewd young woman.

HERO

What do you mean by that, Mother?

MOTHER

(Turning to him) She's absolutely right. I like Mary. I like her very much indeed. But she'd never make the right wife for you. If you marry her, you'll end up with a small house in a small suburb with lots of small children—a small man, and worst of all, content with your own smallness.

HERO

Mother, you mustn't say things like that.

MOTHER

(Sitting at his side again) I must, and I will. Son, I've never failed you yet, and I won't fail you now. Mary

THE LADDER

is unsuitable for you in every way. She has no money. Her family is very ordinary. Her friends—well, it's an old-fashioned word, but if you must know they are just common.

HERO

Common? Mother, you don't know what you're talking about. Some of Mary's friends are the most fascinating people I ever met. Why, only last night, she introduced me to a man, a Man with a Bag, an old family friend, who was without exception the most interesting character I ever met in my life.

MOTHER

(*Crosses to ladder*) An old family friend with a bag! Now I'm glad you told me about Mary. But I want you to listen to me now quietly and carefully, just as you used to do when you were a little boy, and you'd get into trouble and we used to talk it out together. Remember?

HERO

Yes, Mother. (*He becomes almost like a little boy again as the scene goes on*)

MOTHER

(*Hand on ladder*) There's nothing you cannot do, if you set your mind to it, son. Nothing. You'll get to the top. You have the qualities to do very big things in this world. I've known it ever since the day you were born.

THE LADDER

HERO

Do you really think so, Mother?

MOTHER

I know it, son. And when you marry you need someone who will help you get there. Mary will never do that. She has no ambition, no background, no space to her. She'll keep you happy with the second-best.

HERO

But I love her, Mother. I love her.

MOTHER

You think you do, son. But you know very little about love. Love isn't just moonlit nights and rosy days. It has to last long after your bones get old and your heart grows weary. It needs something more than romance to make love last through life.

HERO

What does it need?

MOTHER

Ambition. (*Looks at ladder*) A real determination to get to the top. Something that keeps you going when the going is tough. You've not had much rough going so far. I've kept it from you. And you've got very little ambition of your own. It's your one weakness. Luckily for you, I've had it

THE LADDER

for you. And I'll never allow you to marry a girl like Mary. Never. I want to make you understand that clearly. She'd make you the worst kind of wife.

HERO

Mother, surely a man must choose his own wife?

MOTHER

Yes, of course, dear. But a wise boy, and a good boy like you asks his mother's help in choosing. This may hurt now. But you'd hurt me far, far more if you married Mary. You don't want to hurt me, do you?

HERO

(*Long pause*) You know I don't, Mother.

MOTHER

Well, go away now, there's a good boy, and think over what I've said. We'll talk more about it later on. But I know you'll see that Mother knows best. And when the right time comes, we'll find the right girl for you.

HERO

Thank you, Mother.

Hero goes off slowly. Mother stands looking after him. Then she says to the Man with the Bag:

THE LADDER

MOTHER

And it all blew over. Awkward while it lasted. But I took him away on a cruise, and he soon forgot. As a matter of fact, it was on that cruise we met the girl he finally did marry. Thoroughly suitable in every way—and with connexions that have been a real help to him. She's always understood the special bond between mother and son and never interfered with me. So you see, if I hadn't stood firm then, he'd maybe never have got where he is. He owes everything to me.

BUSINESSMAN

(*Stepping forward from the crowd*) Don't forget what he owes me.

MOTHER

What does he owe you?

BUSINESSMAN

I've never reckoned it up exactly. Something like five million dollars, I guess. To say nothing of his whole career.

MOTHER

Nonsense. I know nothing about all this. If this was true my son would have told me. He tells me everything.

BUSINESSMAN

Is that so, madam? Well, let me tell you a few facts

THE LADDER

about your son that will interest you. Some years ago your son came to see me.

He moves across stage. The crowds part. And there is Hero who comes forward to greet him. The crowds form an intent audience as the next scene is played. A desk and two chairs have been put up behind the crowd.

