

to loosen his collar.) Your best flannelette nightie? . . . Well, I'm sure you must look very erratic my love but I'm afraid something's just popped up (Hurriedly.) cropped up . . . (Recoiling from the phone.) . . . Well, there's no need for that aptitude . . . (Wincing.) . . . Yes, my love, I will be lucky I know but . . . hello? . . . hello? . . . (Glancing at POTTER, trying to impress.) And just you make sure you get those Brussel sprouts on overnight, woman . . . (Wincing.) Sorry, my love, I thought you'd gone! . . . Hello? . . . Hello? . . . Ah. (Putting the phone back and smiling ruefully at POTTER.)

POTTER Sounds like you'll be on the settee tonight, Sarge.

PRATT Oh, no, Mrs Pratt's a very understanding woman . . . it's just that she's giving the little Pratts an early night and she had plans for me to stuff her turkey.

(ARCHIE GATES enters through the French windows. He is aged around 50 and is a no-nonsense, garrulous Australian with a strong Australian accent. He wears green trousers which have a large hole in the seat. This becomes obvious to the audience as he turns to close the French windows behind him.)

ARCHIE *(as he enters)* G'day. How're you going?

PRATT *(mystified by the accent)* I beg your pardon?

ARCHIE I said, G'day.

PRATT Ah . . . and goody to you too, sir.

ARCHIE *(looking at PRATT's hat)* I didn't expect to find Santa here so soon. Chrissie won't be here for a few hours yet, mate.

PRATT Chrissie? I wasn't even aware she lived here, sir.

POTTER Think he means Christmas, Sarge.

(ARCHIE moves towards POTTER and PRATT notices the hole in his trousers.)

ARCHIE *(leering)* And you must be Santa's little helper, eh? Well you can help me out any time you like, if you get my meaning?

POTTER *(with obvious distaste)* Yes, I think I do.

ARCHIE You can drop by and give me my prezzi later tonight if you like . . . I've been good as gold all year . . . more or less.

PRATT Excuse me.

ARCHIE Why, what've you done, mate?

PRATT *(pointing at his trousers, embarrassed)* It's . . . your trousers.

ARCHIE *(posing)* What about 'em, eh?

PRATT No . . . no, round the back.

ARCHIE *(feeling behind)* Oh, crikey . . . my best pair of daks! Ah, well, no worries. *(Laughing.)* Hey, back in Oz we call that the big 'outback' eh?

(ARCHIE starts displaying the hole ostentatiously to them both. PRATT stares at him blankly and POTTER looks on distastefully.)

Get that, mate? Big 'outback', yeah? Get it?

(PRATT *continues to stare blankly.*)

Ah well, please yourself, mate. Anyway, forgive me for being blunt but who the hell are you anyway? Walt didn't mention he had a shed load of people coming over. (*Taking his hand straight from his rear and offering it to PRATT.*) Archie Gates.

PRATT (*looking at the offered hand dubiously before reluctantly shaking it*) Pratt.

ARCHIE Well there's no need to be like that, mate, I was just trying to be civil.

PRATT No, that's me . . . Sergeant Pratt. This is Constable Putter.

POTTER Potter. (*Coldly, clearly disliking ARCHIE.*) And we're already being attended to by a very nice lady, thank you, sir.

ARCHIE Ah, I reckon that'd be Lady Gates. Bit of a stunner . . . can't understand why she'd marry a senile old duffer like my brother.

(WALTON *enters from the hall, closely followed by MORAG.*)

Ah, speak of the devil.

WALTON (*moving to PRATT*) Ah Archie, there you are. And you must be this Puzzled Pratt fellow?

ARCHIE Yeah, well, he's certainly a puzzle to me, Walt, that's for sure . . . fair dinkum, no worries!

Get that, mate? Big 'outback', yeah? Get it?

(PRATT *continues to stare blankly.*)

Ah well, please yourself, mate. Anyway, forgive me for being blunt but who the hell are you anyway? Walt didn't mention he had a shed load of people coming over. (*Taking his hand straight from his rear and offering it to PRATT.*) Archie Gates.

