



THE PLAYERS

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With Special Thanks to
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Act One – Scene One

‘Robert! Stop picking your nose and tell me how many apples the farmer would have left!’

Robert Symes jumped like a startled rabbit, blushed, withdrew his finger from his nose, checked it automatically and looked up guiltily at his teacher.

‘Umm . . . er . . . twelve?’

Zoë O’Brien sighed. ‘How can he have twelve left?’ she asked. ‘He has given twenty-four away. He had forty-six to start with. Twenty-four from forty-six, Robert, is—?’

‘Er, twelve?’

‘Robert I’m being very patient,’ Zoë O’Brien said impatiently. ‘Twenty from forty is?’

‘Er, twenty,’ the boy said happily.

‘And four from six is?’

‘Two, Miss O’Brien.’

‘So twenty plus two is?’

‘Twelve.’

The school bell rang, making it possible for eight-year-old Robert Symes to go home in one piece—and for Zoë O’Brien to cast away visions of herself banging the boy’s head on his desk.

‘Books away, everyone. Quietly please. Leave your jotters on the table as you go out.’ She stood and watched her class file from the room. Within two minutes the classroom was quiet and empty. She leaned back on her desk and rolled her head to ease the muscles that had been stiffening in her neck. This was her second posting, and she had been teaching at Hartwell Primary for two weeks. At twenty-three years of age, she still took teaching seriously enough to commit the larger part of her enthusiasm and energy into it. Nearly. Young as she was, sometimes it still left her somewhat drained at the end of the day.

She made her way down to the staff room, toting a bagful of books for marking, and listened to the sounds of the school emptying itself of children.

‘Another day over, Zoë.’ Mary Whitlock from primary three joined her. ‘Are you marking that lot tonight?’

‘Probably,’ Zoë answered, smiling back. She always regarded Mary Whitlock as a typical teacher: unmarried, hair drawn back in a bun, frameless glasses over a sharp nose, wearing a tweed skirt, cardigan and flat-heeled, sensible shoes. It was an erroneous image. A stereotype.

Zoë knew teachers were more diverse nowadays. Her own shoes were light, with half-raised heels. Nylons covered her shapely legs, and her skirt flirted fashionably a few inches above her knees. The pale green blouse had a V-neck from which her throat swept up to a round and resolute chin. Facially, she did not match the stereotypical teacher at all. Tousled, springy curls of blonde hair framed high cheekbones, and almost-feline, green eyes slanted upward slightly, half-closing invitingly when she smiled. Her mouth was wide, her smile revealing even, white teeth.

When she had joined Hartwell, conjecture and curiosity amongst the male staff had been extensive. Mr Carrington from primary four had observed that she reminded him of ‘sun, sand, sea and St. Tropez.’ Ally Crawford, assistant in primary six, observed that if he were ‘on his deathbed and the lovely Miss O’Brien leant over and smiled and looked at him with those gorgeous eyes, he would die a happy man!’ Bob Grinstead, janitor and leading authority on all school matters, proclaimed somewhat more succinctly that if he were ‘twenty-five years younger and that new teacher wore them short shorts she wears in the gym, he’d slip ‘er one over the vaulting horse before she had time to turn round and blow ‘er whistle!’

Mary Whitlock held the staff room door open for Zoë. ‘All work and no play, dear,’ she chided.

Zoë dumped the pile of books onto a table and laughed. ‘Yes, I know. But there isn’t a lot goes on in Hartwell. Maybe I’ll join the squash club or something.’

‘I wouldn’t!’ Marjorie Pringle, assistant head teacher and the person everyone turned to if they wanted something done, joined them. ‘You’ll end up very sweaty, get lumpy muscles in your thighs, and the men will ogle you unashamedly from the balcony!’ Marjorie took off black-rimmed spectacles and rubbed her eyes as the other women laughed in response. She was a lean, wiry woman of indeterminate age, and she had a strange combination

of pale skin, black eyebrows and dark ox-blood hair. 'Besides, I thought you were more of an artistic sort of person.'

