

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE

77

The following morning. The room has been tidied of all the tropical souvenirs and dolls to a neatness that gives it an oddly deserted look. In the hallway outside the arch a large suitcase stands as a firm statement of imminent departure. PEARL, dressed for outdoors in black, is standing by the window, ostensibly on the lookout for a taxi, but actually staring into space in a sad reverie. OLIVE, wearing a housecoat, enters from the archway, carrying a cup of tea, with a biscuit balanced on the saucer. PEARL turns.

OLIVE: Thought you might like a cup of tea.

PEARL: No thanks. The taxi should be here any minute.

OLIVE: [*Flatly*] Half past eight. Go on, get it down, it won't kill you.

[*OLIVE is masking an immense inner dreariness with a bitter, matter-of-fact calm.*]

When'll you pick up the rest of your things?

PEARL: There's a taxi truck coming on Monday.

OLIVE: I'll tell Emma, she'll be home. [*Indicating the room with a jerk of her head*] Notice anythin' different?

PEARL: You've cleaned the place up. I knew you was doin' it. I heard you after I'd gone to bed.

OLIVE: Didn't mean to, y'know. I started off tryin' to fix up what they broke. After that I couldn't seem to stop.

[*Laughing mirthlessly*] Emma always says tryin' to shift heavy furniture on your own's a sign you're crooked on the world. Wonder what spring-cleanin' at two o'clock in the morning means?

[*PEARL makes no comment.*]

Just you don't want to go to bed, I s'pose.

PEARL: [*Indirectly*] When d'you expect Barney back?

OLIVE: Can't tell. The way he slammed out of here last night, he could have been heading straight for Cairns. But if I know him, he'll be back before the day's out.

PEARL: If you know him. Somehow, Olive, I don't think you do.

OLIVE: After seventeen years?

PEARL: All the time you talk about years—how long you've been doing this—how long you've been going there—

and what does it prove? Nothin'. There's not one thing I've found here been anything like what you told me.

OLIVE: [*Tiredly*] Oh Pearl.

PEARL: No oh Pearl about it. Last night, when I couldn't sleep, I figured out what's the matter with you. You're blind to everything outside this house and the lay-off season.

OLIVE: I'm blind to what I want to be.

PEARL: All right. But the least you can do is to see what you've got as it really is. Take a look at this place now you've pulled down the decorations. What's so wonderful about it? Nothing! It's just an ordinary little room that's a hell of a lot the worse for wear. And if you'd only come out of your day-dream long enough to take a grown-up look at the lay-off, that's what you'd find with the rest of it.

OLIVE: [*Steadily-voiced*] Listen, I'm gonna say this just once. All I told you about Roo and Barney and their time here was Gospel true—I'll swear it—for every year up until now. And if it hasn't been true for this year, maybe you're the last should be squealing about it.

PEARL: [*Her eyes widening*] You're blamin' me, aren't you? Because I was here instead of Nancy.

OLIVE: Yes.

[*BARNEY enters and crosses the front verandah.*]

PEARL: I'm wasting my breath, then. If you can't see further than that, I'm just wasting my breath.

[*BARNEY knocks at the front door.*]

OLIVE: [*Stiffly*] That'll be your taxi. [*Looking through the window*] No it's not, it's Barney.

[*She makes a move for the archway, but PEARL checks her.*]

PEARL: You're not gonna let him in?

OLIVE: Why not?

PEARL: He'll only try to talk me round.

OLIVE: [*With a shade of relish*] We'll see who knows him best, you or me.

[*PEARL sits erect and uncompromising. OLIVE opens the front door and BARNEY enters.*]

Well, wherever it was, they certainly threw you out early.

BARNEY: Yeah.

[*He enters the hallway and stops before the case. OLIVE speaks,*

shutting door.]

OLIVE: You're just in time to say goodbye to Pearl.

BARNEY: [*Impersonally*] I thought she'd be going.