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ARCHIE Yeah, well, he's certainly a puzzle to me, Walt, that's for sure . . . fair dinkum, no worries!

PRATT

(to himself in a Scottish accent) Aye.

(PRATT produces his handkerchief from his pocket and is about to blow his nose when he realises that there are bits of the shattered bauble still in it. He looks around for somewhere to dispose of it, finally tossing it behind the Christmas tree before turning and exiting through the French windows.)

(Lights fade.)

Scene Two

An hour later. The curtains are drawn across the French windows. On the small table, centre left, are three headscarves, one red, one green and one white. Hidden beneath the green scarf are two decks of cards, one red backed and the other green backed. Hidden beneath the red scarf is a gun. ARCHIE is sitting reading a book as EMMA enters from the hall. She is wearing a sheet over her head, which completely conceals her except for eye holes.

EMMA

(as she enters, speaking in a ghostly voice)
Whoooo . . . whooooo . . . (In an imitation of MORAG'S Scottish accent.) Och, I am the ghost of Christmas Future . . . whooooo . . . whooooo.

ARCHIE

(looking up from his book) In that case, Emma, I shouldn't be here because I won't be coming over at this time of year again! I prefer to eat my Chrissie dinner in the sunshine!

EMMA

(disappointed at being recognised) Oh, gosh! How did you know it was me? You were supposed to think it was Mrs McKay!

ARCHIE Sorry but it hardly takes a genius. At her age, Mrs McKay is probably more of a Christmas Past kinda Sheila. She's certainly well past her best, that's for sure . . . got a face like a half sucked lemon.

EMMA (*removing the sheet*) It's dreadfully hot under there! Perhaps you could wear it and I'll come as a Christmas pudding or something . . . (*Giggling.*) then I could steep myself in lots of stupendous brandy.

ARCHIE Sorry but I've never been a dressing up kinda bloke. Afraid you'll just have to put up with me in my civvies.

EMMA Oh, no that won't do at all. But it's just so brilliant that you're here in the first place . . . after all these years.

ARCHIE Oh, I've had a mind to get myself over here to Blighty for a long time but when I heard you and your father were set on visiting Oz, I'd put all my pommie plans on the back burner.

EMMA I was absolutely devastated when we couldn't travel. It was rotten luck when Daddy got beaten up like that.

ARCHIE Sounds like it was a nasty incident.

EMMA Well, the police think it must have been some horrid burglar who got disturbed as he snuck into Daddy's room to grab some loot. Poor Daddy must have muttered something in his sleep . . . all he remembers is waking up when they whacked his leg with the bat!

ARCHIE Strewth! And they never caught the mongrel who did it?

EMMA Daddy just glimpsed a shadow moving out of the door.

ARCHIE But what about Grace . . . didn't she catch sight of anything?

EMMA Grace? She's hopeless! Anyway, they weren't actually married then . . . they were in separate rooms.

ARCHIE (*leering*) That's what they told you anyway!

EMMA Uncle Archie! Anyway she and Daddy still have separate rooms even now.

ARCHIE Strewth! The old duffer's even slower than I thought! But you obviously don't think too much of the new love of your father's life then?

EMMA Love? Love's got absolutely nothing to do with it? I know it's a horrid thing to say but Daddy's quite weak really. He couldn't cope when Mummy died and she saw her opportunity to pounce. I don't know what Daddy sees in her . . . he says she's from 'good stock'.

ARCHIE Makes her sound a bit like a horse!

EMMA She may have all the airs and graces, but she certainly hasn't got any money. That's the only reason the beastly woman married Daddy! And now he says he may have to reduce my allowance because of all her spending! I'd jolly well like to smash her with a bat . . . I used to be pretty handy with a hockey stick.

ARCHIE Well as it happens I'm not exactly a big fan of Grace either. She's trying to get your father to cut off my money completely . . . can you believe that?