BUSINESSMAN

Good morning. Good to see you. Won't you sit down?
Now, what can I do for you?

HERO

It's good of you to see me in the middle of a busy day, and at such short notice. I find it a little hard to explain why I've come.

BUSINESSMAN

Then let me explain for you. Time is money for me, and I don't like to waste it. You've come to borrow some cash.

HERO

I wouldn't put it so crudely.

BUSINESSMAN

Why not? You are becoming quite a public figure now, you know. You have a town house and a country house. You have big expenses. Now you've been offered a job in the Government. You want to

THE LADDER

take it. But it would mean giving up your city interests. You cannot afford it. That's why you came to me.

HERO

I will pay you back.

BUSINESSMAN

Will you? What security can you offer?

HERO

My name. My word.

BUSINESSMAN

(Puts his hand in his pocket and hands over a coin) Here you are.

HERO

What's this? A cent.

BUSINESSMAN

That's all your word and your name are worth to me.
Next to nothing. Why don't you go to your mother for money? She's got plenty.

HERO

There are certain things about my life my mother simply doesn't understand.

MOTHER

(Breaking from crowd) Oh, I do understand. I would

THE LADDER

understand. What a cruel thing to say about your own mother. But you aren't the same as you used to be. You just aren't honest with me. Why won't you tell me what is really worrying you? Mother will understand.

Hero does not seem to hear this interruption.

BUSINESSMAN

Why don't you go to your mother for the money?

HERO

I don't want to involve her in the business. Besides, it's perfectly straightforward.

BUSINESSMAN

Is it?

HERO

I hold certain properties and securities. I want to raise a loan to carry me on for a few years while I am in the Government.

BUSINESSMAN

So you've decided to accept the job?

HERO

I must. I can't refuse it. After all one does owe one's country something—and if they think a man like myself can be of service, I dare not stand aside. Besides, it's the chance of a lifetime. It could lead

THE LADDER

anywhere. (*Pause*) Mother says I've got to take it.
Will you lend me the money I need?

BUSINESSMAN

No.

HERO

Why not?

BUSINESSMAN

Because you've not been straight with me. You've not
told me the real truth.

HERO

How dare you speak to me like that?

BUSINESSMAN

Don't be silly. You want my money. If I hadn't
learned long ago to be brutally blunt, I'd have no
money to lend. You came here today absolutely
desperate. You've run up debts all over the country.
You've spent all your own money. You've even
spent money entrusted to you that was not your
own.

HERO

It's a lie!

BUSINESSMAN

Is it? You know it's the truth. I can give you the figures
if you like. It's my business to know these things.

THE LADDER

That's why you've got to get something from me—or you're a ruined man. If you take this new job, the truth's bound to come out.

HERO

It's no use talking any more. I'll go.

BUSINESSMAN

Wait a bit. I won't lend you a cent. I don't trust you enough for that. But I'll pay off your debts and give you what you need—on one condition.

HERO

What is it?

BUSINESSMAN

(Pulling a document from his pocket and handing it over)
Sign this. I got it ready for you. You're going to the top. You'll be in a position to know many things the ordinary man doesn't know. *You* haven't the money sense. *You* couldn't use that sort of secret information. I can. Give me the state secrets. I'll give you the cash—all you need, now and in the future.

HERO

It's not honest.

BUSINESSMAN

Isn't it a little late to start worrying about this sort of thing? Besides, it depends which way you look at it. Can you afford honesty now?

THE LADDER

HERO

It's not safe. If I sign this, I'll be in your hands for ever.
It admits everything.

BUSINESSMAN

It's safe enough. Do you think I'm going to tell people of our little arrangement? The truth would destroy me as well as you. Besides, I'm not going to kill the goose who lays the golden eggs.

HERO

(*Reading the document*) It's intolerable. You even decide who shall be my friends.