[*As he tosses his coat on to the sideboard he sighs PEARL.*]

Oh, 'Lo, Pearlie.

PEARL: [*Musically*] Hello.

OLIVE: [*Cautiously*] I don't wanna spoil anything, and, besides, I haven't had me breakfast. In the kitchen if you want me.

[*She exits. There is a pause, tense on PEARL's part, flat on BARNEY's. He is staring at the suitcase and finally touches it with his foot.*]

BARNEY: You thinkin' of carryin' this somewhere?

PEARL: [*Strained*] There's a taxi comin'.

BARNEY: Oh. I was gunna say, you'd better let me give you a hand. A thing that size, no job for a woman.

[*He wanders away from her. PEARL watches him, then blurs out without thinking.*]

PEARL: Where've you been to?

BARNEY: Eh?

[*He comes out of his abstraction to look at her, and laughs, shaking his head.*]

Oh no, fair go, that's the question for a missus. And you're leavin', remember!

[*She turns away, embarrassed, and he appraises her clothes.*]

'Struth, I'll bet that's the most respectable get-up in the whole of your wardrobe. I don't mind you walkin' out on me, lovey, but do you have to look as if you're leaving a corpse?

PEARL: [*Putting on gloves*] I knew you wouldn't be able to stand the thought of me being respectable again.

BARNEY: Pearlie, I'll let you into a secret. You've never been anythin' else.

PEARL: [*Flashing*] Maybe I haven't been any second Nancy, but then I never set out to be.

BARNEY: [*Puzzled*] Why the hell pick on poor old Nance?

[*She maintains a tight-lipped silence.*]

If it comes to that, you're walkin' out for the very same reason she did.

PEARL: Nancy left to get married.

BARNEY: Only because she couldn't get what she wanted here.

PEARL: [*In sad exasperation*] You can still see yourself as the biggest prize in the packet, can't you? Well, I might have had some idea when I came into this of turning it into a—*a* little peace and security for myself. Yes, marryin' you. I was silly enough to have thought it would have worked out. But not after last night. And it isn't only findin' out you're the great has-been. It's what you wanted me to do with Vera.

BARNEY: She was asked to the races. One afternoon.

PEARL: Yeah, and I know what sort of runnin' goes on! I got caught up with it myself round her age, and I've ended up here with you. Well, it's not going to happen to my daughter. She's gunna have the sorta respectability that doesn't need a black dress to show it.

BARNEY: All right, Pearl, all right. You go ahead and become the strictest mothering barmaid in the business. I'm not tryin' to stop you.

[*A slight pause, then she speaks on a note of reluctant curiosity.*]

PEARL: There's just one thing I'd like to know.

BARNEY: What?

[*There is the noise of a car pulling up offstage, and a horn sounds.*]

There's your taxi. [*Telling through the window*] Goodo sport, be with you in a minute. [*Turning back to PEARL*] What was it you wanted to know?

PEARL: That first morning you—you said there was three things a woman needed to have. You never told me what the third one was.

BARNEY: Don't you think it's a bit late for that now? And you haven't got it, anyway.

[*Her lip quivers at the rebuff.*]

Oh, don't let it worry you. I've only ever met one woman who had.

PEARL: [*quietly*] Nancy.

BARNEY: Yeah. [*Wryly*] And even she didn't have enough to keep the two of us together. I'll carry your bag out.

[*He picks up her case as OLIVE enters.*]

OLIVE: That the taxi?

BARNEY: Yeah.

[*He moves out with the suitcase and during the following crosses the verandah to exit offstage. PEARL goes up to the hallway.*]

OLIVE: [reserved] Well—see you Monday then, will I?

PEARL: Yeah. And you'll tell Clintie...

OLIVE: You've got a headache and won't be in today. I know.

[PEARL hesitates and then, a little clumsily, speaks softly.]