EMMA I'd believe anything of her. But she can't do it can she . . . I thought it was a trust fund or something?

ARCHIE Nothing a half decent lawyer couldn't drive a horse and dunny cart through. If she gets her way, I end up with nothing . . . what do you make of that?

EMMA But couldn't you survive without it? I thought you had a huge farm?

ARCHIE Poor grazing land though. Last year we produced about enough wool to knit a pair of gloves for a one armed man. I'd be ruined.

EMMA Gosh! (*Thoughtfully.*) Uncle Archie . . . may I ask you something?

ARCHIE Fire away.

EMMA It's just that . . . nobody would ever tell me. Why did grandpapa send you off to Australia all those years ago? It wasn't for anything really horrid was it . . . you know, like violence or something?

ARCHIE I think that's best left in the past, don't you . . . that was between me and your grandfather.

EMMA (*conspiratorially*) It's just that when I think of how Grace is spending all my inheritance, I feel so angry and I get these really horrid thoughts about how I might get rid of her! Thought you might have some ideas.

ARCHIE Now, girl, you want to be careful who you go around saying things like that to . . . you might get yourself into a heap of bother!

ACT ONE

Scene One

The action takes place in the mid 1930s sitting room of the large country house of SIR WALTON GATES. It is mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve. Left centre are French windows leading off to a garden path. Stage right is a fireplace in which a fire is burning, upstage of which is a door which leads off to a hallway. Next to the door is a light switch.

Stage left, a door leads off to an office. In the corner, upstage left, is a Christmas tree, decorated with tinsel and baubles. Under the tree are a number of wrapped presents. Right of the French windows are a chair and a sideboard, upon which are a telephone, decanters and glasses. Centre right is a settee, in front of which is a low occasional table. Centre left is a small table and chair. Down left is a chair and low occasional table, upon which is a table lamp. Down right is a chair. Various documents and files are haphazardly strewn around the room.

The room is dimly lit as WALTON enters from the hallway. He is aged in his mid-fifties. He comes from a wealthy, upper class, landed family but is not terribly bright and has an irritating laugh. He limps quite heavily. As he enters he is enthusiastically singing 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'.

WALTON *(clearly struggling for the words) Hark the Herald . . . pom pom pom pom, Glory to the . . . pom pom pom . . . Peace on earth and pom pom pom pom . . . (Shaking his head, giving up and warming himself in front of the fire.)*

(MORAG MCKAY enters from the office. She is a dour Scotswoman with a strong accent, aged around sixty. Although she is WALTON's secretary he is rather intimidated by her.)

MORAG *(slightly flustered)* Sir Walton . . . what are you doing here?

WALTON *(taken aback)* I live here, Mrs McKay,
(Laughing.) haw haw.

MORAG That may be so, but you should be taking your afternoon nap. I can generally set my clock by the regularity of your habits . . . *(Disapproving.)* both the good and the bad!

WALTON Oh, I don't have any bad habits . . . when you're born into the right class of family they're merely considered to be eccentricities . . . haw haw. Thing is, woke myself up snoring and can't get off again. Too much going on up here, don't you see. *(Tapping his head.)*

MORAG *(raising her eyebrows, dismissively)* Aye, whatever you say, Sir Walton . . . *(Moving to the table lamp and switching it on.)* I'm sure all your responsibilities must weigh awful heavy.

WALTON Ah, well . . . uneasy lies the head, Mrs McKay. Thing is, I can't switch off, that's the problem . . . big ideas, thick and fast.

MORAG *(moving to the main light switch and turning it on)* Aye, well, in my experience most of your ideas are from the thicker end of the spectrum!

WALTON Oh, don't be such a tease, Mrs McKay!

MORAG Anyway, if you're needing me I'm afraid it's quite out of the question. I'm awful busy trying to rectify the mountainous problems created by all your previous big ideas!

WALTON

Oh, you carry on, Mrs McKay . . . don't mind me . . . quiet as a mouse, haw haw . . . scout's honour.