BUSINESSMAN

Naturally, I'm not going to have you mixing with people who I know could influence you wrongly against me and might spoil everything. I risk as much as you, you know. I'm told there's a Man with a Bag who's been to your home once or twice. A most unreliable man financially. He doesn't understand the value of money. Some of my friends in the City would have had all their best schemes upset if they had listened to his advice. You must promise to see no more of people like that.

HERO

He's a good man.

THE LADDER

BUSINESSMAN

He is a dangerous man.

HERO

He's my friend.

BUSINESSMAN

A man like you is going to have lots of friends. The point is that you can't have his friendship and my money.

HERO

(Long pause. Looks up ladder) How do I know you'll play straight with me?

BUSINESSMAN

For the best of reasons. It will pay me to do so. Here, I'll write you a cheque now. Name the sum. You sign the document. I'll sign the cheque.

Hero hesitates a moment. Then sits down and signs the document, as the businessman signs the cheque. They look at each other, then exchange documents. Hero hurries out. The businessman looks after him as he goes, and as the crowd moves in to conceal the desk he comes forward rubbing his hands.

BUSINESSMAN

(To the Mother) I think I can say it's been a very profitable arrangement, madam. He's had about four million dollars out of me one way and another. And

THE LADDER

of course I gave him that house of his down by the river after he gave me that early information about the tax on capital increase. I and my associates must have made at least a hundred million out of that, one way and another. It's amusing to think he'd never have got up there without me—and of course I could pull him down any time I chose.

MOTHER

You wouldn't do that. You mustn't do it.

BUSINESSMAN

No. But sometimes I like to imagine doing it. In a way I'd enjoy it. He's such a small man, underneath it all.

MARY

(*Thrusting her way through the crowd*) He's not small. He's great. Great, I tell you. I won't have you saying such things about him. Stop talking about him—both of you.

MOTHER

What an outburst. What do you know about my son?

MARY

Everything.

MOTHER

Nonsense.

THE LADDER

MARY

I tell you I know everything about him. I'm probably the only one who does.

MOTHER

Who are you?

MARY

Mary.

MOTHER

Mary who?

MARY

That's a good question. Mary who? I could have been your daughter-in-law—the Mary who married your son. But you prevented it. Remember?

MOTHER

So that's who you are. Of course, I remember. And I'm very glad I did prevent it. It would have been wholly unsuitable. He'd never have got to the top with you.

MARY

You fool. He'd never have got to the top without me.

MOTHER

I stopped it.

MARY

You think you're such a wonderful mother. You think you've done so much for him, don't you? Well,

THE LADDER

what have you done? He came to me that night, after you'd spoken to him. He told me every word you'd said. He wept and so did I. You see I loved him.

MOTHER

You don't understand love.

MARY

Don't I?

MOTHER

Of course not. Anyway I stopped all that.

MARY

You stopped my marrying him. But that was all you stopped.

MOTHER

What do you mean?

MARY

I've been his mistress the last twenty years.

MOTHER

I don't believe a word of it. It's disgusting. He'd have told me. I'd have known. Oh, it simply isn't true.

MARY

It's true enough. I knew when he spoke to me that night that he'd never marry me. You'd frightened him. You see, what you said was true. I am common.

THE LADDER

In a way I am small. I don't want as much from life as you do. All I wanted was him. You wanted him too—and he was more afraid of you than he was of me. So for years I've lived alone, in a house he gave me, waiting for him, ready to give him my heart whenever he chose to come. I've watched you and understood you living your own life again through the life of your son, fulfilling in him the ambitions you'd have followed if you'd been born a man. Controlling, pushing, bullying, hurting, handling, wheedling—all in the name of love. If that's love, I want none of it.

MOTHER

You vulgar little slut.

MARY

(Paying no attention) I like to think that when he's been with me, he's been able to be himself. It's the only place in the world he hasn't had to act or to pretend. The only place he could rest. He told me everything. Because he knew I wanted nothing from him except himself. He's always been a prisoner with you. With me he has been free.

MOTHER

You seem to forget he has a wife.