'Right now I feel a nothing sort of person!'

'Getting to you, is it?'

'Sometimes.' Zoë shook her head. 'How do people keep it up year after year?'

'Like us you mean?' Mary Whitlock smiled. 'I sometimes wonder myself.'

'You have to maintain a sense of humour,' Marjorie said, 'and retain a sensible amount of alcohol to numb the pain.'

'That sounds like a good idea.' Zoë said, smiling.

'What, the sense of humour or the gin and tonic with ice and a slice of lemon that awaits us at the Ploughman's Rest?'

'The drink. I can work on the sense of humour another time.'

Within ten minutes, Zoë and Marjorie were comfortably settled at a table in the lounge bar of the Ploughman's Rest, arguably the most up-market of Hartwell's public houses. It was hospitable within an Old World setting of oak beams and brass, an open log fire and a warm, leathery ambience. Adjacent to the lounge was a snug, a public bar and restaurant that served some of the finest food within a thirty-mile radius.

Zoë took a long sip from her drink, closed her eyes and sat back. 'Nice idea. Thanks, Marjorie.'

'It's nice to have your company.' Marjorie put her glass down. 'So what would you be doing otherwise?'

'Hmm. Back to the flat. Mark books. Listen to music, watch some telly, go to bed. Not very exciting, is it?'

'Didn't you say at your interview that you were into music and acting? I seem to remember your CV having references about drama school somewhere?'

Zoë nodded and smiled. 'Guildford. Three years. Three beautiful years.'

'Now I can see some enthusiasm!'

'I loved it. Loved the stage—and the challenge of it all.'

'And now you're teaching? Any special reason?'

'It's a long story. I did all the usual things at school, pantomimes and plays—all the theatre things. Then when I left school and got involved with the local Operatic Society, I really got the taste for it. Everything seemed to

work out for me. I became a big star in a little town! Then, as I say, I got a place at Guildford and went down there. For three years.'

'And?'

'And mum and dad convinced me that teaching was a better long-term prospect than the theatre.' Zoë toyed with her drink.

Marjorie watched her for a while. 'I suspect that your parent's advice wasn't exactly based on an informed evaluation of your prospects within the entertainment industry?' she said, finally, watching as Zoë shrugged. 'And I suspect that that advice was linked to a misplaced assumption that theatre people are generally odd, promiscuous, gay, on drugs or mentally unstable,' Marjorie went on. 'Which is probably true.' She finished her drink. 'So you went to college, did your teacher training, got through your placements and now they'll be very proud of you.'

'Probably.' Zoë stared into her glass.

'Probably! Of course they will be, Zoë.'

'Well . . . I lost them, Marjorie. Both of them. In a car crash. They were on their way up to my graduation.'

'Zoë, I'm so sorry. I didn't realise . . .'

Zoë smiled at Marjorie but her eyes were sad. 'No, it's OK, Marjorie. Well, no, sod it, it isn't OK. But life has to go on, doesn't it?' Her eyes were filling up and she shook her curls angrily. 'Hell, now I'm starting to swear. Next thing it'll be tears. Shall we have another?'

When Marjorie got back with fresh drinks, Zoë had gotten herself together, and she smiled as the other woman sat down again. 'Sorry for all that,' Zoë said. 'These things jump out at you just when you think you've got them tucked away somewhere safe.'

'No apology needed. Listen, if you love the stage so much why not give the Players a try?'

'The Players?'

'To give them their full title, the Hartwell Amateur Musical Players. I'm their secretary. Don't ask me why. I got dragged in eight years ago and have been there ever since.'

'Come to think of it, someone did mention them to me,' Zoë said. 'Sounds interesting, Marjorie.'

'Out of school and to my drinking partners, I'm Marge.'

'OK, Marge.'

Free Excerpt The Players by David George

'And as secretary to the Players, I would be negligent in my duty if I didn't, first of all, try to recruit you into their ranks.'

'And second?'

'Secondly, I should warn you of the pitfalls and setbacks of joining such a troupe.'

'Don't forget, I've been involved in this sort of thing before.'

