



Lyrita

Grace Williams The Parlour

Libretto

The Parlour Opera in One Act
LIBRETTO

The story is based on Guy de Maupassant's short story 'En Famille'.

Words and Music by Grace Williams

The period is circa 1870

SCENE I

The curtain rises on a Victorian living room. The shabby-genteel furniture includes a dining-table and sideboard. There are entrances from the lobby and from the kitchen. A staircase leads up to Grandmamma's room. Through the open window, looking down upon the street, Grandmamma is hurling abuse at the neighbours.

Grandmamma

1 Hie you there! Disreputable wretches, yes, all of you!

Choir (*off-stage*)

Oh, hark at her, the impudent old harridan!
How dare you insult us so!

Grandmamma

Worthless wastrels, gossiping and chattering from dusk to dawn, and bringing disgrace on a respectable neighbourhood. Take yourselves off, the lot of you! And mind you don't forget all your horrid children; they're all thorough little savages!

*Grandmamma shuts the window.
Mamma enters from kitchen.*

Mamma

Grandmamma, for pity's sake, peace peace.
Every morning you infuriate the neighbours;
Oh mercy on us, you'll be the death of us!

Grandmamma

Of course, of course, I'll be the death of you:
Doctor Charlton always says that I'll live to bury the lot of you. You'll see!

Mamma

You pin your faith on Doctor Charlton, don't you?

Grandmamma

And what if I do?

Mamma

And it's true what he says.

Grandmamma

Of course it's true.

Mamma

But little does he guess ...

Grandmamma

What now?

Mamma

... that you're wearing us out ...

Grandmamma
Oh, indeed!

Mamma
... with all this trouble and distress.

Grandmamma
What nonsense!

Grandmamma, erect and haughty sails off to her room.

Mamma
2 You are insupportable!
Oh what's the use? You'll never relent.
You turn your back on me, as if I were beneath contempt. You'll stay in your room now, on your precious dignity, cold and stern; But when you hear the dinner-gong you'll return.

Ah well, I must finish my polishing; that, at least, brings me a little consolation.

Mamma begins to polish the dining-table.

We've not grown wealthy by our labours,
Nor can we boast we're well connected.
We're far too slow at coaxing favours,
and are resigned to being rejected.
And so, without ostentation, accepting
humiliation, we live.
I try to be content by polishing this thin veneer,
And by providing nourishment
With strict economy and care.

Mamma looks at the clock

3 Rosalie! Rosalie!
Do you hear me, Rosalie?

*Rosalie enters from the kitchen.
She is slow and very stupid.*

Rosalie
Yes, ma'am.

Mamma
Oh, here you are;
It's time the children were home,
And the master won't be long now.
You can begin laying the table, and look sharp!

Rosalie
Yes, ma'am.

Mamma
Where have Louisa and Augusta gone?

Rosalie
To the harbour ma'am.

Mamma
The harbour again?

Rosalie
Yes, ma'am.

Mamma
Every holiday off they run;
All they ever think of is fun.

Papa's footsteps are heard in the lobby.

Mamma
There they are, do you hear?

Rosalie
It's the master, ma'am.

Papa enters.

Mamma
Oh it's you, my dear.

*He pecks her cheek.
Rosalie lays the table then returns to the kitchen.*

Papa
Yes, it's me, only me.

Mamma
You're early today, any news?

Papa
Wait now, let me think.
Oh yes, just one titbit of news: in brief they've
appointed the new Deputy Chief.

Mamma
They have, and who is he?

Papa (*indignant*)
A young whippersnapper, half my age.

Mamma
Ah well, what did I tell you?
There's no hope for you in navigation,
it's rotten at the core. That's what it is!

Papa
What did you tell me?
There's no hope for me in navigation,
it's rotten at the core. That's what it is!

Mamma
Didn't you tell me that your Chief
Superintendent has never been to sea?

Papa
That's so. Ha-ha!
D'you know, they daren't send him to the naval
station across the bay: he'd be seasick!

Mamma
Would you believe it!

Papa
Seasick, sailing across the bay.
Seasick, just across the bay.

Mamma
Scandalous! If only we knew a councillor.

Papa
Seasick and as green as a leek.
Oh heaving into the deep.

Mamma
Listen to me: if only we knew a councillor ...

Papa
But we don't ...

Mamma/Papa
And that's that. Oh well ...

Papa
Oh well ... By the way, how's my mother?

Mamma
Your mother, your precious mother,
I'd have you know, was shouting at the
neighbours like an old virago; and when I
begged her not to, hoity-toity, off she went to
her room, all high and mighty.

Papa
Oh dear, but, remember, she's old.

Mamma
Fiddlesticks, she was always a scold.

Louisa/Augusta (*off-stage*)
Mamma, Papa

Mamma/Papa
4 The children ...

Louisa/Augusta (*off-stage*)
Just wait, we're coming.

They enter, carrying a basket containing fish.