(MORAG *exits to her office, shutting the door behind her*. WALTON *potters around the room, singing, not quite sure what to do with himself*.)

Pom pom pom a Merry Christmas, pom pom pom a merry Christmas, pom pom pom a Merry Christmas . . . (Pausing as he picks up a couple of sheets of typed paper, peering at them and then shaking his head.) . . . and a pom pom New Year. (Calling out as he moves towards the office door.) Mrs McKay, do you have a moment, please?

(WALTON *reaches the door but almost collides with MORAG, who surprises him as she comes through the door, quickly shutting it behind her*.)

Oh, I say . . . haw haw . . . you almost had me toppled over there!

MORAG

(glaring at him irritably and impatiently) Aye, Sir Walton, what would it be this time? These constant interruptions are a terrible irritation.

WALTON

Frightfully sorry but totally unavoidable I'm afraid. (Waving the papers at her.) These are entirely the wrong papers, Mrs McKay . . . entirely wrong.

MORAG

(waving her hand, indicating all the other papers) Then perhaps you might wish to avail yourself of some of the others you've left littered about the place!

WALTON (waving his arms helplessly) But which ones? I was rather hoping to fine-tune my speech for the RSPB dinner.

MORAG Aye, well, I'm surprised they abide you as their patron, considering you spend half your days blasting their clientele out of the sky. Anyway, that's the function you attended last week, Sir Walton!

WALTON (genuinely surprised) Me . . . I didn't do it! Oh, no, no, surely not. I should know . . . I was there!

MORAG Well that's where I instructed the taxi to take you, so I've no doubt that's where you were delivered. (Scolding.) Do you never check your diary?

WALTON Well, I rather thought that was more your department . . . I can't be expected to know everything . . . I'm a Knight of the Realm, haw haw.

MORAG Aye, well it's a joint responsibility, so I'd be obliged if you'd remember that in the future. Now, if my memory serves me correctly, your next free meal is courtesy of the British Footwear Association.

WALTON (blankly) No! Good Lord, is it really? But I've already delivered that speech.

MORAG To the RSPB? It would hardly seem to be appropriate!

WALTON It would certainly explain the muted reception. That joke about their outfit being a load of old cobblers fell quite flat. You must send them an apology . . . explain that it was all our fault.

MORAG Aye, well, it was you who created the mess in the first place.

(MORAG moves around the room, collecting and sorting papers as WALTON moves to the sideboard and starts to pour himself a drink. GRACE, his wife, enters from the hall. She is aged around thirty five and is attractive, sophisticated, very well-spoken, immaculately dressed and wears an expensive pearl necklace, and a diamond ring. As she enters, she and MORAG exchange icy glances.)

WALTON Ah, Grace . . . just in time to join me for one? I've knocked off for Christmas.

GRACE Quite right, darling . . . you work far too hard. (Wrinkling her nose in distaste.) I've just heard Emma's car arriving, so a gin is definitely the order of the day.

WALTON And tonic, my dear?

GRACE I said Emma has arrived . . . so a very long, very strong, very straight gin will be absolutely perfect. She's become impossibly bohemian since she went off to London.

WALTON (pouring two drinks) You really could make a bit more of an effort with her . . . I mean, she is my only child . . . haw haw. (Leering and winking at GRACE.) So far anyway.

GRACE Well, don't get any big ideas on that score, darling . . . childbirth and all of the subsequent inconvenience is altogether too exhausting a prospect to contemplate.

WALTON We could get a nanny. I never really saw Mother until I was about ten. She was

frightfully sporty and for years I thought she was the tennis coach. It was quite a shock to find out we were related. (*Moving to GRACE and handing her a drink as he tries to slip an arm around her.*) What do you say?

GRACE

(*shrugging him off and glancing at MORAG*) Please, Walton. Not while the paid help is present.