'In a town as small as Hartwell?'

'Well . . . no. Not quite.'

'Right. Well, here the Players are viewed with great suspicion by probably eighty percent of the town, but fortunately that same eighty percent still come to see the shows. They must either enjoy them or come from morbid curiosity. Remember what I said about theatre folk a while ago?'

Zoë smiled. 'Promiscuous, odd, gay, druggies and mentally unstable. Sounds like fun!'

'There are some in this town who'd gladly attribute all of those things to the Players, so be warned.'

'They aren't serious, are they?'

'They are. There are a few in the Players who are their own worst enemy.' Marjorie looked over her heavy spectacles at Zoë. 'Believe me, I have watched from the sidelines and seen romances and affairs started. Some have been rather romantic and others positively sordid. I have seen goings-on between people in this town that would make your waters turn. I was on stage myself once, just the chorus, you understand, but I speak from an informed position.'

'Well, I suppose I'll have to keep my wits about me in that case,' Zoë laughed.

'My dear, you'd need to keep more than your wits about you. What comes over some of these people when they get anywhere near a stage, I cannot fathom.'

'I'll bear that in mind. When does all this start, Marge?'

'They're having their first committee meeting tonight, if this is Tuesday.'

'It is.'

'Right. Well, when they choose the show, and the dates and what have you, the first open meeting will usually be about two weeks after that.'

'What shows do they usually put on?'

‘Most of the standards. *Oklahoma! Carousel. South Pacific.* It mainly depends on the membership at any one time—how many and who’s available to play the parts.’

‘Like?’

‘Well, there are our regulars. You won’t have been around long enough to have met them yet. Gloria Holby? The vet’s wife?’

Zoë shook her head.

‘Well, his partner, anyway. She’s a very glam type and quite talented, I suppose. A wee bit of a prima donna if you ask me.’ Marjorie looked over her glasses again. ‘Then there’s Roger Earle. Fancies himself and anything in skirts. You might say a pain in the arse!’

Zoë laughed. ‘Marge, that doesn’t sound at all like you!’

‘It isn’t really. I heard our chairman call Roger that once. Arthur Munningford! He’s one to talk. Harmless enough, but I wouldn’t like to be left alone with him! A little bit creepy!’

‘Hmm. Who else? How about the nice ones?’

‘Well, there’s Stanley Pellman. Lovely little man who does the music—but so lonely. He needs mothering.’

‘So?’ Zoë raised an eyebrow at Marjorie.

‘So let someone *else* mother him. I’ve been single too long to get myself overly involved with the angst-laden problems of complicated single men, my dear.’ Marjorie chuckled and finished her drink. ‘Mind you, if I *were* to be involved with anyone, hormones permitting, then it would be with our director, Tom Hamilton. Tall, dark and handsome; just add your own cliché. It’s probably the gin talking, Zoë, but *there* is a man at whose feet I would happily fall in most unladylike supplication. Between you and me, I would risk my teacher’s pension over such a man but, unfortunately, there is an age difference, and his wife got there first!’

They laughed together.

‘Attractive married men . . .’ Zoë shook her head. ‘Now that’s an area I keep away from, Marge.’

‘Because of . . . Or just because?’

‘Because of. That’s another trauma from my murky past. Too heavy, too painful and something I don’t wish to repeat.’

‘Or talk about I suspect. Goodness knows I’ve already stirred up enough unpleasant memories for you for one day.’

‘That’s OK. It’s nice just to talk sometimes.’ Zoë smiled brightly.

Marjorie looked at her watch. ‘Time to go, I think.’ She rose to her feet a little unsteadily. ‘I hope I haven’t put you off the Players, dear. In truth, they’re a bunch of people with oversized egos and a proclivity for showing off in public. But in my opinion, if you love acting and the stage so much, then you should indulge yourself. You deserve it.’

‘No, I’m not put off at all.’ Zoë rose with her. ‘It sounds like something that might just perk my social life up a bit. I shall give it some serious thought.’

