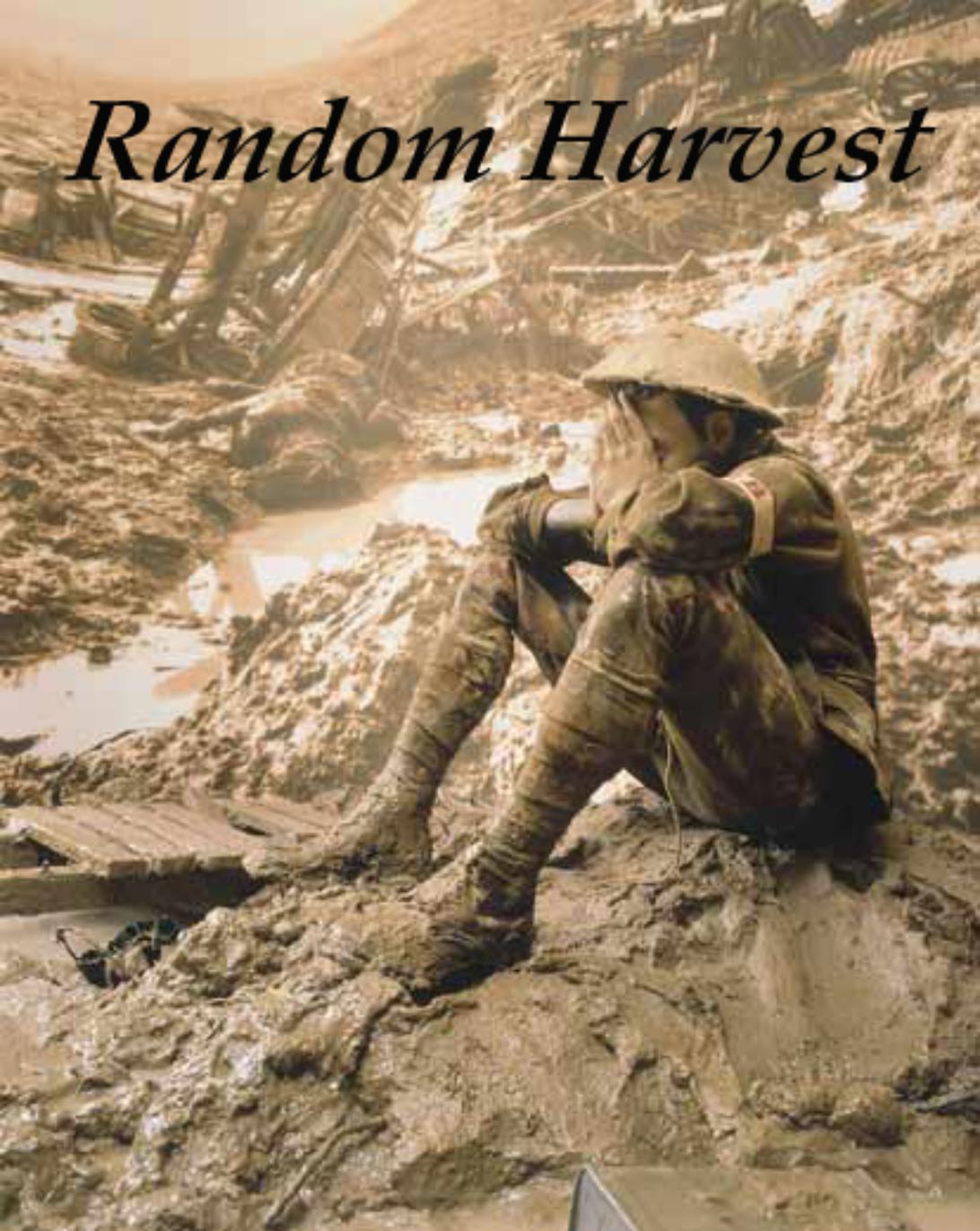


Random Harvest



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Dramatization of James Hilton's novel

by Christian Lanciai (2013)
translated 2018

The characters:

Two doctors
An aged couple
Smith
Paula
'Slugger' Briggs, landlord
two mental wardens

a number of actors by the theatre, among others:

Richard Borley
Mr Margesson, director
Tom Belden
Ponderby

Reverend Blampie
The bartender in Liverpool
Some workers from the street

Charles' family:

Chet
George
Julian
Jill
Kitty
Julia
Bridget
Doctor Astley
Truslove, lawyer
Harrison, secretary
Sheldon, butler and old devoted servant

The action is in England after the First World War and (the fifth act) in 1939.

Act I scene 1. A mental hospital.

First doctor He seems to be the most hopeless of all our cases.

Second doctor It can't be completely hopeless. Somewhere in his brain there must be something left.

1 Yes, but where? We tried everything, but it doesn't help that his mental capacities are all still there. His language and ways indicate the highest possible level of education and social breed, but what does that help when all our inquiries across the country only have led to painful disappointments?

2 Those who lost their own in the war without a trace even as dead are quite a number, Rudyard Kipling for one.

1 You mean that our man 'Smith' falls under the headline 'missed, supposed dead'?

2 With the greatest probability.

1 But someone must have missed him.

2 If he comes from an upper class family, which everything indicates, the risk is that at least the family won't miss him at all.

1 We shall see what today's visit brings.

2 The usual painful test. The float bobs but no catch.

1 Show the poor people in.

(2 opens a door and shows in an elderly couple who have had much to go through.)

2 We must warn you to be prepared that it doesn't have to be your son.

The man We already visited a number of hospitals. We are used to it. The problem is that we don't give up.

The wife So you haven't even found out his real name? Not even his Christian name?

2 That's why we call him Smith. Total amnesia is almost the commonest war damage. But otherwise he is perfectly well.

The man Let's get it done with.

(1 opens another door and lets Smith in. He appears hopeful and expectant, the couple show the same dawning hope, which almost immediately wanes.)

Smith (to the doctor) Don't they recognize me either?

The man (touches him tenderly) I am sorry, my friend, you look like our son, we saw your picture and thought you could be him, but we have to go on searching.

Smith I hope you will find him.

The man That's the hope that keeps us alive. *(takes care of his wife, who is crying, and leaves with her.)*

1 I am sorry, Smith.

Smith Nothing to worry about. I am used to it.

2 No case is hopeless.

Smith Except mine.

1 We shall continue the search and maintain the inquiry. That's all we can do.

Smith Thank you. Then I'll go back. *(leaves with his head lowered.)*

1 I am sorry for him.

2 You are not alone.
1 Come. Let's carry on. (*takes the other around the arm and leaves with him.*)

Scene 2.

Smith Why is everything so quiet? I never felt so much abandoned as now. Where are the personnel? Not a sound. But I hear sounds from the city. Something is going on. It sounds like a party, but the whole city is celebrating. Perhaps they all went there. But only the personnel. They are all gone. Perhaps some new coronation, maybe a crown prince has been born, or maybe – it must be that war that has finished at last. That's why I am here. The war sent me here with a hole in my head and a damaged leg. The hole in the head is fixed, and the leg is working, but my memory is hopelessly gone. I can't remember anything from the moment I woke up on a litter in a field hospital with my body partly blown to shreds. There I was born a wreck and have remained a wreck since then, an irreparable wreck, which must remain on the wharf for the rest of his long and dying decay, like a living corpse among other mummies and zombies on this asylum for lost wrecks that no one will take care of or scrap. But I could leave. The war brought me here, and now it's over. I should be there and celebrate. Look. They left the doors open. It must be the end of the war after four years. Or else they would never leave a mental institution unmanned and forget to close the door.