(*WALTON winces and glances at MORAG to see her reaction.*)

MORAG

Personal private secretary if you please, Lady Gates . . . and if I was only interested in the payment, then I can assure you that I could get far more agreeable remuneration elsewhere.

WALTON

Oh, don't take on so, Mrs McKay. It was just a slip of the tongue wasn't it, my dear?

GRACE

(*smiling falsely at MORAG*) Yes, of course it was. I'm sure you're an absolute treasure . . . all of that shorthand and whatever is terribly clever. It must be so fulfilling to have a trade.

(*EMMA bursts into the room from the hallway. She is WALTON's daughter, is in her mid twenties and is gushing, excitable and naive and has great difficulty pronouncing the letter 'r'. She is dressed in 1930s bohemian style. She is followed by JAMES, who is in his thirties, handsome, sporty, supremely confident and prone to striking exaggerated manly postures. When GRACE sees him, she shows a slight but barely discernible reaction which is missed by all but JAMES. Throughout the following action there is a clear but discreet tension between them.*)

EMMA (rushing to WALTON, excitedly) Daddy, we're here! I've been looking forward to Christmas for simply ages and ages!

(EMMA and WALTON exchange a hug.)

GRACE (sarcastic) Yes, we've been quite ecstatic with excitement ourselves, haven't we, darling?

WALTON Oh, absolutely! Marvellous to see you, haw haw.

EMMA (coldly) Hello, Grace. (GRACE mouths a very insincere kiss towards EMMA. Brighter.) And Mrs McKay?

MORAG Aye, welcome back, Miss Emma. I trust you had a good journey?

EMMA Oh, terrific . . . James drives so quickly. I thought my poor little car would just explode or something . . . which it didn't . . . luckily! (Turning back to JAMES.) Daddy, this is James. (Turning back to WALTON.) He's just returned from a trip to Africa . . . isn't that fun!

JAMES (moving to WALTON and shaking his hand enthusiastically and excessively, much to WALTON's obvious discomfort) James Washington. Delighted to meet you, sir. I know it seems dashed impertinent to foist myself upon you like this but when Emmsie found out that I was alone for Christmas she insisted that I joined in your festivities. I hope you don't mind, sir?

EMMA Of course he doesn't. Daddy?

WALTON No, not at all. More the merrier, haw haw.

EMMA James is astonishingly brilliant. He's . . . oh, gosh . . . well he's just absolutely amazing really . . . (*Thinking hard.*) he's a rock climber, a writer, a botanist . . . oh, and an anthropologist. Isn't that stupendous? I can't even spell half the things he does!

JAMES I'm a pretty keen photographer as well but I wouldn't count myself as a fully fledged expert at any of them. Just manage to muddle through somehow. Oh, and I simply adore flying.

GRACE Really? For a man of such diverse talents I imagine you don't even require the mechanical assistance of an aeroplane for that!

JAMES (*turning to Grace and smiling*) And you obviously must be Lady Gates? Emmsie's told me all about you.

GRACE Yes, I'm sure she has.

(JAMES moves to Grace, dropping to one knee and taking her hand, which she reluctantly allows.)

JAMES (*kissing her hand and then holding it for just a fraction too long before standing*) As it happens, the ability to fly unassisted would be a godsend. Afraid I don't have the money for my own kite.

EMMA James manages all of his expeditions on an absolute shoe-string . . . (*Giggling.*) I simply don't know how he does it. The poor man hasn't got a bean to his name.

JAMES (*philosophical*) Oh, luck of the draw I'm afraid . . . right family . . . wrong son. Eldest brother got the title and estate, middle brother got the

cash and I got father's fly fishing tackle and mother's wicked sense of mischief! Wouldn't change it for the world.

WALTON Splendid. Pity we're out of season. Could have have taken you out to try for a few salmon. Bagged some monsters last year, haw haw.

JAMES I would have enjoyed that, sir. Once had to survive on raw fish for several months when I was escaping from some native types in the Amazon.

EMMA Yuk! Raw fish? How horrid . . . I'd be sick.