Outside, at the steps that fronted the car park, Zoë pulled her collar around her neck. She checked that she had locked her Citroen 2CV. ‘It’s only five minutes to the square,’ she said. ‘I’ll keep my licence and join you in the walk, since I’m heading that way.’

A BMW swept into the park and stopped just beyond them. A tall man got out and slammed the door. There was a series of bleeps and flashing amber lights as he locked it, then he looked across at the two women. He paused at the pub door.

‘Hallo, Marge. I thought that was you.’

‘Hello, Roger.’

‘I’m in a rush right now. See you at the meeting later?’

‘Yes, of course.’

And he was through the door and gone. Marjorie raised her eyebrows above the dark spectacle frames. ‘Always in a rush. That’s Roger Earle. I was telling you about him earlier,’ she said.

‘The “anything in skirts” man.’ Zoë smiled. ‘Well, he didn’t seem to notice me!’

‘Oh, he will have. Mark my words.’ Marjorie took Zoë’s arm, and together they set off in the direction of the town square. ‘What you see of Roger isn’t necessarily what you get,’ she said. ‘And what Roger sees is usually exaggerated!’

Act One – Scene Two

‘Without a word of a lie they were like . . . like that!’ Roger Earl’s well-manicured hands curled around two imaginary spheres and weighed them speculatively.

‘What were?’ Jim Griffin asked, looking over the top of his beer glass.

‘Her breasts.’ Roger picked up his gin and tonic and arched an eyebrow, aware that his audience was in a state of rapt anticipation. He tidied the pale pink cuffs of his shirt, where they protruded elegantly beyond the dark blue jacket sleeves, and allowed the interest to build. ‘She was wearing this silky sort of top—and nothing underneath. I mean, tits out to here and nipples like coach bolts! I tell no lie, Jim. I didn’t know where to look first!’

Jim took a swig from his pint and nodded in sympathy.

‘Anyway, I told her who I was and that I’d come to see if she’d be interested in joining the Players this year. Before I could say anymore, she had the door open. “I *know* what you’re here for,” she says.’

‘And did she?’ asked Terry Ward, the other half of Roger’s audience.

‘Did she what?’

‘Did she know what you were there for?’

‘Well, she bloody soon found out!’ Roger lit a cigarette. ‘I mean . . . I didn’t know who the hell she was, but she’d obviously heard of *me!*’

‘Well, of course,’ said Jim dryly.

‘Anyway, in I went. She just stood there and looked me straight in the eyes. “So tell me about the Players,” she says. “Tell me what it is that you all play at down there.”

‘I was sizing her up, you know, testing the water as it were, so I told her the straight-up stuff about how we put on musical shows, auditions, rehearsals. Quite innocent, you know?’

'Uh-huh.' Jim nodded, the look on his face suggesting that he was debating whether it was time to finish his drink and go home.

'Well, Jim, you may not believe this, but she came right up close to me with her great long lashes fluttering and those gorgeous protuberances almost touching my—'

'Proterber— what?'

'Protuberances. Tits.'

'Oh, right.'

'And she asks me what I think she would be like on the stage.'

'So what did you say?'

'Well, what *could* I say?'

'I don't know. What?'

'I told her that I imagined she would be sensational *anywhere!*' Roger laughed again. 'Before I could get away, she had me up against the sideboard and was definitely looking for a rehearsal!'

Jim drained his pint and looked at his watch. He'd heard it all before. He knew from past experience that Roger was about to expand on his erotic fantasies. 'And thus began a beautiful friendship, eh, Roger?' he said.

'And thus began an hour and a half of action in her bed, more like! I might tell you, she came through that audition with flying colours!'

'So did she join the Players, after all this?'

'I don't think she could keep away. She played Laurie in *Oklahoma!* that year. Before the show, I used to take her under the stage where they store all the old costumes and props and give her a good seeing to. Every night. Monday to Friday and twice on the Saturday matinee. She managed to sing notes that not even Sarah Brightman could reach after that!'

'I honestly don't know how you get away with it, Roger,' Jim said.