Get out, Smith, into the world that cast you out, or rather threw you up like a half digested vomit, which couldn't be properly consumed. I couldn't become more of an outsider anyway, so I might as well go the whole way and disappear into a world of only shipwrecks. (*goes out.*)

Scene 3. A pub.

Paula Who is he?
Host He just wobbled in here and seems somewhat confused.
Paula Is he drunk?
Host Not in the least.
Paula Do you think...
Host Yes, I think so.
Paula I will search him. (*closes in on Smith, who tries to look invisible.*) Are you not taking part of the celebrations?
Smith For me it's not much to celebrate.
Paula Haven't you been in the army? You look as if you had.
Smith Yes, I was in the army.
Paula Aren't you happy then that the war is over?
Smith It doesn't matter to me. For me it isn't over.

Paula You come from the hospital, don't you?
Smith Yes.
Paula Have you run away?
Smith No. I just found the gates were open. Obviously the personnel had one out to celebrate. I wanted to see what was outside.
Paula You sound as if you always had been there.
Smith On the contrary. I was rather fresh, transported here and there between other hospitals.
Paula What's your damage?
Smith Grenade shock. I am only one among thousands.
Paula Did you get better?
Smith Somewhat. In the beginning I couldn't do anything. I had no muscle control. I couldn't even talk. Gradually I could start stammering but not more than that. I still have difficulties talking.
Paula Not with me.
Smith Maybe because you make me relax.
Paula What's your name? Do you know?
Smith Smith. I was unidentifiable when I was collected from the battlefield. I still am.
Paula My name is Paula.
Smith Hello, Paula.
Paula Hello, Smith. Do you want to go back to the hospital?
Smith I would rather not. Of all my hospitals, that one was the most bleak and unpleasant. It felt like a final destination, as if my stay would be permanent.
Paula Didn't they try to trace your family by inquiries?
Smith Yes, but without results.
Paula You seem rather lost.
Smith I can't very well get more lost.
Paula I believe you. Come. You need something to eat. *(to the host)* What do you have?
Host Only eggs. Fried or scrambled?
Paula Scrambled will do. *(The host gives a questioning eye.)* He is completely harmless. Only war damage. *(The host indicates the head.)* Not at all. *(Host leaves.)*
Smith He wondered if I was crazy. I am not. My only damage is total amnesia. I remember nothing from before the moment I woke up on a stretcher. I have tried, but it doesn't work. The doctors are decent and have tried all they can to help me but with poor results. I am like a blind groping in the dark, and all I have to grope for is loose ends of fragments of dreams. I can recognize a scent and get a feeling that something seems familiar but without being able to identify it. I must constantly practice my mind with associations.
Paula How long have you been like this?
Smith It's a year since I woke up in a hospital, in November 1917.
Paula How many hospitals?

Smith Uncountable. Some half dozen. I would only like to forget them

Paula You are not going back to the hospital. You don't belong there.

Smith I don't belong anywhere.

Paula Still you seem to have improved since you were fished out from the maelstrom of the war. It's probably just a question of time.

Smith Do you think so?

Paula If you got better so far you will continue getting better. Probably it will also get faster. Suddenly one day it will all come back to you.

Smith If only I could do without the medicines and feeling imprisoned.

Paula I think so too. What you need is to feel safe and comfortable.

Smith I think so too.

Paula The hospital was rather full, wasn't it?

Smith It was crowded. All hospitals are.

Paula They will hardly notice if someone is missing.

Smith On the contrary. At 6 o'clock all patients are checked. If anyone then is missing the alarm goes on. So I think I should go back.

Paula It's a madhouse, Smithy. You are no madman.

Smith I know. But mentally I am totally handicapped.

Paula Is that what they say you are?

Smith No, but all the others are, probably locked up for life everyone of them.
(*The host brings the eggs.*)

Host Sorry about the delay. The stove wouldn't get started.

Paula It's all right. Eat now, Smithy, and get power and courage. What you need is to feel well.

Smith There is nothing wrong about my health. It's only the other thing missing.

Paula That's what you must regain, for once it was there.

Smith Can you help me?

Paula I wish to, because I believe in you. You are no ordinary patient. You have been somebody once. I am curious about what might lie there buried alive.

Smith Me too.

Paula It could become an interesting quest of discovery.

Smith Yes.

Host You had better bring your guest home, Paula. He looks a bit tired.

Paula Yes, he needs rest. He needs to get away from where he has been.

Smith (to the host) I have been in the war. That's all I know about myself.

Host I see.

Paula You won't say anything, Stanley?

Host I promise. Keep me informed.

Paula Trust me. Come, Smithy. Time to get home.

Smith I think so too. I have been away too long. (*Paula takes him out.*)

Host I hope she can sort him out. Pity for a man to get into the wrong place.
(*starts cleaning up*)

Scene 4. A simple provisional room.
Enter Paula with a staggering 'Smith'.

Smith You are very good to me.
Paula Nonsense. The least we can do is to help a wounded soldier.
Smith You don't know how damaged I am.
Paula You are so damaged that you can't recognize yourself.
Smith That's what I mean. I don't know myself.
Paula (*places him in a chair*) You are in a fever. You are even ill.
Smith That's not so strange. I haven't exerted me so much in a year. All others have exerted themselves for me instead.
Paula Where have you been?
Smith Sennelager. Hannover. Switzerland. Manchester. Birmingham. Hastings. I thought Melbury would be my final destination.
Paula It will if you go back there.
Smith Do I have any choice?
Paula Try to learn to manage by yourself.
Smith How, when I don't even know who I am?
Paula One step at a time. Your first step to success was to step out of that hospital. Honestly speaking I think they were glad to get rid of you and one patient less.
Smith I was more or less treated like a parcel.
Paula There you are.
Smith But how can *you* help me?
Paula See to it in the first place that you are not brought back. Then we'll see. First of all we must get you well.
Smith It will not be easy.
Paula I am used to challenges.
Smith How? What do you do?
Paula I perform.
Smith As what?
Paula Cabaret artist. I wanted to become an actress, but everyone is in for that. Touring with a cabaret could be a step on the way.
Smith Are you known?
Paula Locally.
Smith Imagine! I ended up in the hands of a celebrity!
Paula Perhaps you are more famous yourself without knowing it.
Smith I hardly think so. I am too mediocre.
Paula We all are, and that's what we want to get away from. Perhaps you were born so and therefore want to get away from that. We all want to be something better than we are.
Smith That's not so strange, since we are all basically incorrigible.

Paula I never thought of that. When you get better you shall see me on stage. Perhaps you could start your new career as some kind of a stand in.

Smith I am afraid I would only make a fool of myself. I am shy by nature, and my war damage has aggravated my fear of people. As soon as my company gets too overwhelming I start stuttering, and everything only gets worse until I withdraw. Solitude is the only cure, and it's only temporary. As a human being you will never be without other human beings.

Paula You never stuttered in my presence.

Smith Somehow you inspire confidence. That's why. Your presence gives me a comfort I never felt before.

Paula That proves we are on the right way. I am sure we'll make a real person of you, Smithy. Now you had better go to sleep.