MARY

Forget? I never forget. Nor do I forget that she was

THE LADDER

the wife you chose for him. You chose her. He didn't. You chose her because you knew she could never take your place in his life. And sometimes I've laughed to myself thinking of her there sharing his glory, producing his children—the children that should have been *mine—mine!* And never suspecting. Never knowing about me.

WIFE

(*Stepping from the crowd*) But I've known about you, Mary. I've known for years.

MARY

How did you know? I can't believe he told you.

WIFE

No. Of course not. He's not got that kind of courage. But do you think you can be married to a man all this time and not realize that you share no part of his real life at all?

MOTHER

Don't say any more to her. I forbid you to speak to this woman.

WIFE

No, Mother. You can't order me around like that any more. I've known about Mary and been hoping to meet her for a long time.

THE LADDER

MARY

Why didn't you talk to him about it?

WIFE

I've often wanted to do it. But I didn't quite know how. You see, I'm a proud person. I felt so deeply my failure as a wife. I was bitter about you for years, Mother. I knew your son never really loved me. I knew he was marrying me to please you. I had a certain amount of money. I had my family connexions. You thought I could be of use to him on his way up. You pushed him into it.

MARY

Then why did you marry?

WIFE

I wanted to get away from home. I thought it would be better to be run by somebody else's mother than by my own. It's been a terrible time really. Because you see although he's never cared for me, I came to care for him very, very deeply. I shared his position as he rose. But it meant less and less to me as it meant more and more to him. I knew his weaknesses of course. I was never able to help him. But I pitied him. And I was terribly jealous of you. You possessed his body. (*To the Mother*) You possessed his soul. I was just his wife.

THE LADDER

MARY

You must have hated both of us.

WIFE

I did for a time. But then I faced the truth. I blamed you, Mother, for our marriage and all the emptiness of it. But I saw that I only married him for my own sake. I was in love with nobody but myself, my own plan, my own future. It was a terribly selfish thing to do. And if I'd been the kind of wife he really needed, I could have given him the sort of understanding, the compassion that could have made everything different. I don't hate you now—either of you. To tell you the truth, I am deeply, deeply sorry for the bitterness I held against you. I hope both of you will forgive me.

MOTHER

I'm not going to listen to any more of this nonsense. There's nothing to forgive. You've made him an excellent wife. It's been an ideal marriage. Everybody knows it. As for this woman, I don't believe one word of her story—and I'd advise you to do the same. She's deliberately trying to upset me—but she won't succeed with me I promise you. (*Mother goes into the crowd*)

MARY

Something has happened to you. Something important. What is it?

THE LADDER

WIFE

I changed. I let God take charge of everything—and I lost my loneliness, my bitterness, my fear. A friend of yours helped me so much.

MARY

A friend of mine?

WIFE

Yes. There he is.

MAN WITH BAG

(*Coming out of the crowd*) Hullo, Mary. Do you remember me?

MARY

How could I ever forget? I've never forgotten. But I don't want to talk to you or have anything to do with you.

MAN WITH BAG

Surely you've got something to say to me, Mary, after all these years?

MARY

No. Nothing. He told me that if he was going to set up a house for me, it was to be on condition that neither he nor I ever saw you again. He said you'd never understand our arrangements nor agree to it. And he was dead right . . . wasn't he?

MAN WITH BAG

(*Going back into the crowd*) Oh, I understand, I understand quite well. I'll be seeing you, Mary. (*He goes*)

THE LADDER

THE STATESMAN

(Coming out of the crowd and beckoning Hero after him)

Now look here. We must come to an absolutely clear understanding. I and my friends have been talking the matter over. We're in a position to offer you the biggest, most powerful post this country can offer. It will mean your place in history is certain. You're young for the job of course. But you have the right background. We know your mother and like her immensely. An amazing woman. And you have a wonderful wife. She's a great partner and everybody loves her. *(Pause)* The one thing we want to be sure about is you.

HERO

Whatever do you mean?