PEARL: I'm sorry, Olive. I wasn't the type, that's all.

[*She exits. OLIVE moves to the front door to watch her departure.*]

ROO enters down the stairs.]

ROO: [gruffly] 'S that Pearl going?

OLIVE: Yes, Barney's seeing her off.

ROO: Oh. He's back, is he?

OLIVE: I said so, didn't I?

[*The taxi starts up offstage and drives away. OLIVE closes the door.*]

ROO: [eying the room over] You've taken down the dolls and all that other stuff.

OLIVE: Last night. [*Catching his reproachful glance, irritated*] Oh, it's not just because you gave them to me. I took 'em down to dust, and those birds and butterflies, they just fell to pieces. You couldn't even touch them. Then the rest of it—well, some of the dolls were broken, and the shells looked so silly on their own, I just couldn't put them back.

ROO: I'll get you some new ones.

OLIVE: No, you won't. Plenty to waste your time on besides chasin' those things.

ROO: You always said you liked 'em.

OLIVE: I used to like a lot of things I ain't seen much of lately. A bit of a joke and a laugh, for instance. If I can do without that, I won't miss a few bloomin'—decorations.

ROO: Olive, that stoush had been brewin' for a long time.

And you saw what Barney did to me.

OLIVE [challenging him] What? He got full and brought home some bloke you don't like. That's all I saw.

ROO: [*another of his vain struggles for the right word*] Nobody—nobody else in the gang would have—ah—what's the

use?

[*A pause. He speaks distantly.*]

All I know is shaking hands with Dowd last night was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. And when I walked out of this room there was no feelin' in my fingers... [*Flexing them*] Like they'd been crushed or somethin'.

[*Staring at his hands*] That's just how it was—like they'd been crushed.

OLIVE: Righto, so it means a lot to all of you up North. But why the hell couldn't you leave it up there? It's got nothin' to do with our time down here, has it? Did you have to smash that up as well?

ROO: [*turning to her, sensing she is near tears*] I didn't mean to. Honest, Ol, that's one thing just seemed to happen.

OLIVE: It happened all right.

[*She whirls up to the archway just in time to meet EMMA making an entrance.*]

And what do you want? Can't you hear enough from the kitchen?

EMMA: [*indignantly*] I wasn't listenin'. I came up to get that cup and saucer.

OLIVE: Yeah. I'll bet.

[*She exits upstairs.*]

EMMA: [*in pretended affront*] Oh! [*Coming into the room and picking up the cup on the table*] She's got a nasty mind, that Olive. Bad enough to have to trail around pickin' up after her, but when she insults you for it... [*Looking at ROO who is staring moodily at the floor*] Here, you're not gonna let her get you down, are yer?

ROO: So you was listenin'.

EMMA: Course I was. I told you, it's the only way I can find out anythin'. And a mornin' like this, wouldn't miss it for all the tea in China. [*Relaxing enjoyably*] This is what I call interestin'. The lot of yez squabbling at last 'stead of all that playin' around went on other times. Only thing I'm sorry for is Nancy ain't here. She knew which way the wind was blowin', that one.

ROO: [*slowly*] Nancy got married.

EMMA: Nancy got out while the going was good, that's what Nancy did.

ROO: You think you know all about it, don't yer?

EMMA: I been round here long enough, ain't I? I bet I can tell you things you don't even remember. Like that first Sunday when they met yer at the Aquarium, and Nancy made that crack about being out of our depths, wasn't it? ROO: Somethin' about being out of our depths, wasn't it? EMMA: No. Thousands of fish all swimmin' in their tanks, but yer was the only two out of water. Real wag, I liked Nance.

ROO: I reckon we all did.

EMMA: Shrewd, though. She could buy and sell Olive.

ROO: I never noticed her shrewd.

EMMA: Oh, she was. She was.

ROO: [*in sudden resolve*] C'mon, Emma, you're supposed to know the lot. Whose fault do you reckon it was, mine or Barney's?