Smith It was long since I slept well.

Paula Then it's about time.

Smith Thanks for your existence, Paula. *(falls asleep in the chair, all tired out)*

Paula Something tells me, that I should be even more grateful for your coming to me. *(lifts him carefully from the chair, puts him to bed and covers him with a quilt without thinking of undressing him.)*

Act II scene 1. The pub.

Host How is your new bloke?

Paula He is asleep.

Host I hope he will not make trouble. After all, he escaped from an asylum.

Paula He is more harmless than a child. He can never make trouble since he always seems to have withdrawn from people.

Host That's the most difficult for a human being to do.

Paula That's why he was dragged out from a grenade shock trench. If there was somewhere he did not fit in, it was the war.

Host That's how it was for all who went down in it. But how is he physically? Can you manage him?

Paula The worst thing is that he is ill. He needs a doctor.

Host The flu that struck us after the war is worse than the war. Is that what he has got?

Paula He has a high fever. That's why the theatre has closed, so we are all out of work. People are ill everywhere.

Host Even doctors die in the epidemic. One of them died by his wheel on the way from here.

Paula That's why he never came back. He wanted to get Smithy back to the hospital.

Host He just wouldn't have dared. Your friend just managed to get out from there. You can always cure some fever.

Paula Not if you die in it.

Host Is it that bad?

Paula I think he can make it. The body is strong, but the soul is the weaker. That's what he is missing. He can't locate it.

Host In other words, he could spend the rest of his life searching for it.

Paula Still he is only a gentleman of best quality and education. His background should be interesting.

Host You shall have to help him find it.

Paula That's exactly what I intend to do.

Host How long will the theatre stay closed?

Paula Until the worst of the epidemic is over. It could take months.

Host Then you have plenty of time.

Paula Yes. But we must also live.

Host You needn't pay for the room.

Paula Thanks, Briggs. As a soldier he must get some form of compensation now that the war is over.

Host If he can get himself identified.

Paula That's the catch.

Host If he can't we'll have to find out something. Couldn't he act in the theatre?

Paula I also thought of it.

Host Meanwhile he can manage my garden, since Tom has quit.

Paula That would be the ideal occupation and therapy for him, herbs, flowers and trees instead of people.

Host I thought the same.

Paula Thanks, Briggs. You are a good fellow.

Host Who wouldn't be, (*winks*) when it comes to cheating the authorities on a sacrificed patient.

Paula Thanks, Briggs. (*leaves*)

Host He will do. A gentleman who survives the war will probably also survive everything else. (*pours himself a beer.*)

Scene 2. The room.

Paula (*relieves Smith of a thermometer and reads it*) Congratulations, Smithy! You are well and out of fever! You have settled with the influenza that everyone is dying of.

Smith It is not fair.

Paula What is unfair?

Smith I really should be dead.

Paula You shouldn't think so. Consider instead that you fooled everyone who wanted to kill you. You have outwitted death. That's not to be ashamed of.

Smith But so many have died for nothing, while I have survived myself and must live on like a restless shadow without soul and identity.

Paula I should have been dead myself. The house I lived in was bombed. Those who slept in the room next to mine were killed. First I thought it was unfair for them to be sacrificed while I made it, but it was nobody's fault.

Smith Except of the war, man's worst invention, which makes her a monster while no animals can be so premeditatedly cruel and inhuman as she.

Paula From where did you get that?

Smith I don't know.

Paula It sounds familiar, as if I read it somewhere. You must have done that too.

Smith Maybe.

Paula Follow that thought, and we might find new leads.

Smith As fragments of dreams without intelligible meaning.

Paula Don't be despondent. I have some good news, by the way. The government owes you money. All soldiers will have gratifications. Soon you will be able to pay for everything and become self-sufficient.

Smith Of course you gradually want to get rid of me. The last thing I want is to become a burden to you.

Paula That's the last thing you could be. I will tell you a secret. I don't have to pay for this room. So when you get your demobilization gratification you can pay whatever you please.

Smith And how can I get it without identifying myself?

Paula You have the provisional identification of the hospital.

Smith That's just it. I have to first be officially discharged from the hospital, and that will be difficult if my true identity is missing.

Paula You mustn't worry. That's the last thing you should do. It will be arranged somehow.

Smith How? I can't hide here like an escaped convict and be a bother to you and our host for any length of time. It doesn't feel right.

Paula The only problem with you is that you are a gentleman. You are too noble and sensitive. I already talked with Slugger about you.

Smith Slugger?

Paula Our host, Briggs. He was a professional boxer before the war, which fame he still lives on today, and that's why he is locally popular. Everybody knows him hereabouts, and he often gave a party for the whole theatre when we had something to celebrate. He is all for keeping you away from the authorities. And he wants to give you a job.

Smith A job?

Paula As a gardener for his garden here outside. You can't imagine how beautiful it is in summer.

Smith You couldn't have given me something more meaningful to do.

Paula I knew it! Then it's settled!

Smith Until further. A temporary respite in expectation of that my life will clear up and return.

Paula So you don't have to think of hiding any longer. You have obtained an official position.
Smith I feel very honoured.
Paula Another step forward and a push ahead. That's what you need.
Smith You know me.
Paula Perhaps I am starting to.
Smith I wish I could do it myself.
Paula You will.
Smith You are the only one who believes in me.
Paula The main thing is that somebody does. Then you have a full justification of existence.
Smith You give me everything except my lost life.
Paula It will come, Smithy, it will come.

Scene 3. The pub.
Two male nurses by the counter.

Briggs You mustn't come here and try any tricks!
1 We are only doing our duty.
Briggs Are you looking for trouble?
2 Take it easy, governor! We come here in perfectly honest and peaceful intentions to in good order take care of a patient who belongs to the hospital.
Briggs So you call it peaceful an honest? It's a bloody excuse to ruin people's lives! Your duty is to deprive people of their freedom!
1 He is marked paranoid and suffers from the delusion of feeling persecuted and could be dangerous if his subconscious was influenced badly.
Briggs Of course he feels persecuted if people like you persecute him! Your only business here is to beat it. People like you are not welcome in a human pub.
1 We only wanted to relieve you of a painful burden and possible danger...
Briggs Now you are leaving! (*leaves the bar, rolls up his shirt sleeves and approaches them threateningly.*)
2 Come, Gilbert. We'll try again some other time.
1 (*to Briggs*) Do you want us to send the police instead?
Briggs Get out! Now! By the way, he doesn't live here any longer.
1 Where does he live then?
Briggs How could I know? He just left.
1 To where?
Briggs That's for you to find out. You have his hospital identity, which you forced on him. You gave him the name of Smith. It's just for you to inquire for your escaped Mr Smith. Good luck! (*throws them out*)
You can come out now, Paula.
Paula (coming out) I had better warn Smithy, since he can't live here any longer.

Briggs If I know these mental caretaker vultures and parasites correctly, they will never dare to show themselves here any more. But they could send the police.

Paula Do you think they will?

Briggs No. But you are right. Your bloke should have a safer place.

Paula The main thing is that he may feel secure, which he never did here in spite of everything you did for him.

Briggs He did more for me. He made the garden explode in glory.

Paula I will take him with me to Selchester.

Briggs Is that where you are performing now?

Paula Yes. Thus he may at last get familiar with our theatre. There is after all no better possibility for anyone to get lost and hide than in a theatre.