'Nor do I sometimes, Jim,' Roger said, laughing. 'Live dangerously, keep your head below the parapet and keep on the move! That's all a man can do.'

'Tell that to your Virginia. I'm sure she'll be very understanding.' Jim shook his head and grinned. 'I must go. See you, Roger. Cheers, Bill.'

The man walked away. Roger raised his finger to the barman for a refill.

Bill looked pointedly at his own watch. 'Are you staying all night, Rog? It's half after six.'

‘It’s the first meeting of the Players,’ Roger stated, blowing a plume of smoke over the bar. ‘Not really worth going home first. Will you have another?’

‘No thanks. The wife’ll give me hell as it is!’ Bill got off his stool and buttoned his jacket. ‘Have a good meeting then.’

‘Sure.’ Roger raised his new drink. ‘Cheers, Bill.’

The bar door closed softly behind the retreating figure, and Roger Earl, only son of a retired Inland Revenue officer—the Earl half of Carforth-Earl Financial Services—and the possessor of a suspected peptic ulcer, was left on his own.

He leaned his elbows on the bar and studied his reflection, which looked back at him between the bottles fronting the mirrored wall. He wasn’t disenchanted with the image. Brown, unfashionably long hair flowed across a high forehead in gentle waves. Grey eyes sat on each side of a longish, straight nose with elongated nostrils from which two deeply etched lines ran down to bracket the small, thin mouth. The end result was an expression, considered by most people to be one of arrogant disdain. Roger, however, perceived the image as that of a man exhibiting quiet confidence and superiority. A public school look. A manifestation of someone born with an extra share of intelligence and an inherited, inborn superiority.

Not that Roger was by any means highborn. He had never really come to terms with the fact that his father had lacked the ambition to be anything higher in life than an Inland Revenue inspector. Roger envied the rich and aristocratic. He gazed longingly at his reflection in the mirror, staring through it and beyond to a world of manor houses, country retreats, Range Rovers, green Wellington boots, Barbour coats, game beats and English Springers.

And the social life! Countless shoots, receptions, parties. All those ripely developed young debutantes sipping champagne cocktails, smelling of Giorgio and bored to death—just waiting to be peeled out of their expensive designer dresses.

‘Roger!’

It wasn’t a whisper or a shout, but something in between. More like a hiss, a chilling sound that could strike fear in the heart of the strongest soul—let alone that of Roger Earl.

‘Ginnie!’ he said. “Hello, love.”

Virginia Earl had one of those faces that cartoonists love. It exhibited anger, joy, misery and humour with the essential and exaggerated characteristics straight out of the 'Beginners Guide to Cartooning.' Right this moment, beneath the fringed, dark hair, the eyes were narrow slits, the nostrils slightly flared and the lips compressed into a thin, forbidding line. It was an expression of angry suspicion that Roger knew well.

'I thought I'd find you here!' she rasped. Her teeth were now bared in a smile for the benefit of the bar's other customers. Roger wasn't fooled and flinched visibly.

'Well, I was working late,' he explained. 'The Players meeting is at seven, so I thought I'd have a quick G and T and then go straight there.' He forced a smile. 'Do you . . . want something?'

'I just want to see my husband once in a while,' Virginia snapped, her eyes flicking around the bar, checking, dismissing, seeing all, missing nothing.

'Oh, come on, Ginnie . . .'

'Don't *come on* me, Roger! When I hear that from you, it always means trouble!' Virginia's lips hardly moved, but each word cut chillingly through the air. 'Are you meeting anyone?'

Roger spread a hand in innocent supplication. 'Ginnie, come on—'

'There you go again, Roger!'

'There I go where?'

'You're doing that *come on* thing.'

'Look, sweetheart, I'm not meeting anyone. I'm going to the meeting—and I'm coming home afterwards. Maybe a drink or two first, but—'

'And I suppose that *witch* will be there?'

'Which witch?'

'That Gloria witch.'

'Oh, come—,' Roger began, but then caught himself. 'Look, Gloria's on the committee. Of course she'll be there. There's absolutely nothing going on between Gloria and me.'