EMMA: What fault?

ROO: Oh, I don't just mean the blue last night—who's to blame for mecsin' up the whole thing?

EMMA: You're kiddin', aren't yer?

ROO: No, fair dinkum, I want to know.

EMMA: Well, I'll be blowed! [*Looking at him in astonishment*] How long did you think these lay-off seasons were gonna last—forever? They're not for keeps, you know; these are just—seasons.

ROO: I know, but whose fault was it we come a cropper?

EMMA: Nobody's fault, yer melon!

ROO: Don't be silly, it must be somebody's.

EMMA: [*exasperated*] Why must it? All that's happened is you've gone as far as you can go. You 'n' Barney 'n' Olive, you're too old for it any more.

ROO: Old?

EMMA: That's it—old! Take a look in the mirror.

ROO: Nobody tells me I'm old. I'm as good a man now as ever I was.

EMMA: Are yer? Then who the hell was that bloke Barney brought here last night? A mirage or somethin'?

ROO: [*subornly*] I ain't old! Old is—what you are, and—
and—

[*He gropes for a name and the only one he eventually finds is a*

shock to him.]

Tony Moreno.

[*After a moment he turns to survey his face questioningly in the mirror over the mantel. It is the action of doubt. From here on ROO is at the mercy of an entirely different conception of himself.*]

EMMA: I didn't mean you was up for the pension. But you ain't seventeen any more, either. Look, sit down a minute.

[*He refuses with a dogged shake of the head. She speaks curiously.*]

Strikes me you don't know what's hit you, do you?

ROO: All I know is something went wrong, and I reckon it was Barney.

EMMA: Well, maybe Barney had a bit more to do with it than you did, but he's been slippin' longer than you have, don't forget that.

ROO: [*strongly*] I ain't slipped. Never you say that. What I had was one lousy season.

EMMA: So far. That's the first.

ROO: You think there could be another bad as that?

EMMA: Lots of them. Don't you?

ROO: [*on a rising note*] You reckon I can't even earn a living any more?

EMMA: Yes, you can still earn a living. But that's not what we're talking about, is it?

[*There is a pause while he turns away from her. When he is still, she speaks.*]

Why do you think Barney lied about your back?

ROO: Lyin' comes as natural to him as skiting.

EMMA: Not always, it didn't. You listen—before Barney started to get the brush-off from women, he only skited. Now he lies. Work it out for yourself. When did he start lyin' about you? Eh?

[*He is dumb and she rises, bridling a little.*]

Yeah, I might be a damned fool around the place, but I can still nut that one out. You and Barney are two of a pair. Only the time he spent chasin' women, you put in being top dog! Well, that's all very fine and a lot of fun while it lasts, but last is one thing it just don't do. There's a time for sowing and a time for reaping—and reapin' is

what you're doing now.

[*She moves to pick up the cup and saucer, clearly intending to leave the room, but he stays her with a tired gesture, visualising his defeat for the first time.*]

ROO: Hang on, Emma. [*Drawing a deep breath*] I dunno . . . maybe you're talkin' sense.

EMMA: I am. 'N' if you'd had half an eye between yez, you would have seen what you was headin' for long ago.

ROO: I s'pose we would. Nobody stopped to look, that's all.

EMMA: Nancy did. And now it's time for the rest of yez.

ROO: What about Olive?

EMMA: Olive? Olive's a fool. I'll show you somethin'.

[*She puts the cup and saucer on the sideboard, rummages in the cupboard underneath, and drags out the seventeenth doll. She speaks with bitterness.*]

You see this? Middle of the night Olive sat here on the floor, huggin' this and howling. A grown-up woman, howling over a silly old kewpie doll. That's Olive for yer!