JAMES Couldn't risk a campfire . . . amazing sense of smell those chaps had. Marvellous people. Thought I was cutting along with them pretty well until they started eyeing up my head. It came down to a pretty stark choice . . . have it chopped off and shrunk or tootle off and make myself scarce!

GRACE You'll need to be very wary around here then . . . (*Laughing.*) Mrs McKay can be terribly fearsome. She could shrivel your head with a glance!

WALTON Mrs McKay? Oh, yes, quite so . . . haw haw . . . frightfully good.

MORAG (*coldly*) I think you'll find that the McKay's have an enviable reputation for their lighthearted cordiality, Lady Gates, so I would be grateful if you'd direct your hilarity elsewhere, if you'd be so kind?

GRACE Cordiality perhaps but clearly little sense of humour, I think. That will be all for now . . .

I'm sure you must have lots of vital filing or paper clipping to complete.

MORAG Sir Walton?

WALTON Yes . . . that's fine, thank you.

MORAG (*moving towards the office door*) And I'd appreciate no further disturbances. You may be finished for the festive season but some of us still need to attend to your vital interests.

WALTON Oh, absolutely. Don't take offence, Mrs McKay . . . it was just a spot of . . .

(WALTON is cut-off as MORAG exits to the office, pointedly shutting the door.)

Ah . . . well.

GRACE Ghastly woman. No mistaking Mrs McKay for a ray of sunshine!

EMMA Oh, don't be so beastly to her, Grace. I don't know how Daddy would manage without her!

GRACE Yes, but then he has been somewhat devoid of any sensible help from within the family for many years! Now, James, please, please, tell me you don't claim musicianship amongst your many talents. Emma's guest last Christmas insisted on boring us with his violin! My husband overheard from an adjoining room and imagined we'd acquired a vocal, stray cat.

WALTON That's true, so I did, haw haw. Frightful noise . . . peculiar chap.

(EMMA *reluctantly exits with WALTON and MORAG. GRACE immediately rushes to the door, checks to make sure that they've gone and then shuts the door before spinning back, angrily to JAMES.*)

Kill him, maybe . . . slap him, almost certainly!

JAMES Kiss him, perhaps?

GRACE What the hell are you doing here, James? Two bad pennies in the space of two days is simply beyond belief!

JAMES (*standing and smiling disarmingly*) Oh Gracie, come on. Is that any way to greet an old friend?

GRACE Three years, James. It's been three years since you walked out.

JAMES Please . . . let's not go through all of that again. We agreed . . . it was impossible. All you ever wanted was money and a life of comfort . . . I couldn't give you that.

GRACE Couldn't or wouldn't? Too busy dashing off performing manly deeds of derring-do!

JAMES Oh, don't let's argue, Gracie. Your dream's come true . . . don't begrudge me following mine.

GRACE My dream? (*Shaking her head.*) . . . You think that I enjoy this? James, I hate it . . . I detest it. Married to that man . . . you think that's a dream?

JAMES But you chose . . .

GRACE *(snapping)* . . . yes, I chose! Bad choice as it turns out but then that's not your problem is it? Oh no, nothing was ever your problem.

JAMES Oh, Gracie, don't be angry with me . . . I can't bear it.

GRACE *(softening)* Oh, James, I'm not angry with you . . . not really. Yes, I absolutely despised you when you walked out of my life but that was my big mistake. That's why I plotted and schemed my way into Walton's life. My success would somehow be your failure. Oh, Walton's a good man . . . a kind man . . . but I'm afraid I'm beginning to loathe him . . . his ridiculous manner . . . his awful laugh! So, James, welcome to my world . . . heaven on the outside . . . but on the inside I think my soul is descending into hell. I know I'm turning into some kind of monster but I'm powerless to stop it. And now you turn up here with Emma. Is that some kind of a sick joke? We detest each other.

JAMES Oh, she's not so bad. She means well but she's not my type at all. I met her at a friend's party . . . and then I realised who she was. Maybe I was wrong but when she invited me here I couldn't resist the chance to see you again. Look, if you want me to leave . . .