Virginia smiled. It reminded Roger of a TV wildlife programme he'd once seen: 'All about Alligators.'

'I'm sure that's not from lack of trying on your part,' she said sweetly. 'I wouldn't trust that over-hormoned marriage breaker any more than the rest of the female members in your precious Players.'

Before Roger could protest further, his wife revealed her public smile again. She turned for the door. 'So I'll see you about half past nine then, Roger.' Her high heels clicked on the wood block floor. Roger gulped at his drink thankfully, and then nearly choked as Virginia turned back to him, as though it were an afterthought. Once again her eyes bored into his.

'Oh, Roger, darling,' she said softly, 'if I *do* catch you playing around with her, or any other woman for that matter, then be very aware that what happened to Winston last month will be nothing compared to what I'll do to you.'

The nostrils flared briefly in challenge.

Then Virginia was gone, leaving Roger staring blankly at his forlorn reflection in the bar mirror. Winston was their new kitten. A tom. Roger winced inwardly and finished his drink. The man behind the bar collected his glass and raised his eyebrows in query.

'Another, Roger?' he asked.

'No. I'd better go, George. Players meeting, you know.'

'Is it that time of year again already?'

'Every October, George. The boards beckon!'

'Rehearsing already, then?'

'No, not yet. Tonight's just a committee meeting to get things rolling once again. Choose a show. Set dates. That sort of thing.'

'Well, behave yourself.'

'Me?' Roger lifted his hands. 'I always do!' Roger's good humour was returning as quickly as it had been destroyed by Virginia's appearance moments ago. 'If I can't . . .'

George finished, chuckling.

'You've got it!' Roger made for the door. 'See you, George.'

Outside, he slipped into the dark-green BMW 3 Series, let the window down, lit a cigarette and started up. Briefly he wondered if Gloria *would* be there tonight. She wasn't the most reliable member on the committee, but she was by far the most decorative. In a way, it was sad that Virginia's intuitive venom was so misdirected—or at least so unjustified. Try as he might, Roger never seemed to get anywhere with Gloria. Maybe this year things would be different. Going on stage did strange things to people. It released their inhibitions, liberated their libidos and—wham! Panties off and party time.

Roger eased the car out of the car park, and then gunned it down the road with a series of sweet gear changes. He felt good again. Roger had an extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity, and it was never very long before he would bounce back from life's little setbacks! And anyway, it had been a long time between last year's show and the start of the new season. Far too long to go without contemplating Gloria Holby's incredible backside!

He headed into the darkening night with keen anticipation.

Act One – Scene Three

Gloria Holby hooked her thumbs into the sides of her panties and wisped them down to her knees, stepped out of them and tossed the scanty silk to one side. From behind her came a strangled gasp. She turned to the man who stood in just a shirt and socks, frantically tugging at his knotted tie.

'What's wrong, Brian?' she asked, raising an elegant eyebrow. 'Never seen a bum before?'

'Not like yours!' he choked. The tie was getting tighter instead of coming off, and his face reddened as he slowly strangled himself. Gloria ambled to the king-size bed, everything about her naked body irresistibly mobile. She was built in a Page 3 mode rather than possessing the qualities that might qualify her for the pages of *Elle* or *Vogue*. Whatever part of her was designed to stand out or be rounded stood out proudly and rounded agreeably. Gloria looked after her body—and it looked after her. From the long dark hair to the delicately painted toenails, everything was inspected, cosseted, creamed,

dusted, trimmed and polished daily. Now she was reclining appealing on the bed. Ready, but a little impatient.

'Come on, Brian,' she said, watching the man as he wrestled and finally won the battle with the obstinate tie. 'And for God's sake, take your socks off.'

Brian hopped across to the bed on one leg as he tugged a sock from the other. 'Are you sure this is safe?'

'I've locked the doors,' Gloria answered, 'and Harold isn't due back until eight. Do stop worrying.'

'Eight!' The man looked at his watch. 'That's only two hours!'