Here we are, at last!

*Mamma looks sternly at the girls but Papa welcomes
them with open arms*

Augusta
Look, Mamma, look what we got you.
You'll need a large cooking pot.

Louisa
No, don't look, have three guesses, I say.

Mamma
As if I couldn't smell them a mile away.

Louisa
But they're fresh, Mamma ...

Augusta
... fresh from the sea,

Louisa/Augusta
... a fisherman gave us one each for tea:

Louisa

One for Augusta and one for you,
one for Papa and for me, too.

Augusta

And one for Grandmamma, she loves fish.

Mamma

She'll swallow the lot if you gave her the dish.

Louisa/Augusta

Ha ha...

Papa

My dear, don't encourage them to laugh at their
grandmother.

Louisa/Augusta

Sorry, Papa.

*Mamma shrugs her shoulders and takes the fish to the
kitchen*

Papa

Just see you don't do it again.

Louisa/Augusta

We'll try not to.

Papa

Well, my dears, tell me, where have you been?

Louisa/Augusta

To the harbour, Papa.

Louisa

Oh isn't it the most exciting place in the world!

Papa

I suppose I thought so once.

Augusta

Such thrilling things to see whenever we go
there.

Louisa

And today...

Papa

Was today any different?

Louisa/Augusta

... today, what do you think we saw?

Louisa/Augusta

The fishing boats and trawlers
Just setting out to sea,
And ferry boats and freighters
Loading up below the quay,
And then we heard the sirens sounding:
Toot, toot ...
And what else d'you think we saw?

Papa

The office where I work all day?

Louisa/Augusta

No, far more exciting than that!

The schooners and the yachts,
All the sailors dressed in white,
And lots of little launches tossing up and down
the tide;
And then we heard the bell a-ringing,
Ting-a-ling ting-a-ling ...
And what else d'you think we saw?

Papa
How d'you expect me to know when I'm shut
in my office all day?

Louisa/Augusta
We saw ... a great big ocean liner
With the captain at the wheel,
And he winked at us so saucily
he made us laugh and squeal.

Papa
Nonsense! You're making it up. I don't believe
a word you say. What? Good gracious!

Louisa/Augusta
He really was an awful rip,
He asked us if we'd like a trip;
And then we heard the engines booming,
Boom boom ...

Papa
But it's all nonsense. You're making it up.

Louisa/Augusta
And then the sirens sounding,
Toot, toot, toot ...

Papa (*with amusement*)
I know it's all nonsense. You're making it up
Ship a-hoy! Sirens sounding.

Louisa/Augusta/Papa
... and then the bell a-ringing, Ting-a-ling ...

*Mamma returns, followed by Rosalie carrying a
soup tureen. Papa, Louisa and Augusta don't
notice them until they hear Mamma beat the
dinner-gong.*

Louisa/Augusta
5 Dinner at last. I'm famished.
Oh, what a lovely aroma!

Mamma
Come along, to table!
Come along at once!

Mamma ladles out the soup

Mamma
You may begin.

Louisa/Augusta
We're longing to.

Papa
But where's Grandmamma?

Mamma
She heard the gong;

it was loud enough to awaken the dead.
She's just being obstinate.
Don't wait; eat instead.

*Mamma hands round the bread basket.
All except Papa begin to eat.*

Papa
But are you sure she's all right?
Louisa, go and see.

Mamma
Why must you always, always, always take
her part?

*Louisa runs upstairs to Grandmamma's room.
The meal continues. Mamma, angry, drums on the
table with her finger-tips. Louisa returns, looking
bewildered.*

Louisa
Grandmamma lying flat on the floor.

Papa
I knew something was wrong.

Papa rushes upstairs.

Mamma
It's just a ruse.

Louisa resumes her meal.

Mamma
That all it is. Just a ruse.

Louisa
But she did look queer, as white as a sheet,
and as stiff as a poker from her head to her feet.
And as cold as ice.

Mamma
What did you say? Cold as ice?
It's not possible ... Oh!

*Papa comes downstairs. Mamma takes a quick look at
Papa, then rushes upstairs. Louisa and Augusta remain
seated at the table, eyes wide open.*

Papa.
The doctor, send Rosalie at once. Rosalie!
The doctor, fetch Doctor Charlton at once.
It's urgent.

Rosalie
Yes sir. Oh! Oh!

Rosalie exits through the lobby.

Papa
Oh – oh, my poor mother!
What has happened?

*Papa returns upstairs. Louisa and Augusta watch him.
When Papa has disappeared, Louisa and Augusta come
slowly to the centre.*

Augusta
Poor papa, what can be the matter?

Louisa
If you'd seen what I've seen,
You'd guess what's the matter.

Augusta
Go on, tell me more:
were her eyes shut tight?

Louisa
No, they were open,
If I remember right

Augusta
Then you knelt down to touch her ...
Did she see you kneeling?

Louisa
No, she didn't see me, she was staring at the
ceiling.