Briggs Especially if you are without identity.

Paula Exactly. In the theatre you can always find a new role to play.

Briggs Good luck! (*She leaves.*)

Act III scene 1. The theatre company's Saturday dinner at Selchester.

The dinner is reaching its climax, Smith and Paula are among the rowdy company, when Borley rises and clinks his glass.

Borley May I get your attention to the fact that now is the moment of my momentum, as we are arrived at the solemn moment of my welcome speech to our guests in combination with my usual Saturday dinner speech to point out the importance of our latest successes.

Margesson Successes, you blufftard? Our plays have never been worse, and they get worse all the time!

Borley What does that matter as long as the audience laugh and pay? The important thing as that they don't boo and whistle and demand their money back, which I must point out to the imperishable credit of our company, that that has never happened.

Belden Something at least. Our greatest success is that we are still existing and never have gone bankrupt.

Borley Don't keep interrupting now, but let me speak, who has something important to say.

Margesson You affected dotard, all you can do as a speaker is to bore us to death, and you always did. That's the only thing you are good at.

Borley Do you mean to say that I am not always outstanding on stage, what?

Belden Keep belching, chatterbox! Say something funny!

Borley I want to focus your attention on the fact, that we have another guest than the ordinary ones here with us tonight, whom Paula so successfully has contributed to our famously joyous society with, namely our mysterious friend Smith, who so far hasn't wished to appear as anything else than the lowest of profiles. (*All applaud.*)

Several Speech! Speech!

Paula (to Smith) You don't have to.

Smith I will for once. (*rises*) My friends, I can't deny that I have enjoyed myself tremendously ever since Paula dragged me down to your level. (*laughter*) Your plays are not perfect, but, as Mr Borley very aptly pointed out, what does that matter as long as the audience pay and laugh? That they are not perfect has the advantage that they can be improved, and it has been my pleasure to be able to do so. (*acclaim*)

Belden Who are you really?

Smith Never mind, for I don't know myself.

Borley Mr Smith turned up as a dark horse and has insistently kept in the dark all since, while he at the same time proved to be exactly what we missed in our rowdy gang, which is a gentleman. Thereby he filled up the only black hole among our many talents.

Belden All we know about you is that you have been ill and survived the war with some difficulty. From what black hole did Paula dig you out, if it wasn't directly from the grave of the unknown soldier?

Paula (rising) I didn't have to dig him out. He came all by himself. Suddenly he just stood there at the service of anyone who wished to use him. He has proved to know anything, gardening, book-keeping, carpentry, coulisse-painting, script-writing and everything else, and in a perfectly natural and modest way he thus became our factotum. Still he is just Smith and happy with that. Let's also be happy with that.

Belden But what is concealed under the intriguing and magical name of Smith?

Smith (rising again) At least no false modesty. I am shy by nature with solitude for my best friend. To live as a human being feels like a humiliation, since I actually should be dead – that the war spared me and threw me up like an invalid maybe for life I view as a mortal infernal irony. I am satisfied with being nothing, for I am nothing and desire definitely not to be anything. So whatever you do, please never ask me to go on stage.

Belden I just came across a play with a part that would fit you perfectly.

Margesson (rising) Dear factotum, don't bother about all these hopeless cases of absurd miscarriages. They are all lost and simple clowns who never could anything but make fools of themselves by dissembling. No one of us could ever be honest or even himself. That's why you fit in so well, for with your lack of identity you are the only true and honest person of us all. I welcome you and look forward to continue abusing all the others as long as you can endure staying on.

Smith (now seated) Thanks for the honour. I am a good listener.

Paula So what will be our next smiling course of triumph? What roaring sixpenny audience will we next have at our feet?

Borley (rising again) I was just coming to that. Ladies and gentlemen, my honoured colleagues and co-workers, I have the considerable satisfaction and pleasure to announce, that our next successful triumph will break loose – in Rochby!

Belden Rochby?

Margesson At least it's better than Bletchley.

Lanvin Will you never find some real town to lay at your feet, like Bridgenorth or Maidenhead?

Borley That will come after Rochby. Bring up the matter afterwards. Rochby is settled.

Margesson At least it's almost as important as Selchester.

Borley No evil spoken of any audience anywhere! The Selchester audience has always remained faithful to us.

Margesson It's so simple that it doesn't realize that we give the same play every time only in different costumes.

Belden Disguise is only what theatre is all about.

Paula Don't mind them, Smithy. They are just fooling around and never serious.

Smith That's what's so enjoyable. I love them.

Paula (*gives him a hug. The dinner continues.*)

Scene 2. A cheap room in a pension.

Ponderby all washed up on the sofa, as Smith enters.

Ponderby My dear friend, you come like a rescuing angel.

Smith But I haven't done anything.

Ponderby That's no excuse. You have to help me.

Smith Have you been drinking again?

Ponderby And what's worse – I tried to cure myself.

Smith Don't tell me you took a lot of aspirins and other bracing drugs.

Ponderby That's just what I did. I am totally finished.

Smith But you must on stage tonight!

Ponderby That's just it. That's the very problem and the knife in the back. I can't perform.

Smith But you must! Only you can play that part!

Ponderby You have also been a soldier. You also look good. You must go over the top, I mean on stage.

Smith But I can't!

Ponderby Yes, you can. You are sober. Both my legs are wobbly. I can't get anything straight or right.

Smith You demand the impossible!

Ponderby That's why I have to do it. You must set yourself to it. No one else can do it.

Smith But my dear Ponderby, I am no actor. I am nothing. I can't act. I can do anything except that!

Ponderby You simply must. You have no choice, lad. The unwritten law of the stage. If one turns out, another must turn in. The only impossibility is not to let the show go on. One for all and all for one. It's called solidarity. You can't just let us down. We all love you.

Smith But I could never make it. I would shake my knees off.

Ponderby I wouldn't have asked you if it weren't a critical emergency. You see my case. I am finished. I can't even get up from the sofa, let alone speak clearly.

Smith But you know how nervous I get in unexpected company!

Ponderby But it's a mere nothing, my boy! It's the smallest part in the play, less than a subsidiary part! All you need to do is to cry the two retorts.

Smith I would never make it. I would pee in my pants or do something worse.

Ponderby Like what?

Smith You never know beforehand.

Ponderby If you pee in your pants no one will notice. Take it easy, old boy. Relax. You can't back out when I ask you.

Smith But I never acted on stage before!

Ponderby Then it's about time. Your debut at last! Two small repartees! Then it's all over, and you won't have to act ever again, unless you want to.

Smith But what will our director say?

Ponderby These things happen all the time. He is used to it. You always have to improvise. That's what keeps the theatre alive. – Don't be afraid, my boy. It's only for tonight. I promise to never do it again.

Smith Drink?

Ponderby No, try a cure. Drinking is part of the profession, it's almost a necessity for keeping your nerves from breaking, but I will never again try to sober up by artificial means. Then it's even better to drink water.

Smith Maybe that's what you should have done instead.

Ponderby Yes, instead I threw water from both ends. It was not very funny. One is enough.

Smith (sighs) Only for tonight, then.

Ponderby I knew it! My boy, you save my life! (*embraces and kisses him*) Go now for your great quest, and make the entrance of your life! Hamlet's ghost is with you.