'So what do you want to do, Brian, move in permanently?' she asked sarcastically. 'I have to be away for a meeting by seven, so do get a move on!'

Gloria wasn't at all sure whether she fancied Brian now that he was undressed. When she had met him a couple of days ago at the Hartwell Hunt Social, he had looked wistfully boyish in his beautifully fitting blue suit. From the moment she had been introduced to him, he had followed her around with a resolute persistence that stopped just short of him getting on his knees and begging to be allowed to remain within Chanel sniffing range. One thing had led to another, as it usually did with Gloria, and the end result now stood before her, all ribs and collarbones, with a masculinity that did little to invoke images of searing passion, nor produce the slightest tremble in her loins.

Gloria was not at all sure why she was addicted to these secret assignations. Well, she *was*, but in truth she didn't like to acknowledge that her partner, Harold Cartwright, local veterinarian and rugby player of note, seemed fonder of stroking animals and making close bodily contact with heavily built rugby forwards than he did with her. Gloria had been brought up to ignore the existence of all things physical—especially if they were pleasurable. The only daughter of an extremely wealthy Haslemere stockbroker, she had been pushed ungraciously by her un-paternal parents into one of those 'excellent places for young girls.' There, it was hoped, she would be taught how to become independent and motivated and develop into a young lady. All it taught Gloria in her first year was that if she indulged in exploratory and furtive groping with spotty boys, out of school and in the middle of the night, some jealous, budding lesbian school chum might spitefully split on her and thereby create a heap of unnecessary trouble she didn't need.

Just such a one did. The first time it happened, she received a very strong lecture of advice to change her ways. Extra gym and netball were prescribed, supposedly to quench her unladylike desires. It didn't work. The budding lesbian, emboldened by Gloria's delicately balanced and untenable

position in the school, persisted in her attempts to attract Gloria into her dormitory bed. Gloria tired of her doggedness. One night, affecting a giggling submission, she suggested that the two of them sneak down to the gym and go for a midnight swim.

Nighties off and in the water, Gloria played hard to get. Amid muffled screams and giggles, she climbed from the pool, wiggled her bottom enticingly and, pursued by the other girl, made straight for the gym instructor's office. She leapt inside, made for the wall where keys were hanging and found one marked 'store'.

'In here, with the air beds!' she urged, and as her eager and excited suitor rushed in, Gloria nipped smartly back around the door, closed it and locked it securely.

'That'll sort you out,' she had muttered in triumph, retrieving the two discarded nightdresses and making her way back to the dorm.

Mr Farquarson, being the only male member of the school staff, had been less than amused when he opened his office the following morning. A nubile and naked girl of tender years was *not* what he needed in his office—especially when he had only two years to go before retiring with an unblemished record and a comfortable pension.

Quickly wrapped in a towel, the girl had been transported, shivering and weeping to the principal's office. There started an enquiry that had resulted in some very difficult questions for Mr. Farquarson, who managed to sound convincing enough to hold on to his job.

Miss Jamison, the principal, had clucked sympathetically at the poor girl's dreadful experience and taken her under her wing to try and ease the effect that such trauma could visit upon her young and impressionable mind. This was the start of a mutually beneficial affair that was to last until the girl finally left the school, with flying colours and top grades in all her academic subjects.

The outcome of the investigation found Gloria guilty of persistent disobedience, disruptive behaviour and politically incorrect homophobic attitudes. Her case was not helped in any way when she called the principal a 'skinny old dyke!' She was promptly expelled.

From all this, Gloria learned three things. One was that her parents never listened to her, nor understood her. Two, that cold baths and physical exercise were no substitute for warm baths and physical sex. Three, that

whilst sexual approaches by other women could sometimes be unpredictably pleasurable, gay women should be treated with suspicion!