Augusta
Oh, the shivers running up and down my spine!

Louisa
Up and down your spine!
What about mine?

Augusta/Louisa
6 Who'll be the first to solve the mystery?
Doctor Charlton ...?

Louisa
... with his shady history.

Augusta
Shady? Who says he's shady?

Louisa
I heard Mamma say so once.

Augusta
Really?

They hear Dr. Charlton approaching.

Louisa
Look out! Here he comes.

Doctor Charlton enters - bluff and hearty.

Doctor Charlton
Hullo, Hullo, my poppets, What's this I hear?
Your grandmamma's up to her tricks, once
more? Ho-Ho, she can't trick me, the old rascal,
where is she? Upstairs?

*Louisa and Augusta nod. Doctor Charlton goes
upstairs. He meets Mamma and Papa coming away
from Grandmamma's room.*

Doctor Charlton
Well, good folks, here I am;
Now what's the matter? What's wrong?

*Dr Charlton looks into Grandmamma's room.
He whistles. Papa & Mamma come slowly
downstairs. They look stunned. They proceed slowly
to centre stage, as Louisa and Augusta withdraw to
the side. Rosalie returns – looks scared – joins Louisa
and Augusta. Dr Charlton comes quickly downstairs.*

Doctor Charlton (*matter of fact*) It's the end.

*Papa is dumbfounded. Mamma cries quietly –
crocodile tears.*

Dr Charlton (*shrugs his shoulders*)
And it'll come to us all, everyone.

Mamma
Forgive me, I find I'm quite heartbroken.

Papa
But are you sure you're not mistaken?

Doctor Charlton
Sure? Of course I am sure in every way:
The heart, eyes, hands all prove what I say.
Come, come my friends, you mustn't find it too
distressing; for her, and for you, it may well
prove a blessing.

Now, Rosalie, run along and tell Mrs Lillywhite
to come along quickly, and do all that's
necessary.

Exit Rosalie

Papa
Thank you for your kind attention.

Doctor Charlton
Not at all, it was a pleasure, a duty,
don't mention it.

Mamma
7 By the way, Doctor Charlton, tho' it's long past
one, won't you join us at dinner, which we'd just
begun.

Doctor Charlton
Well, it's most kind of you - if it isn't any bother.

Papa
I'm afraid I've no appetite, and feel in such a
dither.

Mamma
But everything's prepared; it's wicked to waste
good food. We must try to eat, so let's make haste.

*Mamma, Louisa and Augusta clear away the soup
plates and take them to the kitchen.
Rosalie returns with Mrs Lillywhite. Mamma makes
signs to them and they hurry upstairs.*

Papa
I can't help remembering how she was when I was
a boy: a fine figure of a woman, stately but not
severe, and oftentimes indulgent to me, the apple

of her eye. So, you see, my grief is natural and sincere. Beneath the strange contrariness she showed of late, she was human and frail, old and worn. And now, no longer can she love or hate. At peace at last, and I am left to mourn. Oh My poor mother!

Mamma returns. She pulls down the blinds.

Doctor Charlton

You need a pick-me-up; Where's the cognac?

Mamma points to the sideboard. Dr Charlton fills two glasses; he gives one to Papa, then gulps down his own, and refills his glass. Louisa and Augusta bring in plates, glasses, a water-jug, and a large dish mixed grill, containing chipolatas.

Mamma

And now we must try to eat, for strength;
no formality, just help yourself.

They all sit at table. Dr Charlton takes a huge helping. The dish is passed round. Papa is too upset to eat; Mamma eats absentmindedly; Louisa and Augusta normally; and Dr Charlton with great relish. The water jug is passed round. Dr Charlton makes a wry face and refuses it. He sticks his fork in a chipolata, raises it, about to eat ...

Doctor Charlton

"They say the composer Rossini (*eats*)
Was fond of chipolatas and chianti"

A-ha, that rhymes!

You see how easy it is to write poetry.

Mamma and Papa try not to listen, but Louisa and Augusta are fascinated.

"When maestro Rossini wrote 'ah, bravo, Figaro!'

With sly humour – directed at Louisa and Augusta; thinking up a rhyme.

"When maestro Rossini wrote 'ah, bravo, Figaro!'

He drank some chianto to stir up his spirito."

Bravo, bravissimo!

Louisa and Augusta giggle; imitate Dr Charlton and become hilarious.

Louisa/Augusta

"When maestro Rossini wrote 'Ah, bravo Figaro'

He drank some chianto to stir up his spirito."

Bravo, bravissimo!

Papa

I can't stand it!

They stop at once.

Mamma

Silence, silence! Have you forgotten?

Dinner is resumed in silence.

Dr Charlton
I beg your pardon, dear lady.
You know, very few are as sensitive as you:
Only the other day, I call to mind,
I visited a poor soul who just breath'd his last,
And found the family gathered round him,
And drowning their sorrows in champagne ... that
the old boy left behind.