GRACE *(sighing)* No, James, that's the last thing I want. To tell you the truth, when you walked into the room my poor little heart started pounding like anything. I just don't see what good can come out of you being here.

JAMES Opening old wounds? *(Tenderly.)* Oh, Gracie, you don't have the monopoly on bad choices. You'll never know how much I've missed you.

JAMES Gracie, there's only ever been one girl for me. Come on, let's hurry, before the others come back.

(JAMES and GRACE exit to the hallway just before PRATT reappears outside the French windows. He peers through, looking rather confused, before tentatively trying the door handle. Finding the door unlocked he steps into the room, glancing around hopefully and shaking the collection tin, which clearly only has a single coin inside.)

PRATT Hello . . . knock knock . . . is there anybody there? (Receiving no response, he starts singing the first lines of a carol.) Dong ding murder me on high . . . in Devon the bells are swinging . . .

(He shakes his tin hopefully before becoming bored and moving to examine the Christmas tree. He accidentally pulls off one of the baubles and is trying to reattach it as EMMA enters from the hall. PRATT immediately hides the bauble behind his back, guilty but trying to look casual.)

EMMA (as she enters) James, I was just . . . (Seeing PRATT she halts in surprise before shrieking in delight.) Gosh . . . Uncle Archie!

(PRATT looks behind himself in surprise, thinking that someone else must be there.)

EMMA (suddenly unsure of herself) It is you isn't it?

PRATT (confused) I believe so, madam. I've always been me . . . ever since I was a small boy.

EMMA And you're Santa . . . what fun!

PRATT *(modestly)* Ah, don't be fooled by my clever disguise . . . I'm not the real Santa Claus.

EMMA Yes, I realise that.

PRATT And I haven't brought you a present if that's what you were hoping.

EMMA *(joking)* Oh, how beastly of you . . . too fat for the chimney?

PRATT *(defensively)* Don't be deceived, madam . . . lurking beneath this bulbous coat is the body of a finely horned athlete.

EMMA No . . . I meant the present's too fat for . . . !

PRATT But I haven't brought you one.

EMMA *(confused, slowly)* No . . . I don't want to be a bore but do you think we should start again?

PRATT From where?

EMMA The beginning perhaps?

PRATT A very good idea, madam, you seem somewhat un-cohesive. Allow me to reiterate my entrance. *(Picking up his collection tin, moving to the French windows and tapping on them.)* Knock knock . . . Yo ho ho . . . *(Singing.)* dong ding merrily . . .

EMMA Yes?

PRATT *(shaking the tin before placing it down)* I am Sergeant Pratt and I'm soliciting for the Retired Police Officers Malevolent Fund.

EMMA Oh . . . gosh . . . I understand now. (*Giggling.*)
How silly!

PRATT (*indignant*) No they're not silly . . . they've
dedicated many years to public servitude!

EMMA No . . . (*Pointing to herself.*) me . . . I'm silly. I
thought that you were someone else.

PRATT Ah, yes, Santa Claus. It's a very lifelike
costume isn't it? (*Pulling the false beard off,*
wincing with pain.) . . . arghh . . . it's fooled
everybody. I was going to dress as Good King
Wendy's ass but I'm afraid I'm two legs short of
a full donkey.

EMMA Look, I don't have any money immediately to
hand but . . .

PRATT No, madam, the act of begging would be
criminally offensive. What I am offering is a
performance of my touring peri-pathetic magic
show.

EMMA Magic? Wow, how incredible! I do so love
magic.

PRATT Really, then you've come to exactly the right
man. I am a master of delusion. Observe . . .
this is a small burble from your tree.

(PRATT *theatrically displays the bauble in his*
hand before removing a handkerchief from his
pocket and wrapping the bauble in it.)

Now, I shall place the burble in my
handkerchief thusly and then . . . (*Noticing the*
ashtray on the table and picking it up.) . . . ah,
this'll do . . . allow me to . . .