Smith If only that was the only ghost... (*hurries out*)

Ponderby It's only the usual ramp fever. We never get rid of it. It's in the profession, like liquor. Where is my whisky now? I am sure I had one bottle left in reserve for security, which I always have. Without my daily whisky I would have been dead long ago. (*reaches for a bottle somewhere and falls out of the sofa*) Damn it! Now I must even get up. This doesn't work any more. I am saved for this time, but next time I will be fired. An actor must at least be able to act sober even if he never is. (*finds his bottle, drinks, lies back on the sofa again, relaxes and enjoys.*) Aaaaah! (*with relish. Appears to go back to sleep, until Smith re-enters. Ponderby immediately wakes up.*) Already? How did it go?

Smith Disaster! I must run for my life!

Ponderby What happened?

Smith I became nervous.

Ponderby I always do. That's why I always make success.

Smith I made the contrary.

Ponderby What did you do? Cry or forget the wrong lines?

Smith I started stuttering.

Ponderby So you entered on stage as a helpless stammerer? In my heroic part? But that is hilarious!

Smith That wasn't all. When I pulled the door handle to open the door to get out it came loose and rolled across the entire stage!

Ponderby That sounds marvellous. Better and better. What did the audience say?

Smith They all laughed at me. I am afraid they roared of laughter.

Ponderby And for that you want to run away? My boy, I know the symptoms. You just made an astounding success. It's nothing to run away from. On the contrary. You must welcome your fortuitous destiny!

Smith What fortuitous destiny? I am marked for life as an invalid!

Ponderby And then you stammer on stage in a tragic-comical hero part! It's just too wonderful. You must carry on.

Smith As an actor? Never in my life!

Ponderby You have still no detachment to acting, but you will get it. Instead of acting a part you acted yourself. That's the last thing you must do, but it will pass. You need not do it any more time. Next time you will disappear in another part than yourself, which will make it easier. Drink whisky, and you will get what I mean.

Smith I am sorry, Ponderby, but I can't make it. I never thought I would relapse into stammering again. (*runs away*)

Ponderby Poor boy! He will be back. Paula will find him and restore him to our only real and sound reality of dreams. (*drinks and returns to his comfortable position in the sofa.*)

Scene 3. The theatre, behind the wings.

Paula I promise, I will find him.

Margesson We can't lose him now. He has made himself indispensable, especially after his sensational debut tonight.

Belder We never had an audience more amused.

Margesson It's not just the profits. It's our reputation and quality.

Belder We can't do without him. We and the audience need him.

Paula I understand. We must find him. I will do anything to find him.

Margesson Good luck. We trust you. (*Paula hurries out.*)

Belder Do you think she will succeed?

Margesson It would be odd if she didn't. She succeeds with anything.

Belder What if they marry? Is the theatre dependent on them?

Margesson A theatre depends on her actors whoever they are but on no one else.

Belder Paula will never leave us, but our quiet friend of unexpected talents could apparently provide any surprise.

Margesson He took the house by storm. Even if we have lost him we must keep that in the play from now on.

Belder Absolutely. But no one could make it more convincing.

Margesson If he returns we have made our fortune.

Belder It all depends on Paula.

Margesson And she never gives up.

Scene 4.

Smith I am sorry, Paula, but I can't risk getting back on stage, not after my horrible performance, when everything went wrong. It feels as if everything went wrong for me all my life. The amnesia after having been sacrificed in the war without any relative ever turning up, chased by male nurses and policemen who want to lock me up as socially dangerous because of my shyness, and when I at last find a home and communion in your theatre, this happens. I will never get rid of my total outsidership.

Paula But you have me.

Smith Do I?

Paula I could never do without you. That's why I followed you and traced you wherever you escaped and tried to hide away. But you can't hide away from love, if you are loved.

Smith Do you mean...?

Paula Yes, I mean it.

Smith A social enemy like me, who only wants to avoid people and hide to them, who loves solitude and hates himself, hopelessly antisocial, a living dead in a world of phantoms and damaged for life by war, a grenade shock victim who could never get used to a grenade shocked world, which is wounded and traumatised for good, while I can only observe how it is more deeply and incurably wounded than myself, who is the worst invalid case of all, without memory, without identity...

Paula That's why, Smithy. You just defined the personality that I could only love.

Smith A fresh wind like you, an ideal companion, a social genius, a happy ray of light in our midst for everyone who knows you, how could you feel anything for such a one as me?

Paula I just do it.

Smith And what shall we do about it? I can't show myself at the theatre any more, and it's your theatre.

Paula How about getting married? Would that make things easier?

Smith Are you serious?

Paula If you want.

Smith You enter like a warming sunrise into the dark terrible night of permanent loss which is my life and turns into more than a leading star, a curator, almost like a mother with the same effect as if I never had any...

Paula So you don't say no, Smithy?

Smith How could I ever say no to you?

Paula That's settled then, Smithy. All problems are solved. We couldn't have done it better.

Smith But what shall we live on, if you also leave the theatre?

Paula You have many strings to your lyre. You improved our plays. You can write. You could make an author.

Smith It was always in my line.

Paula There you are. We have our savings. Gradually we could find some more stable ground to build on. Only the beginning is difficult. It's the first drop that must be squeezed forth to make the ice break out in a great thaw.

Smith With you by my side I could do anything.

Paula You already did. You won me.

Smith Partners, then?

Paula For life.

Smith You saved my life.

Paula No, Smithy, we found our life both together.

Smith (embraces her) Then all we have to do is never to lose it. Let it always continue like this. Forget my memory. I never had it. I was born when you were at the place where I happened to wander when I walked out on the hospital. I have no other life and never had any and don't want any. We found our world. Let us never let it go.

Paula Agreed! *(They embrace again and walk out like pals.)*

Act IV scene 1. At the vicar's in London.

Blampie I am sure it's nothing to worry about.

Paula It's the first time I let him go out on his own.

Blampie He will be back in a few days.

Paula But it's impossible not to worry about him.

Blampie When he comes to Liverpool and meets his publisher you are all set. Then your life has landed safely on a right track that could only lead on to even safer grounds.

Paula But he should have been back already.

Blampie The publisher has maybe made him interested in another project still. They usually do.

Paula If he doesn't come tomorrow we must contact the publisher to hear if anything has happened.

Blampie If you want to, I could call him at once.

Paula It would comfort me, if it were possible.

Blampie No sooner said than done. *(lifts his telephone and calls)* Max? This is Blampie from London. I sent the young author Smith to you. His young wife is worried about him. Has he arrived? *(listens. Grows pale. Listens again. Somewhat dampered:)* Thank you, Max. Let me hear from you at once if he turns up. *(hangs up.)*

Max expected him yesterday, but he never turned up. I am afraid something could have happened.

Paula I knew it. I felt it. He is lost.

Blampie We shall of course do anything we can to find him.

Paula It will not be easy to find a certain Smith with an unknown Christian name somewhere between London and Liverpool.

Blampie But there is only one. He must be located.

Paula Of course, I will look for him until I find him, even if it will take my whole life.

Blampie I will help you with all I can.

Paula Such a relationship can't be interrupted. It has to be continued.

Scene 2. A pub in Liverpool. Bad weather.

Some upset people from the street carry in Smith completely smeared with dirt, water and blood.

Bartender Easy now! He might have a concussion. Was he driven over?

1 No, he just stumbled and fell in the street, but he has an awful bump.

2 Who doesn't slip in this terrible weather? The streets are like soap!

Bartender (bathes Smith's front) He doesn't seem hurt at all apart from that bump. He was lucky.