[*She tosses the doll onto the table, takes the cup and saucer and moves towards the kitchen. In the hallway she hesitates, however, places the cup and saucer on the hall table and goes upstairs to OLIVE. ROO stands, dazed with misery, then makes his way to pick up the doll and smooth its fuzzy skirts.*]

BARNEY: [*off, commandingly*] Bubba!

BUBBA: [*off*] You leave me alone.

[*BUBBA appears in the windows at the back verandah, followed by BARNEY. He seizes her arm as if to expostulate with her, but she drags herself free of him. ROO puts the doll aside on the piano top.*]

BUBBA: Let me go!

BARNEY: Don't be a fool! What difference will talking to Olive make?

BUBBA: She'll tell me whether it's true or not.

BARNEY: Why wouldn't it be?

[*They are both now in the room.*]

ROO: What is it?

BUBBA: Barney came and told me that the—the races are off.

BARNEY: I didn't. I said that I'm goin' and the boys are goin', but you're not, and—nobody else is.

ROO: That's right, Bub.

BARNEY: I fixed it at the Stadium last night. Told Dowdic you couldn't come.

BUBBA: Did you? Well, now I'll go down and tell him that I can come. Where's he staying?

BARNEY: Bubba, there's a big crowd of fellers livin' with him.

BUBBA: I don't care. You tell me where he is or I'll be waiting outside Young and Jackson's when you go down to meet him half past ten.

BARNEY: I'm not meetin' him Young and Jackson's.

BUBBA: You are. I heard you fix it with him last night.

[*BARNEY is helpless before the thrust of her vehemence, and ROO interrupts.*]

ROO: Now, just a moment, Bubba.

BUBBA: It's no use tryin' to talk me out of it, Roo.

ROO: Far as I'm concerned, you can go down and see him any time you want to. But first I reckon you oughta know the reason why you was asked to the races.

BARNEY: It was me. I was drunk!

BUBBA: You weren't the one that asked me. He did!

BARNEY: Didn't I go into your place and get you?

BUBBA: Yes, but he asked me. He sent you out of the room and told me not to—to take any notice of what you said.

Then he asked me.

ROO: Bubba, Dowd had been drinking as well. The pair of them. By this mornin' he's probably forgotten he ever met you.

BARNEY: Would you risk goin' down there and having him make a fool of you in front of all those other fellers?

ROO: Would you, Bubba?

[*She is silent. ROO's question forces an answer from her.*]

BUBBA: Yes.

BARNEY: [*amazed*] Well, what the hell's so important about goin' to the races?

BUBBA: He asked me.

BARNEY: I know, but even if he did . . .

BUBBA: He asked me! And he didn't call me B-bubba or kid, he wanted to know what my real name was, and when I told him, that's what he called me. Kathie. [*Turning*

away to roo] He might have been drinking, and this morning he might have forgotten like you said, but this is the only chance I've ever had of comin' close to—I dunno—whatever it is I've been watching all these years. You think I'll give that up?

BARNEY: Bubba, you don't know this Johnnie Dowd. He's not like me and Roo.

BUBBA: He is!

BARNEY: You don't know him.

BUBBA: He's more like you than—than they are.

BARNEY: Who?

BUBBA: [*avidly*] The others! Any of the fellers I've ever met down here.

BARNEY: [*viciously determined to disillusion her*] Who d'yer think caused that fight last night?

ROO: [*swiftly*] No, you hold on. The fight hadn't anything to do with this.

[*Pause.*]

Bubba, come over here.

[*He is sitting on the piano stool. She goes to him and he puts out his hand for her to take.*]

You're sure you know what it is you're after?

BUBBA: Yes.

[*She squats impulsively before him.*]

ROO: [*searchingly*] We've spoilt it for you, ain't we? A long time.

BUBBA: Not spoilt. It's—it's just that nothin' else is any good, that's all.

ROO: Even after what you saw last night.

BUBBA: That won't happen to me.

ROO: How can you be sure, Bub?