(PRATT places the wrapped bauble on the table and smashes it several times with the ashtray before lifting it back up from the table and theatrically waving his hand over it.)

Abraca-zebra.

(PRATT smiles in anticipation as he unfolds the handkerchief but is embarrassed as the shattered pieces of the bauble fall to the floor.)

Ah . . . (Casually, as he screws up his handkerchief and places it back in his pocket.) . . . a bit of glue, it'll be fine. (Hurriedly.) May I introduce my assistant?

EMMA Yes, of course, tremendous.

PRATT (moving to the French windows and calling outside) Porter . . . get yourself in here, at the double . . . come along . . . quickly.

(CONSTABLE MARY POTTER appears outside the French windows. She is in her mid-twenties and is intelligent and feisty but rather gawky and lacking in self confidence. She is dressed very amateurishly as a fairy, which she is clearly very embarrassed about.)

POTTER (exasperated) It's Potter, Sarge . . . not Porter.

PRATT Never mind that . . . hurry up, we haven't got all day.

POTTER (to EMMA) Hello . . . he's hopeless, honest! (Pointing at her dress, self consciously.) Sorry . . . it was his idea. (To PRATT.) I don't know why I've got to go around looking like this, Sarge . . . this is supposed to be my day off.

PRATT (to EMMA) For the purpose of my theatrical delusions I normally employ an intelligent and attractive lady assistant. Unfortunately, Constable Porter is inedible on both counts but I'm afraid she's the best I could find at short notice. She is dressed, as you will see, as the arch-angel Gabriel.

EMMA Oh, super, that's brilliant . . . for a moment I thought she was a fairy.

POTTER See, I told you, Sarge! It's not fair making me dress up like this. (To EMMA.) I look really smart in my proper uniform, honest.

PRATT I'll decide what's fair, Porter. (To EMMA.) Where would you like me to perform?

EMMA Oh, gosh. Look . . . I wouldn't want to take advantage of you but would it be a frightful bore if I asked you to perform for everyone later this evening? It would be the most amazing fun.

PRATT Everyone? Oh . . . (Excitedly.) you mean I would have a large conflagration of people?

EMMA You'll need to make the arrangements with Sir Walton. I'll send him through shall I?

PRATT Through what? Ah yes, very good. Oh, and I wonder if I might borrow your telephone . . . by borrow, I don't mean I want to take it away with me . . . I just want to talk to it.

EMMA As you wish, Sergeant.

PRATT And in the circumstantial please feel free to address me by my theatrical numb de plum . . . 'The Incredible Puzzled Pratt'.

EMMA *(excitedly and theatrically, pronouncing Pwatt)*
Wow, 'The Incredible Puzzled Pratt'!

PRATT No . . . no, Pratt!

EMMA That's what I said . . . Pratt. Brilliant . . . how stupendous!

(EMMA skips off to the hall, excitedly.)

POTTER Oh, Sarge, do we have to stay until later? It's Christmas Eve. I was going to have a bath and wash my hair tonight.

PRATT And that is exactly why I'm against women being recruited into the police force. It's no use thinking you can just join up and then spend all your time at home abluting! You should be pleased to be out and about rather than stuck at the station making cups of tea.

POTTER Well, I shouldn't have to make the tea all the time. I'd be really good at solving things.

PRATT Lady policemen solving things? Whatever will you want next? It all started going wrong when you were given universal suffering to vote! (Moving to the phone and dialling.) Anyway, you're staying here to help, Patter . . . that's a direct order from your superfluous officer. I'm discom-boobled by it as well . . . I'd planned a romantic evening at home with Mrs Pratt.

POTTER Bet she'll be devastated to miss that, Sarge!

PRATT *(into the phone)* Ah, hello my love, it's George . . . George . . . your husband, George . . . Yes, well, I'm afraid there's been a change of plan, my love, work I'm afraid . . . What? You're wearing what? . . . *(Embarrassed, tugging)*