*Louisa and Augusta shriek with laughter.
Mamma gets up angrily. Papa also gets up – he is very
distracted. Dr Charlton is forced to get up, too.*

Mamma
Enough! stop at once! Louisa, Augusta!

*Louisa and Augusta get up and run from Mamma,
unable to stop laughing.*

Stop at once! Stop!

*Mamma catches the girls and slaps them.
They stop laughing.*

At last!

Louisa/Augusta/Mamma/Papa
Oh, what an upheaval!
We must send a telegram to Aunt Genevieve;
We must inform the next of kin.
All the things that must be done.

*Dr Charlton looks around for his bag, puts his
stethoscope in it and prepares to depart.*

Where can we begin
Oh, what an upheaval ...!

Doctor Charlton

8 Now don't worry; Most of them can wait until
tomorrow: the notary, clergy, and, of course, the
obituary.

*Mamma looks for paper and pencil to write the
telegram. Dr. Charlton feels in his pocket – finds only
a coin or two.*

I'll engage the undertaker, if I may;
And I think I'd better fix that up today.

All
Au revoir, Doctor Charlton.

Doctor Charlton
Au revoir, my friends, Look towards the light.
Take heart, I'll call again, tonight

*Exit Doctor Charlton. Mrs Lillywhite comes
downstairs and also leaves. Rosalie returns to the
kitchen. Mamma writes the telegram.*

Mamma
Now, both of you, take this message along to the
Post Office to be telegraphed.

They read the message.

Augusta
It's to Aunt Genevieve ...

Louisa
... and Uncle Steve.

Augusta
"Grandmamma has passed away ...

Louisa
... Please come without delay."

They run out. Mamma and Papa are alone.

Mamma (*tentatively*)
Tell me, did your mother make a will?

Papa
No, I don't think so, I'm sure she didn't. Why?

Mamma
Why? Why? Why? You ask me why, when for ten long years I've cared for her; and slaved for her; and now she'll pass me by. And your sister, Genevieve, that queen of idleness, will inherit half the furniture. Oh, no wonder I'm distressed.

Papa
My dear, don't upset yourself.

Mamma
I can't help being upset.

Papa
I'm sorry if it hurts you.

Mamma
Of course it hurts me.

Papa
I know it's not been easy.

Mamma
No indeed it hasn't.

Papa
You've been patient.

Mamma
I'm glad you think so.

Papa
You've been virtuous.

Mamma
Thank you.

Papa
But now, alas, what can we do?

Mamma
How helpless you are!

Papa
It is too late.

Mamma
Helpless!

Papa
Far better just to acquiesce and accept our fate.

Mamma
But, listen, it is not too late: Now, answer me, didn't your mother promise you her best bureau, and the little corner cupboard?

Papa
I believe she did, but long ago; I really can't remember.

Mamma
But of course she did; You told me so, and the pendulum clock and fender.

Papa
I really can't remember,

Mamma
And to me she promised the chiffonier with the beautiful marble top;

Papa
Now are you sure?

Mamma
Oh yes, she did, and I must confess that it gave me quite a shock.

Papa
Why must you mention this now?

Mamma
Why? Because all those things belong to us, and now's the time to claim them. They're all in her room. We must bring them here, and we must replace them with our own shabby things not worth a sou. They're only made of matchwood. So hurry, we've no time to lose. Come on, step forward!

Papa
O heavens! I've just remembered ...

Mamma
What on earth's the matter?

Papa
I ... I ... I ... should have sent a message to the navigation office. You've no idea how angry the superintendent is if one's late, or worse, don't turn up at all.

Mamma
But when, all of a sudden, one is plunged into mourning, no one in his senses would expect you to inform him. So come along and move this from the wall.

They move the sideboard.

Papa
Well really, it's quite an idea, just to keep him guessing; and when I return he'll, storm ... and rave ... and then I'll quietly tell him why I was absent.

Imagine his face, full of stupefaction, dismay,
embarrassment and humiliation.

*Mamma and Papa begin to dismantle the room.
Papa carries the top of the sideboard towards the stairs.*

Papa
I'll knock the wind out of his sails.

Mamma
Be careful, hold onto the rails.

Mamma, laden, follows Papa.

*The Curtain, which falls slowly, represents the outside
wall of the house, so that the space in front of the
curtain becomes a street.*

9 Entr'acte

*A Chorus of neighbours runs in from either
side in small groups.*

Chorus
Have you heard the news?
Everybody's heard the news.
Someone said it could be catalepsy.
Now what on earth is catalepsy?
Whoever heard of catalepsy?
But Mr Elderberry said she died of apoplexy.
Of course she died of apoplexy.
It's no wonder: she roared at us like thunder.
What can you expect?

What, indeed, can you expect?
A fiery tongue can cause a fatal fall.
But we must show respect,
And call this evening to condole.
Let's tell them it was such a shock.
We'll meet you there at seven o'clock.