THE STATESMAN

The man at the very top is supremely powerful. He is more than a figurehead. He actually can decide the way the nation goes. It means that he can no longer be his own master. He has to represent the interests of those who put him there. He can't afford any qualms of conscience, any softness of emotion, any views of his own. It's a strong drink, the place of supreme power, and it needs a strong stomach. Naturally, we have an alternative candidate in mind. Do you agree?

HERO

I want to be sure I understand you. You offer me the

THE LADDER

place on condition that when I'm there I do what you and your friends tell me, regardless of any view I hold about how right or how wrong it may be?

THE STATESMAN

I'm encouraged by that. It shows a great realism. Yes.

HERO

Very well, I accept.

THE STATESMAN

My congratulations. No man of your age has got to the top so quickly. And you deserve it.

A maid in her cap and dress enters.

MAID

Excuse me, sir, a gentleman wants to see you.

HERO

A gentleman, what sort of gentleman?

MAID

Seems very nicely spoken, sir. May be some sort of a traveller. He said you would know what his business was. He said you were expecting him. He's carrying a bag with him.

The statesman looks at Hero and shakes his head slowly and decisively.

HERO

Tell him I am not at home.

Statesman and Hero walk off talking. Maid goes, and says when nearly off stage 'I'm sorry, sir, he is not at home'.

THE LADDER

MAN WITH BAG

(*Coming on*) Not at home? Too bad. Well I'll find him one day. I suppose I'd better be on my way.

COCKNEY

Where are you going, guvnor?

MAN WITH BAG

It's a long way yet.

COCKNEY

Cor, sooner you than me, chum, with a bag like that to carry. P'raps you'd try going up the ladder? Maybe get you there quicker, eh?

MAN WITH BAG

No. A ladder's not much use to me where I live.

MOTHER

(*Coming forward*) And where, may I ask, *do* you live?

MAN WITH BAG

If you really want to know, I live at the Cross. And if you live there the only use you have for a ladder is to get down from it. That I will never do.

A great shout arises.

CROWD

He's coming down! He's coming down!

Down the ladder, coming into view, is Hero, in tail coat, top hat, loaded like a Christmas tree with all the honours of

THE LADDER

the world. They cheer him as he descends, and draw to one side so that he is left at the foot of the ladder facing the Man with the Bag.

HERO

Hullo, I've often thought of you.

MAN WITH BAG

I've often thought of you.

HERO

It's a great work you're doing.

MAN WITH BAG

It's a great work *you're* doing.

HERO

I really want to help. But you know what it's like. Committees. Summit conferences. Journeys all over the place. So much is expected of a man in my position. You know, every hour of every day in my diary is full the next six months.

MAN WITH BAG

Yes, I know what it's like.

HERO

I'd really like to help you carry that bag, you know. But you understand it's just one more thing. I can't manage it.

MAN WITH BAG

You could manage it all right.

THE LADDER

HERO

(*Astonished*) What do you mean?

MAN WITH BAG

You could manage to carry it with me if you weren't so loaded down with all that other stuff.

HERO

(*Pointing to all his finery*) You mean all these things?

MAN WITH BAG

Yes. You can't carry both. You'll just have to choose.

Mother, Businessman, Statesman, all seize Hero and hold him firm.

THE STATESMAN

He *has* chosen.

MAN WITH BAG

Well, I must be getting along.

MOTHER

(*To the crowd*) Can't some of you help this man to carry his bag? Some of you look great hulking loafers to me. You've got plenty of time on your hands. Why don't *you* help?

COCKNEY

Well, it's like this, ma'am. It just wouldn't do. We don't want to get involved in anything controversial. Tell you the truth, I'd like to help with the bag. But then

THE LADDER

again, some of your friends might not like it. It'd be as much as my job is worth. We're what you might call bystanders.

MAN WITH BAG

There's no such thing as a bystander today. Things are moving too fast for that. If it's the last thing I say to any of you, I want you to know that a bystander today is a betrayer.

He goes.

COCKNEY

By God, nobody's going to call me a betrayer. I like that fellow. I'm going to help him. (*He goes*)

A few more go, headed by the wife. The group at the foot of the ladder stand rigid holding Hero who is staring out where the Man with the Bag has gone.