2 But he got a real knock on his head.

1 Watch out! He wakes up!

Smith (groggy, like still in a dream) I'll never forgive that general – to send us all out to a certain death and on purpose!

1 It's all right, Sir. You are alive.

Smith (looking around) Where am I?

Bartender In a pub in Liverpool.

Smith What am I doing here?

Bartender Begging your pardon, Sir, but only you could possibly know anything about that.

Smith Am I no longer in the war?

Bartender The war was finished more than a year ago.

Smith (more and more concerned) What day is it today?

Bartender December 27th 1919. You look as if you came directly from the war.

Smith I do. The last time I was awake I was in a trench close to the German lines.

1 I can assure you, Sir, that you were awake when you slipped in the street.

Smith Imagine, I have no memory of that.

Bartender What is the last thing you remember?

Smith A trench in the war 1917. I grenade came exploding and finished me, I thought. Apparently I still went on living after that.

2 Do you know who you are, Sir?

Smith Of course I know who I am. My name is Charles Rainier. But what on earth am I doing in Liverpool?

1 Are you quite all right in your head, Sir?

Smith Absolutely. I must have stumbled in the street. But how did I manage for two years?

2 That's your problem, Sir.

Smith I must contact my family. Don't worry. I am quite normal. All I need is to pull myself together and find my bearings. I seem to have a bump in the temple. A mere nothing. I thought I would be more severely wounded than that. Let me just get sorted out a bit, and then I'll be fit enough to go home. I also seem to have money enough.

Bartender Have a bit of this, Sir. It will restore order in your brains.

Smith Thanks. *(takes the whisky at once)* That did it. What brand?

Bartender Glenfiddich.

Smith It will do. *(holds out the glass. The bartender refills.)*

Bartender My pleasure, Sir. *(fills it up. To the others:)* He'll manage. No danger. You can all go home. He just needs to dry a little. *(The others drop off.)*

Anything else, Sir?

Smith Not for the moment, thank you. I just need to collect my thoughts a bit. *(bartender leaves)*

How is this possible? The general sent us out to reconnoitre and spy out the enemy in order to sacrifice us for nothing, and there I was with my leg in shreds and couldn't move while the grenades kept raining and exploding all around us. And next I wake up in a pub in Liverpool! Obviously after having hit the street in a somersault! It's just as absurd as Rip van Winkle! And how did I manage during these two years, since evidently I must have survived? Perhaps I lay unconscious in a hospital for some year while they patched me up, but then? *(tries hard to remember)* It's no use. I can't understand anything. I had better go home. They must have wondered where I went, as much as I wonder that myself. *(gets up and leaves. The bartender returns too late to wish him good luck.)*

Scene 3. The Stourton family at breakfast.

Julia How do we know that he is not an impostor? And why does he show up after two years exactly as daddy is going to die?

Chet He has been ill, Julia. He disappeared in the war and has been lost for two years. If he suddenly shows up again, that's nothing to get sore about.

George Still it's remarkable that he turns up as father lies dying.

Julian Does anyone know anything about the will?

Chet He is good for one and a half million. That's all we know. Assumedly he will share it equally between the six of us.

Julian Six?

Chet Yes, father wrote Charles off when he never was reported more than missed and never came back.

Jill I saw recently in the paper that Charles was still in Germany.

George Probably just a rumour. And now he is here.

Julia He will certainly have some matters to explain, if he can.

Chet Here he is. (*rising*) Welcome, Charles! What a surprise! (*embraces him overwhelmingly, thumping his back*)

Charles (very proper) That's enough, Chet. You are the same. You must know that I am at least as surprised as you by the situation.

Kitty Tell us, uncle!

Charles There is unfortunately not much to tell. You know that I went missing in the war. After lying in the trenches with a shattered leg and grenades exploding all around me I remember nothing at all until I wake up beaten up wet and dirty in a pub in Liverpool of all places. According to those who saved me I had no more than slipped in the street and had a bump on my head. I swear to you, that I thought I was still in the trenches of Flanders.

George But how come that you happen to return exactly as father lies dying? Pardon an impertinent question, but that is what we all wonder most of all.

Charles The chance of destiny. There is no explanation. I woke up to consciousness three days ago. You should have seen me. I just couldn't show up to my family without getting new clothes. I could hardly come here any earlier. About the condition of father I knew nothing until I came here. Is it at all possible to see him?

Astley As his doctor I must strongly advise against it.

Truslove As his lawyer I must insist that he may see his son before he dies.

Astley The shock could kill him!

Truslove Or the contrary, inspire him with new life.

Astley A new life by the shock sending him directly to eternity.

Truslove He has given up Charles as dead. It would be wrong to let him die in that false conviction.

George Are you thinking of the will?

Truslove I am trying to think of what is right as the family solicitor.

Chet What do you think, Charles?

Charles I only want to do what is best, and I think the best thing would be for me to go away for the time being. But it is important that you understand that I am not ill at all. You don't have to be afraid of me or treat me with some special consideration. In spite of the total amnesia during more than two years all my functions are perfectly normal, and all that I experienced before the grenade shock is intact in my consciousness. Just act as if nothing else has happened than that I have been away for a two years' vacation. The last thing I wish is to complicate the situation in face of father's departure.

Bridget Well spoken, Charles. What would you most like to do?

Charles Resume my interrupted studies at Cambridge.

George That sounds very reasonable. I think we all appreciate that. You were made for studies as the bright boy in the family, and with the right kind of studies that might be the best way for you to be able to help the family, if necessary.

Julia We will call on you when we need you.

Charles Thanks. Then I'll retire. Excuse me. (*leaves the table*)

Jill What do you think?

Chet He is perfectly honest. He remembers nothing.

Julian What do you think he might have done during these two years? Obviously he has managed to survive.

Julia That will be his problem. We have enough of our own.

Kitty I think it's intriguing.

Chet So it is, Kitty. We have a family secret which no one knows anything about and least of all the bearer of it.

Scene 4. The pub in Liverpool.

The same people as in scene 2 carry in Blampie. Sunny weather.

Bartender What happened?

1 He just collapsed in the middle of the street.

2 I am afraid he had a heart failure.

1 But he is still alive.

Bartender How is it, reverend?

Blampie I am afraid I've had it.

Bartender Can you answer questions? Who are you, and where do you belong?

Blampie In London. I am vicar at St. Clement's in Vale Street.

Bartender (to the others) At least he knows who he is. (*to Blampie*) What are you then doing here?

Blampie I am looking for a missing person.

Bartender Who?

Blampie Smith.

Bartender (to the others) Last time we carried someone in here he had slipped in the street and hit his head so that he thought he was still in the war. He woke up and was angry with the general who had sacrificed him at the front.

Blampie (attentive) Who was it?

Bartender He knew that well enough, but he remembered nothing of the last two years.

Blampie My God! (*dies*)

1 Is he alive?

Bartender (listens to his heart) I am afraid he has turned in. Lucky it was that he had time to say who he was. Then it's just to contact the police.

2 Poor fellow! Do you think he might have been looking for the war veteran?

Bartender That would be an incredible coincidence in that case. (*returns to his job, takes up the telephone*)

1 So you'll handle the rest?

Bartender Absolutely. (*the others leave.*) Is it the police? We have a casualty here. A priest from London.