*Chorus runs off.
Stage plunged into darkness.
The **Orchestral Interlude** indicates the passing of
the hours.*

SCENE II

*The living room has been transformed into the
parlour, now furnished with grandmamma's ornate
treasures; which include a marble-topped chiffonier, a
brass fender, a pendulum clock, a bureau and a small
corner cupboard.*

Mamma (*discreetly, matter-of-fact*)

10 Look, the neighbours are coming as a mark of
respect. Rosalie, we have visitors: let them in:
and don't forget to walk on tiptoe, speak quietly
and bow your head.

Exit Rosalie

Chorus (*offstage*)
Good evening, Rosalie, and how are you?
How are your master and your mistress?
They must be very upset.
May we go in now?
How sad it is!

The neighbours enter.

Alas, good neighbours we are so very grieved;
It gave us such a shock
To hear you were bereaved.
We hasten to express deepest sympathy,
And offer our condolence.
But the sweet harmony of her last years,
Within the bosom of your family,
Beloved by all, will leave a fragrant memory.
Although you are this day quite overcome with
grief, we hope that time will heal and bring, at last,
relief.

*In the course of this Elegy, Louisa and Augusta enter
with their friends. They are not noticed by their elders
as they tiptoe up to Grandmamma's room and, after
some moments there, come down again. The friends
depart, but Louisa and Augusta remain on stage.*

Mamma/Papa

11 Thank you, one and all. It was so unexpected.
She always was so well.

Chorus

Yes, on this morning this very morning
She greeted us in ... in jest.
And spoke to us so ... so briskly,
she was so full of zest.

It is so hard to realise that now the strife is o'er;
The weary burdens of this world she will bear no
more. It must bring consolation to know that all

her days ... She was so upright and steadfast, and
firm, ... firm in all her ways. It must bring
consolation to know she lived so long. She
rejoiced to see her grandchildren. And the happy
throng of little playmates running gaily up and
down the street.

Mamma/Papa/Chorus

Ah, well.

Chorus

But there, ... all things must end,
We must accept our fate.
And now, dear friends, we'll take our leave,
It's getting rather late.

Mamma/Papa

O, you have touched our hearts, our thanks we
can't express.

They break down - then quickly control themselves.

Forgive us, we beg of you,
for showing such distress.
And so, farewell.

Chorus

Farewell.

Mamma/Papa

You were most kind.
All you have said we'll take to heart
And bear in mind.

Exeunt chorus – Rosalie leads the way.
Rosalie returns.

Mamma

12 Now, Rosalie, it's time to start preparing supper for Aunt Genevieve, who'll soon be arriving.

Mamma and Rosalie go the kitchen.

Louisa

Papa, why is all the furniture changed?

Augusta

Yes, why Papa? It seems very strange.

Papa

Now please don't ask me why,
It's too hard to explain;
It hurts me to think of it,
gives me pain ...

Augusta

Poor Papa, you're all upset. I am sorry I asked.

Louisa

But, all the same, I'm puzzled and find it all very queer.

Augusta

Don't worry Papa, can't you see ...

Louisa

... But look here ...

Augusta

... he's not himself? So be silent.

Mamma returns

Louisa

Well, let's ask Mamma instead.

Mamma, why is all our furniture upstairs now that Grandmamma's dead?

Mamma

How do you know it's upstairs?

Louisa/Augusta

Well, isn't it?

Mamma

Have you been to her room?

Louisa/Augusta

Was it wrong to go?

Mamma

Didn't I tell you not to?

Louisa/Augusta

I suppose we forgot.

Mamma

When did you go?

Louisa/Augusta

When all the neighbours were here.

We crept on tiptoe so as not to make a noise.

Mamma

Do you hear what they are saying? Go on!

Louisa /Augusta

And we took two friends.

Mamma

Two friends?

Louisa/Augusta

Arabella and one of the boys.

Mamma

Why did you do such a thing? Tell me why!

Louisa/Augusta

Because they begged us to let them come and see.

Mamma

Oh! Oh!

Louisa/Augusta

We couldn't very well refuse, could we?

Mamma

I never, never heard of such morbid curiosity!

Papa

No, no, try to understand youthful simplicity.

Oh well ...

13 It's getting dark. Rosalie!

Rosalie comes.

Rosalie

Yes, sir.

Mamma

Draw the curtains ...

Papa

And fill the lamp with oil.

Mamma

Oh, mercy on us, there's no oil in the can;

I quite forgot. Rosalie, try to borrow some from Mrs Trott. Oh dear, what shall we do?

Papa

I'll trim the wick. (*takes lamp to the kitchen*)

Mamma

In the meantime, let's find a candle-stick.

Louisa/Augusta

But, Mamma, you surely know they're all in Grandmamma's room.

Mamma

Why, yes, of course. And now, look here, just an hour ago, you were brave enough to run upstairs. Well you can be brave again. Up you go, both of you, and bring two candles down!