MOTHER

Well, it's about time somebody helped him. Haven't I always said so?

MAN IN CROWD

He was always interfering in my business.

WOMAN

Why can't you let him alone? Never did you any harm, did he?

THE LADDER

MAN IN CROWD

Yes, he did.

BUSINESSMAN

So hopelessly impractical. He never got the point that each man has his price.

HERO

Why didn't you buy him then, not me, damn you?

BUSINESSMAN

You were so much cheaper.

MARY

(*Shouting*) It's a lie. You'd never have bought him. Never.

MOTHER

Stop shouting like that. It's vulgar.

MARY

Oh, I wish I could go to him. I ought to have gone long since.

MOTHER

You've done enough harm already. You stay exactly where you are.

HERO

The truth is that he always tried to get in my way. I could never quite forget him. But I got the better of him. He never got me down.

THE LADDER

MOTHER

That's my boy. You were made for the top. *Nothing* could ever get you down.

Re-enter Cockney.

COCKNEY

Hey, mates, will someone give me a hand with a ladder?

MOTHER

I thought you were going to help the man with his bag? Just as I expected, you good-for-nothing loafer. You can't stick honest work for long.

COCKNEY

Now, hold hard, ma'am. Hold hard. True I don't work more than I must. Who does? But you got me wrong this time. Honest you have. I tried to help him with the bag. But he says he's carried it as far as he must. And now he needs the ladder.

HERO

What for? The ladder's mine.

COCKNEY

Funny thing that. He didn't tell me what for, come to think of it. But what he says is good enough for me. Come on, lads. Lend a hand.

Two or three of them come from the crowd, and help the Cockney bring down the ladder and carry it off the stage.

THE LADDER

The Cockney is singing 'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road—Oy!' as they go.

HERO

What *does* he want with my ladder?

THE STATESMAN

I think I can tell you. You see, although he possesses no wealth and no real power, he became a considerable nuisance. We just had to do something about it. He got ideas above his station. Of course he exaggerated all the time. But some people believed him. They began to think of him quite seriously as a possible alternative to you (*Pointing to Hero*)—and me. Think of it. They actually supposed he could run things better than us. Absurd, of course, but there it was. We just couldn't stick it any longer.

MARY

(*Slowly*) What have you done to him?

THE STATESMAN

Oh, nothing. I assure you, nothing. I wouldn't lay a finger on him. I'm not that kind of person. But there's always someone who can arrange these little matters.

BUSINESSMAN

Quite a cheap job, too.

HERO

How much did it cost you?

THE LADDER

BUSINESSMAN

Far less than it cost me to keep you going. Only thirty shillings, thirty pieces of silver.

The crowd, who have been watching intently the direction to which the ladder has been carried while these speeches are given, suddenly crane and stir.

A MAN

He's going up!

A WOMAN

He's going up!

A sound of distant, slow, heavy hammering.

ANOTHER WOMAN

They're nailing him.

A MAN

Yes. By God. They're nailing him.

Softly you hear singing 'The Old Rugged Cross':

On a hill far away stood an old rugged Cross,

The emblem of suffering and shame,

And I love that old Cross, where the dearest and best

For a world of lost sinners was slain.

So I'll cherish the Cross, the old rugged Cross,

Till my trophies at last I lay down;

I will cling to the Cross, the old rugged Cross,

And exchange it some day for a crown.

THE LADDER

The hammering ends half way through the first verse. As the singing proceeds, the crowd decides one by one to go either toward the Cross or in the other direction. As the verse ends, Mary cries:

MARY

Wait, wait for me. It's not too late. I must go to him.

She runs off in the direction of the Man with the Bag. The Mother, the Businessman and the Statesman try to draw Hero away. But as the curtain closes, he moves towards the Cross. 'The Old Rugged Cross' continues to the end:

To that old rugged Cross I will ever be true,
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away
Where His glory for ever I'll share.
So I'll cherish the Cross, the old rugged Cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the Cross, the old rugged Cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.