Act V scene 1. A train compartment, 19 years later.

A young man is there casually studying a paper when Charles enters.

Charles May I share your compartment?

Harrison By all means!

Charles I see that you study the latest scandal news from the conference in Munich.

Harrison Do you think there will be a war?

Charles Just as no one wanted the last one, no one desires the new one, but it will come anyway. The Munich sacrifice of Czechoslovakia was just a pathetically anxious and cowardly postponement.

Harrison You must have been in the last war.

Charles Too much.

Harrison But you seem to have come out of it alive.

Charles No, I came out of it more than seriously wounded.

Harrison But you seem to have recovered.

Charles From the war, yes, from the damages, no.

Harrison So you are one of those extremely difficult grenade shock cases that defied treatment.

Charles If it only had been for the grenades... It was the personal shocks that defied treatment, that I still haven't recovered from.

Harrison (questioning) Personal shocks?

Charles I can give you an example. A staff officer had the idea, that if the Germans obtained false information by some trusted spy of a major attack, it would have greater chances of success. The thing was to convince the Germans. For that object patrols were sent out during several weeks into no man's land, which the Germans had been informed of by the faked spy. They became cannon fodder. One of these patrols were led by a young fresh officer who thought he was leading his men to a romantic heroic victory. It turned out the opposite. The few survivors were obliged to crawl down into a grenade hole but so close to the enemy trenches that he could apprehend the conversation of the Germans, since he knew German. By then he got the whole picture, how they had been sacrificed for a strategic experiment. That exacerbated the effect of his shock of the war trauma, as he lay half drenched in the mud, dizzy from the pains of his crushed leg and sick of having to watch the even worse sufferings of his comrades. Before dawn there was a grenade coming whistling and striking just a few yards from him. It killed the others and damaged him in his head so that he neither saw, heard or could think anything further.

Harrison And still you are here, Sir.

Charles The incurable damage consists of two lost years of my life. I went out in the front and woke up two years later in a pub in Liverpool. For nineteen years I have been trying to find out what I could have done and how I managed to survive during those years.

Harrison I think I read about the case.

Charles The only trustworthy doctor I discussed the matter with has suggested, that the person I was during those years probably had no memory of the previous. When I got back my memory of the previous I lost the memory of the two years. Does it seem all too absurd to you?

Harrison Not at all. There are many such cases. But your case is unique.

Charles Don't tell me you know all about it and that you know who I am.

Harrison Unfortunately I am obliged to disappoint you. You must be Charles Rainier, one of the corner stones of the economy and industrial concerns of the country, executive director of the Rainier industries with about three thousand families under your umbrella. Imagine to have accomplished such a rehabilitation with such a damage from the war.

Charles It was not altogether my own fault. My family helped, and I won a wife who did the rest.

Harrison Weren't you almost bankrupt at one point?

Charles Yes, in the beginning of the twenties. My eldest brother took over the leadership for the industries after our father while I preferred to study at Cambridge. I had to leave my studies to save the family from ruin. Since then I have been stuck in business and politics. My brother suddenly died of over exertion, and someone had to save the livelihood of three thousand families.

Harrison So you sacrificed yourself.

Charles Only the studies. Responsibility was more important. I never have a moment free, but I never complain. I am forty-two and can still work hard for at least twenty years for the good of the country and its people, if the new war doesn't put a stop to it. The only thing that worries me is the blind spot of the two lost years.

Harrison Why does it worry you, when you won everything?

Charles Because I always had that fretting feeling, that those two years were the only really important ones in my life.

Harrison I wish I could help you.

Charles Would you? I am collecting secretaries, and I could always use one more. Are you interested?

Harrison What would be my work?

Charles To begin with you could archive our collections at Stourton. My wife is a great art and book collector. She also started as my secretary. My oldest secretary, whom I took over from father, has to leave now, so you could actually fill up a vacancy.

Harrison It would be interesting, especially to help you dig up your unknown past.

Charles I can't promise you any success with that. Everything else will be easy for you.

Harrison I would gladly accept your offer under a period of trial to begin with.

Charles That sounds wise. You are welcome. You could start by coming to my wife's great party now on Saturday. She always gives Saturday parties, intellectual people, writers, art people and other outsiders like myself. That way you will get to know Stourton and its collections. You are welcome.

Harrison Thank you, Sir.

Charles Don't Sir me. There are no titles for me. Call me Charles. (*offers his hand*)

Harrison I thank you.

Charles For nothing. Here I am off. Let me thank you instead for the thankless role of a coerced listener.

Harrison It was an interesting pleasure, Sir.

(*Charles gives him a warning finger, smiles and proceeds.*)

What luck! Private secretary of Charles Rainier! And in my situation as desperately out of work! Maybe he saw it in me...

Scene 2. The party.

Lots of people, almost only celebrities.

Harrison Am I late?

Sheldon Not at all, Sir.

Harrison I am afraid I will be rather out of place here.

Sheldon That's why Mr Rainier himself almost never appears at his wife's parties. No one is more an outsider than he.

Harrison So he will not come?

Sheldon You never know. It happens that he sometimes turns up and then suddenly disappears again. His life consists of almost only board meetings.

Harrison But his wife is here, isn't she?

Sheldon You can count on that, but it will take you some time to reach her. As the perfect hostess she has to talk with everybody.

Harrison May I be intimate with you, I mean, ask some intimate questions about my employer?

Sheldon At your own risk, Sir.

Harrison Where is he now?

Sheldon No one knows. When no one knows he is usually out hunting for something he will never be able to find.

Harrison Like two lost years?

Sheldon So you know about it, Sir.

Harrison Has he always been doing that?

Sheldon Always, that is, since he came back.

Harrison Is it a happy marriage?

Sheldon As happy as a perfect marriage could be where everything works perfectly and the wife is ideal in every way but where there is no intimacy.

Harrison So they never had children?

Sheldon They never even tried.

Harrison Do you know any reason?

Sheldon The wife says that Charles always kept looking for another. That's why he never married his sister's adopted daughter Kitty, who still loved him. They were even engaged. She said the same thing.

Harrison So it seems Charles had a love during his lost years whom he never could retrieve.

Sheldon He has tried for twenty years without results.

Harrison And if he finds her? What will then his wife say?

Sheldon She is experienced. She is expert on managing crises especially in human relationships, especially when they get complicated.

Harrison That's why she manages socially and can handle any bizarre personalities.

Sheldon Yes, she is a social genius.

Harrison When may I see her?

Sheldon When she pleases. She is very interested in your work.

Harrison It will be difficult in this throng.

Sheldon Wait it out.

Harrison It seems to be a stable marriage although it's not about love.

Sheldon Don't say so. She loves him. He loves another who doesn't exist. As long as she doesn't exist there is no problem.

Harrison Why then did he marry her?

Sheldon She took over when young Kitty broke the engagement and found another in Egypt. She was only a modest secretary then. Charles has an instinct for good secretaries who then always remain in his service, like you, for example, and she also started from the bottom. When young Kitty was out and Charles in his doldrums, she insisted on becoming his private secretary. He couldn't say no since he needed an efficient one, and she surpassed all his wildest expectations. It is she who has made his career as political industrial leader. She has all the social strings in her hand that she manoeuvres to further him.

Harrison Is he happy?

Sheldon No.

Harrison Is *she* happy?

Sheldon At least she plays that role.