Louisa/Augusta
Very well, Mamma.

Mamma
And hurry, before it grows too dark.

Louisa and Augusta run up to Grandmamma's room. Papa comes back. Mamma and Papa sing absentmindedly as though under the influence of the increasing eeriness of the music.

Mamma
For candles; and, mark my words, Rosalie'll dawdle as usual.

Rosalie
I'm here, ma'am.

Mamma
Oh, quick for once!
Take the oil to the kitchen, and fill the lamp

Rosalie goes to the kitchen

Papa
They're a long time up there, I can't understand.

Mamma
They're very disobedient. We must take them in hand.

Louisa and Augusta come downstairs - both petrified with fright - run - stop - look back - then run to their parents for protection.

Mamma/Papa
What's wrong? What is it that scares you?

Louisa/Augusta
Grandmamma, she's getting up, and dressing!
And she's coming downstairs!

Mamma faints. Louisa and Augusta try to revive her with smelling salts and water. Papa is too confused to do anything, except help Mamma to a chair. She faints, repeatedly. Everyone is now in a state of confusion. In the darkened room, there is a sudden silence. Grandmamma's door opens. Grandmamma appears at the top of the stairs. Slowly she comes down. She seems to be in a trance. Papa walks towards stairs to meet Grandmamma.

Papa
14 Mother! Mother! Oh, what a miracle!

Grandmamma, now at the foot of the stairs, walks very slowly across the stage.

Louisa/Augusta
This is a miracle!

Papa
Heavens, wonders will never cease!

Grandmamma approaches Mamma, without noticing her.

Mamma

Well, here you are again ... how nice ... come and get warm, You must be as cold as ...ice!

Still ignoring Mamma, Grandmamma sits down, bolt upright and expressionless. The Doorbell rings. Rosalie brings in a lamp, sees Grandmamma and squeals. Rosalie trembles; the lamp sways; Louisa and Augusta seize the lamp and place it on the table. The Doorbell rings again. Louisa and Augusta rush Rosalie into the lobby to answer the door.

Louisa/Augusta/Mamma/Papa

15 Aunt Genevieve and Uncle Steve!

Aunt Genevieve and Uncle Steve come in. Rosalie is too scared to follow them, she returns to the kitchen another way. Mamma, Papa, Louisa and Augusta try to conceal Grandmamma. But Uncle Steve sees her and he grins mischievously.

Aunt Genevieve

My dears, my dears, I came at once, left everything, and hurried here ... I really can't believe it.

Uncle Steve

Well, seeing's believing, isn't it?

Aunt Genevieve sees Grandmamma.

Aunt Genevieve

Oh! Oh! ...

Mamma administers smelling salts to Aunt Genevieve.

Uncle Steve (to Grandmamma)

How are you old dear? As lively as ever, I declare.

Grandmamma still expressionless – but gradually begins to take notice – her eyes rest on the changes of furniture.

Mamma/Papa

Well no, she hasn't been very well. But she's better now; she recovered far sooner than we expected.

Aunt Genevieve/ Uncle Steve

So I see; but, what was the matter? What was wrong?

Mamma/Papa

What was wrong? We're not quite sure.

They look at Grandmamma. She stands up stiffly and walks slowly to centre stage.

Grandmamma

16 I lay in a coma, a deep coma, make no mistake; dead to the world; but I could hear everything. And now, mark my words, I'm wide awake.

She glares at the furniture, then slowly returns to her chair. Aunt Genevieve goes to comfort Grandmamma.

REAM 1147 20

Aunt Genevieve

What an experience! But, don't worry now; come quietly. My poor little mother, what agony you've suffered! There, there, I'm here to comfort you. A daughter's care is all you need, a daughter's love; you know I sensed that something was wrong, that you were calling me, and so I came at once.

Mamma

Barefaced hypocrisy, I can't stand it!

Aunt Genevieve

So now let me guard you from all who would harm you.

Papa

Quiet, my dear, anger won't mend it.

Uncle Steve (*with a hint of sarcasm*)

You see, you have a dutiful daughter.

Aunt Genevieve

Just place your trust in me. No longer have you cause to fear, for come what may ...

Louisa/Augusta

17 What a to-do, what a sensation!

Let's go and explain the whole situation to all the neighbours come to condole.

Uncle Steve

Rest assured, your dutiful daughter will not forget you. She hurried here without delay.

Mamma

Just listen to her scheming flattery. Oh it's more than I can bear!

Aunt Genevieve

... I shall be here to watch over you.
With deep devotion.

Papa

I admit it's almost mockery, and I know it isn't fair.

Mamma

And you know it isn't fair. But we must expose her.

Papa

Expose her? No use!

Aunt Genevieve

I'll sooth your cares away.

Louisa/Augusta (*moving to centre stage*)

What a sensation!

What a to-do! What a sensation!

Let's go and explain the whole situation

To all the good neighbours come to condole.