Back home and discarded as being inappropriate and detrimental to the family image, she was settled into a job at a beauty salon and, in a final display of love and affection, her parents set up a trust fund for her—a considerable portion of which would become available if and when she reached the age of twenty-five. Gloria found it hard to wait. At twenty-three she had gone to see her bank manager, leant across his large desk and asked for an advance against the fund. On the strength of the security of the forthcoming trust fund, together with the intriguing quantity and quality of suntanned cleavage displayed in his 'in' tray, the manager had quickly consented. Just as quickly, Gloria had bought the old school building on the outskirts of Hartwell and converted its ground floor into a gymnasium and health centre. The upper floor became a comfortable, well-appointed living accommodation.

And it was here that she now lay, listening to the excited murmurings from Brian as he finally climbed onto the bed beside her.

'Oh, Gloria, you're so . . . so—'

'Sshhh!' she snapped.

'But you are everyth—'

'Hush!' She pushed him away, her head cocked to one side, listening. From somewhere downstairs came a click, followed by a thump.

'Oh Christ!' Gloria sat up suddenly.

Brian's mouth dropped open. 'What is it?' he asked, fear dawning and draining what little colour there was from his cheeks.

'Harold!' she snapped, leaping off the bed and skipping swiftly to the bedroom door, everything bouncing and bobbing sympathetically with the sudden movement.

'Harold?' Brian gulped and scrabbled for his clothes.

Gloria had edged the door open a crack. 'Is that you, darling?' she called.

A deep affirmative reply floated up the stairs. She motioned to Brian to hurry up his dressing, a somewhat superfluous suggestion since he was diving into his clothes as though his life depended on it. By now he was likely convinced that it did.

'I'm just taking a bath,' Gloria called down. 'You're early tonight.'

To Brian's horror, she stepped out and onto the landing. He yelped soundlessly as his zip caught his limp and petrified penis. Gloria was at the top of the stairs now.

'You'll find cold chicken and things in the fridge. I have to go to the Players meeting.'

'Don't worry. I'll get something.' The voice was closer now, wafting up the stairs—deep bass and totally alarming to the man who was crouched trembling behind the bedroom door.

'Had a good day?' Gloria asked coolly.

'So-so.' The voice retreated a little. 'Foot rot, liver fluke. Two dogs put down and four castrations!'

Brian's expression blanched and he looked sick.

'Sounds fascinating,' Gloria answered. 'See you when I've finished.' She came back into the bedroom and retrieved Brian from behind the door.

'Listen!' she hissed, 'go across the landing and through the second door on the right!'

'But what if . . .?'

'Just listen! Go down the spiral stair. That takes you to the sunroom. Go out by the door marked fire exit. And *quietly!*'

The man glanced at the door, back at Gloria, at the door again, swallowed hard and did as he was told.

'Will I see you again?' he whispered, turning back at the door.

'Piss off!' Gloria hissed.

She drew in a deep breath, giving the man time to get clear, then ran some water into the en-suite bath, just for authenticity, then finally let it run back down the plughole. Men! She sniffed to herself. Two typical examples. One little weed who was hardly up to the job anyway and couldn't leave quickly enough when things got difficult—and one downstairs who had looked up at her standing naked and available and who was obviously more interested in cold chicken breasts!

She sprayed Chanel No. 5 between hers, leaned into a wispy excuse for a bra and fastened it thoughtfully. It might have been quite exciting if Harold *had* come up, she mused, if only to get a reaction. Does he even *see* me, she wondered? Does he know I'm alive? God knows.

She looked at her bedside clock. If she didn't get a move on, she'd be late for the Players meeting. Back to another year with the same old people, most

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of whom thought they had acting talent and didn't. And those that did rammed it down your throat at every opportunity. Opinionated creeps who wouldn't know talent if it ran up their trouser legs! Another year of Roger Earl and Stanley Pellman!

Still, she thought to herself, at least Stan noticed her and looked at her. Roger did, too, but he leered rather than looked. Stan . . . well, poor Stan, he was different. Stan regarded her, when he thought she wasn't aware of it, with a secretive and burning lust! It was nice. Exciting!

She glanced at herself in the wall-to-wall mirrors and eyed her body reflectively. It looked good. Pretty sleek. Oh yes, Stanley looked at her all right! Stan positively *ogled*!

Happier, she finished dressing.