Harrison And who is she really? What was she before she became his secretary?

Sheldon It has never interested Charles, so no one ever bothered to find out. She could have been anything.

Harrison Thanks, Sheldon. I think she has spotted me. I think it's time to introduce myself to her.

Sheldon Good luck. (*leaves with a slight bow*)

Harrison (*when the wife approaches him*) Mrs Rainier, I presume?

Wife And Harrison, I presume, our new secretary and Charles' factotum?

Harrison Factotum?

Wife One who takes care of everything. You appear to have taken on the impossible task of sorting things out.

Harrison Sorting things out?

Wife The collections of Stourton are hopelessly unsurveyable. Have you had a drink?

Harrison Thank you, I will need it, for among all these intellectual giants I feel as lost as a rabbit among trumpeting elephants.

Wife That's why Charles never comes to my parties. He is the same: shy, brooding, seeking solitude and hopelessly inadequate in his own eyes.

Harrison But he is quite adequate in yours?

Wife We have everything except for one thing.

Harrison Intimacy?

Wife You appear to be informed of his secret.

Harrison So far that no one knows about it and least of all himself.

Wife You have been closer to him than I lately. You haven't together succeeded in catching any new glimpses?

Harrison No.

Wife But look who is here! Himself! (*approaches him, who has just entered*) Welcome, Charles! I just had some intimate conversation with your new secretary.

Charles That gives me pleasure. I am sorry I can't stay long.

Wife You never can. You seem upset?

Charles I *am* upset. (*to Harrison*) Harrison, would you care to follow me for a ride?

Harrison Has anything turned up?

Charles As a posthumous war hero I had to give a speech to a collection of ex-militaries, and among them was that infernal general who sent us out to die by the German lines. I was so upset that I cut myself short and left the society with the risk of leaving an impression of extreme rudeness, but I couldn't explain the matter. That's why I came here. I need to calm down.

Wife Would you like a drink?

Charles No, I need harder bandages.

Harrison I am at your service.

Charles I want to do something downright silly. They are giving a foolish play in East End that makes fun of the whole military business. That's exactly what I need: to laugh and forget.

Harrison I have been drinking.

Charles Don't you think I have as well? We'll have to alternate by the wheel if necessary. Come! (*drags Harrison along. The wife has long since disappeared among the guests, but she watches them leave.*)

Wife Something has turned up.

Scene 3. The theatre.

Charles and Harrison take seats among the audience to the left above the stage, which shows a caricature of a colonel at a desk rummaging among the papers in such an exaggeratedly theatrical way that he impossibly could find anything by that method.

Colonel Damn it and bloody hell, I must find that blasted document and hide it before they discover me as a spy!

A young dashing officer (suddenly opening the door crying) T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-he en-en-en-en-en-en-emy ad-ad-ad-ad-ad-va-va-va-va-va-vances! (*stammers frightfully. Roaring laughter in the audience by playback chorus.*) Gi-gi-gi-gi-gi-ve the o-o-o-o-rder to-to-to-to-atta-ta-ta-ta-ta-tack, Sir! (*The audience is howling for laughter. The officer grabs the door handle to run out, which falls out and rolls across the entire stage. The audience explodes in laughter and applause. Charles rises quite pale.*)

Harrison How are you, Sir?

Charles Come, Harrison. (*They leave and enter the now empty stage.*)

The one instant in my life when I was laughed at, and then I had to make exactly the same experience once more.

Harrison What has happened, Sir?

Charles The curtain has risen. That role was the only role play of my life, and I made a total disaster of it, but that disaster they have turned into a permanent success. Is that how the theatre works? To distort reality into a grimace for everyone to laugh at? The war was from beginning to end nothing but destructive calculation to by any means bring the enemy as much damage as possible to the ends of his total destruction, the means of which included sending ten million innocents to death. And now Hitler is ready to do it all over again but worse.

Harrison Shall we go home, Sir?

Charles No, drive me to the Melbury asylum. That's where my roots are. (*They leave.*)

Scene 4. A high place out in the country.

Charles (alone) This is where I escaped after having made a complete fool of myself at the theatre, far away from the mundane deplorable world with its scorn and cruelty, with a view across five counties. I never thought she would find me here, and still she did come after and traced me here. That's how our life started together, and I was completely set on never retrieving my memory and quite satisfied with that, when our life was abruptly cut off just as we were married, I had started to write and she expected a child, by the brutal return of my memory while the two interim years were deleted. After twenty years they suddenly return with the moral lesson, that my twenty years of success were worthless against my two years as a mental invalid. But those two years are lost forever, while I stifle under the responsibility of twenty years' commitments. (*Harrison is seen with the wife above the stage.*) Don't tell me...

Wife (to Harrison) Stay here. I have been through this before. (*descends*)

Charles (rising slowly as she approaches) And I have been married to you all these years without noticing.

Paula I knew you would come through sooner or later. Still it's not too late.

Charles With a new world war at hand? The next peace will be far away. Come into my arms, my redeemer. Only you could save the whole world.

Paula Let's do it together.

Charles Do you think we have the strength?

Paula You have the influence. I have the love. We have the force.

Charles You were always so convincing.

Paula You learn to convince by acting on stage.

Charles The world is no stage. It's all too realistic a drama.

Paula Which we must save us through by acting in it.

Charles As actors, conceited careerists, vain politicians or cynical opportunists?

Paula No, only as human beings. Being human always conquers all.

Charles Someone said, that you could have better use and learn more from just observing human nature than from all philosophies in the world.

Paula It was you yourself.

Charles Wasn't it father Blampie?

Paula Maybe you got it from him. He searched for you in Liverpool and died there.

Charles I know. I searched for him today and learned everything. Why didn't you reveal yourself earlier?

Paula I wanted the wounds to heal first. I didn't want to force nature. I couldn't force on you a relationship and history that you couldn't relate to.

Charles The more I can now. Have we matured at last?

Paula At least we have made a start. Come! We have so much to recover!

(They start leaving. Harrison meets them.)

Charles (with his arms around Paula) Everything is under control, Harrison. Back to work!

Harrison Yes, Sir. (*Charles takes him on the other side, and they all three leave together, Charles in the middle embracing both.*)

The End.

*Dharamsala 11.11.2013,
translated in August 2018.*

Comment

James Hilton's famous novel is introduced by the train scene (Act V scene 1) and Harrison's introduction into Charles' life and riddle, and the greater part of the novel is then about the fruitless search for the two lost years with a detailed account of all the events of the last twenty years, which are rather undramatic and which for that reason have been left out both here and in the famous film of 1942 with Greer Garson and Ronald Colman, who also acted the main part in Hilton's other famous novel, "Lost Horizon" 1937. Like the film we have chosen to follow the events in chronological order starting at the hospital in Melbury. Several vital and memorable scenes from the novel are impossible to reproduce on theatre or film, like for instance the fantastic evening with the original pianist couple, which leads to the solution of the riddle. Instead the film has successfully introduced other innovations, like for example that the audience is allowed to recognize Greer Garson as Paula long before Charles does. Here we have left possibilities open – the audience *could* be able to recognize her, but it could also be left unknowing until further – Mrs Rainier is after all 19 years older than Paula and has survived a miscarriage. Another episode of vital importance in the novel, which is difficult to do justice in dramatizations and on film, is Rev. Blampie's part in the events. Instead we have here given him an extra scene.