They'll hardly believe it, it sounds up the pole.

What a to-do! What a sensation!

It's time we were off, without hesitation,

To tell them of all that has happened tonight.

Let's startle them all and give them a fright.

They join hands and prepare to run out. But just then Doctor Charlton is heard approaching.

Doctor Charlton (*offstage*)
Good evening everyone;
I've brought Mr Elderberry.

Louisa/Augusta
Doctor Charlton!

Enter Dr Charlton.

Doctor Charlton
I've brought Mr Elderberry.

Mamma
The brazen impostor!

Papa
Hush!

Dr Charlton stands stock still – takes in the situation – then places himself in front of Mr Elderberry, hiding him from Grandmamma. With his hands behind his back, he signals to Mr. Elderberry to retreat. Louisa and Augusta whisper to Mr. Elderberry – they pull him backwards and disappear with him through the door. Dr. Charlton greets Grandmamma.

Doctor Charlton
Well, ... and how's my old sweetheart?
(*He feels her pulse*) Sound as a bell!
As I was coming through the door, I thought: you

never can tell what these old 'uns are up to when they ought to be safe in bed. But she'll be alive and kicking ... long after the rest of us are dead. Ha-ha you old rascal!

Grandmamma gets up and comes forward.

Grandmamma
18 Oh yes, you can laugh, and treat it as a joke;
But I am not amused.
Take care, or you'll provoke my temper.
And if it explodes, well then, beware!

(*To Mamma and Papa*) What's the matter?
Why do you stare? No need to answer: I know you're in a fix. And there's no way out; I've seen thro' all your tricks. But I'm tired. Come Genevieve, take my arm; I want to talk to you; we'll go up to my room.

Grandmamma and Aunt Genevieve walk towards the stairs.

(*To Mamma, angrily*) Send supper on a tray, and don't look so innocent. You know, Genevieve, it's high time I made my last will and testament.

Grandmamma and Aunt Genevieve go up to Grandmamma's room. Mamma hurries to the kitchen. Dr Charlton, Papa and Uncle Steve remain on stage. Dr Charlton finds a decanter and fills three glasses.

Doctor Charlton
Last will and testament, property and inheritance; Ugh! what do they matter?

(Jovially) If you've enough for sustenance, and small surplus for your pleasures, you can be free, free, and do just what you please. Long live liberty!

Uncle Steve
That's right. Long live liberty!

Uncle Steve
Liberty for the proletariat, the underdogs of our rotten civilisation, the wretched victims of bureaucracy and exploitation!

Doctor Charlton
Capital! Carry on!

Uncle Steve
Down with inheritance and property ...

Doctor Charlton
Down with the lot!

Uncle Steve
... It's high time...!

Mamma
It's high time ... you had some coffee. Rosalie will serve you. *(To Dr Charlton, biting)* You seem to find it pleasant here but just wait!

(To uncle Steve) Now I must take this tray upstairs. My heart's been in a flutter since we were taken so unawares.

(To Papa) Be careful with the brandy ...

Papa
[19] I'm sorry, you were interrupted ... All this confusion ...

Uncle Steve
Well, I was just going to say ... it was high time we had a revolution.

Aunt Genevieve and Mamma appear, rushing down the stairs, shouting insults at each other.

Aunt Genevieve
Oh, you trickster, you hypocrite, you thief, Just let me catch you!

Mamma
Oh, how dare you, how dare you!
You ungrateful wretch, you!

Aunt Genevieve
Oh, and to think you egged her on, you, my brother!

Mamma
You forget, how we've fed, clothed and cherished your mother!

Uncle Steve

What on earth's going on? For goodness sake explain!

Dr Charlton

They're having quite a game ...!

Papa

Why are you accusing us? Why are we to blame?

Aunt Genevieve

I'll explain! They've purloined all Mamma's possessions. Everything you see here: this, and that, and these, all belong upstairs. And she's leaving them to us, dear.

Mamma

Oh she is, is she? May I ask how you know?

Aunt Genevieve

Because Mamma just told me so!

Uncle Steve

She told you so?

Mamma

Oh what treachery!

Papa

We were wrong to participate;
it's only brought us sorrow.

Doctor Charlton

Now the fat is in the fire ...!

Uncle Steve

Well, in that case, she must sign,
with witnesses, tomorrow.

Mamma

Oh, you rascals, the pair of you, you lazy gluttons! Oh, you barefaced villains!

Aunt Genevieve/Uncle Steve

Oh how dare you insult us!

Papa

This quarrel will only upset you ...

Doctor Charlton

Oh, this is fun ...

Papa

Oh, be quiet, I beg of you!

Doctor Charlton

... But it's getting late and I must run. You'll all have apoplexy if you keep up this rumpus.

Dr Charlton scribbles a prescription.

What you need is a sedative, here's a prescription; take it to the chemist and let him mix you one.

Mamma

We want nothing more from you;
Off with you and don't come back!

Mamma/Papa

You're the cause of all the trouble, you artful old quack!

Dr Charlton pretends to be alarmed, but never loses his self-possession. They all turn their backs on Dr. Charlton, and don't notice Rosalie slipping away, bonnet on head, and carrying a hold-all. Dr Charlton, very amused and intrigued, waits for Rosalie to leave, then follows her.

Aunt Genevieve/Uncle Steve

20 We accuse you; and you know the reason why:
You stole all these things, didn't you?
Confess now, don't deny it.

Mamma/Papa

We have nothing to confess, nothing to fear;
She promised them to us, so our consciences are clear.

Aunt Genevieve/Uncle Steve
Liars!

Mamma

Don't call us that!
Out of this house or well call in the police!

Papa

For the love of heaven cease!

Enter Louisa and Augusta

Aunt Genevieve

The police, oh how outrageous!
What would the neighbours say?

Louisa/Augusta

You'll soon be able to hear what they say.
They're coming, they're on their way.

Mamma/Papa

Coming? The neighbours!

Papa

Why are the neighbours coming?

Mamma

What mischief have you done now?

Louisa/Augusta

Well, you see ... just for a lark ...

Louisa

... we thought we'd better tell them after dark
...

Augusta

... so we both ran out and told them Grannie'd
come to no harm ...

Louisa

... she wasn't dead at all, it was just a
false alarm, ...

Augusta
... But they wouldn't believe us, ...

Louisa/Augusta
... and said we were horrid to invent such a story.

Augusta
Papa, don't look so worried.

Louisa
So we said they'd better call again to prove that we were right.

Augusta
And when they see Grandmamma, ...

Louisa/Augusta
... we hope they scream with fright.

Louisa and Augusta run to the window and see the neighbours arriving. The neighbours run in and look around excitedly.

Chorus
[21] Is it true? Is it true? What they say?
Oh, it can't be; such a thing has never happened in our day.
Just imagine, they told us that she jumped out of bed.
How alarming! Sensational, for she was dead!
But she wasn't dead. It must have been a swoon.

Papa/Uncle Steve
A most unusual kind of swoon.

Chorus
A swoon! A most unusual kind of swoon!
Well, we never heard the like of it.
But, tell us, where is she now?

Grandmamma appears on the stairs, above and behind the neighbours.

Grandmamma
[22] She's here!

Grandmamma advances to centre stage. The neighbours back away from her.

Go on, look at me, don't be scared. I vow I'll have my revenge. Go away, you vulgar creatures, all of you! And, don't forget, old as I am, I still know how to make fools of you.

Chorus
Oh. Well indeed, what sauce, what cheek, you old wretch! You're a horror, you're a terror, you old wretch! You're a wicked old witch.

Louisa/Augusta/Aunt Genevieve/Uncle Steve
What a caterwauling!

Mamma/Papa
What have we done to deserve such a dreadful disturbance?

All
Stop your noise or out you go!

*Chorus go out, muttering angrily.
Grandmamma, quite unperturbed, ignores them.*

Chorus (shouted off stage, raucously)
"And you're a nasty old ...!"

Grandmamma (still unperturbed)
23 Louisa! Augusta! To bed this instant!

(To Mamma and Papa, acidly) And for all the
mischief you've done, you'll soon feel repentant.

Exeunt Louisa and Augusta

Grandmamma
Good night, Genevieve.

(To Uncle Steve) Good night to you, too.
Come back in the morning,
We've important things to do.
And bring your dear children;
It's a long time since I saw them;
But, tell them from me
I have not forgotten them ...

Aunt Genevieve
Good night Mamma, we are most grateful
Au revoir!

Uncle Steve
Good night, see you tomorrow then.
Au revoir!

*Grandmamma grins maliciously and embraces
them. Exeunt Aunt Genevieve and Uncle Steve.*

Grandmamma (to Mamma and Papa)
And now, as for you, don't you dare put out
the light till you've returned all my treasures.
You'll do that this very night.

*She turns her back on them and sails off to her
room.*

Mamma and Papa are left alone.

Mamma
24 There's no justice, all to her daughter!

Papa
Never mind. These things don't matter.

Mamma
There's nothing more to say. There's only
desolation.

Papa
But you must try to find some hope and
consolation.

Mamma
Nothing can console me and restore what's
lost.

Papa
What's the use lamenting? Just forget what's
past.
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!

Mamma
You're trembling; too much excitement. Or is it
fever?

Papa
No, no, no, far worse!
That bright idea to keep my superintendent
guessing ... Oh! what a mess I'm in!

Mamma
Your superintendent! To blazes with him!

*She snatches a clock and takes it upstairs.
Papa stares blankly into space.*

Papa
But, for pity's sake; what am I going to say to
him?

*He drags a sofa towards the stairs, it gets stuck, he
struggles with it, as the Curtain falls.*

Libretto copyright Grace Williams © 1966