BUBBA: Because I won't let it! Dolls and breaking things, and—and arguments about who was best—what do they all matter? That wasn't the lay-off.

ROO: It's what it came to.

BUBBA: [*rising and dragging her hands away from him*] Well, it won't for me. I'll have what you had—the real part of it—but I'll have it differently. Some way I can have it safe and know that it's going to last.

ROO: [*softly*] Little Bubba—you've outgrown the lot of us,

haven't you?

BUBBA: [*now uncertain of herself*] I've got to at least try.

[*ROO rises and looks towards BARNEY.*]

ROO: Tell her where he's puttin' up.

BARNEY: [*after a pause and not very graciously*] The Coffee Palace. [*As she hugs ROO*] And he's going away Monday.

ROO: Never mind that. [*To BUBBA as she moves*] Now don't you go down there in front of all them fellers. You ring him up and arrange to meet him somewhere. D'you hear me?

BUBBA: All right.

ROO: 'N' don't make yourself cheap. Tell him you're ringing because you can't get any sense out of Barney.

BUBBA: Yes.

[*She moves over to BARNEY who is scowling over ROO's last remark, and asks, a little timidly:*]

Are you mad at me messin' up your day?

BARNEY: [*shrugging it off*] Aw, what's a day? I can still meet up with the rest of 'em. You go ahead. [*Kissing her cheek*]

All the best, Bub.

[*She moves to the French windows and looks back at them, eyes glistening.*]

BUBBA: No matter what happens, I'll always remember you, 'n' this house, 'n'—

ROO: Yeah, we know.

[*She turns and runs over back verandah to exit. BARNEY moves up to look after her.*]

BARNEY: If he doesn't treat her right I'll kick his insides out.

ROO: Yeah.

[*BARNEY hesitates a second, then moves in for the plunge.*]

BARNEY: Look, we might as well get this straight while we're at it. The mob is pulling out on Monday—up the Murray for the grapes. I'm going with them.

ROO: [*nodding*] With Dowd.

BARNEY: There's a crowd of us goin'.

ROO: [*quietly*] You're going with Dowd.

BARNEY: [*impatiently*] All right then, I'm going with Dowd. You want to make anythin' out of it?

ROO: Why should I? I don't bloody care any more.

BARNEY: [arrested, rather shocked] That fixes that, then. [Trying to regain his defiance] And I tell yer, it's not just that me money's runnin' out either. Last night was the finish for my books. We're poison to each other now. I reckon the only way out for both of us is to split up for a while.

ROO: Maybe it is.

BARNEY: I'll go up the Murray with them, and you can stay down here. That'll make a change for the two of us. Then, when the season comes on again, we can all meet up north—and who knows, we might be able to give it another burl. Whaddya say?

ROO: [in slow conviction] Only one thing wrong with that. BARNEY: What?

ROO: I ain't goin' up for the season.

BARNEY: [thunderstruck] You're not? Where you going then?

ROO: Nowhere. I'm staying here.

BARNEY: For the winter? You're crazy.

ROO: It won't be so bad.

BARNEY: Bad, me foot. You're talking about winter, re-member.

ROO: Olive lives through it. Millions of people do.

BARNEY: [forcibly] They was born here! You've lived in the sun all your life.

ROO: Time I made a change then.

[He is lighting a cigarette.]

BARNEY: But why? What the hell's the matter with the sun? ROO: [deeply] Nohin'. [Staring at the tiny flame of the match] The sun's great. It's just I—I've had too much of a good thing, that's all.

[He gently blows out the light.]

BARNEY: [mystified] Well, you're a beaut. Honest, I dunno what to make of you. It's like—like you was cuttin' off your nose to spite your face. Only you don't sound mad about it. [Trying a new tack] It wouldn't be anything on account of Bubba, would it?

ROO: [passively] No. Nohin' on account of Bubba.

[A pause. BARNEY is staring at ROO, trying to unravel the puzzle. From upstairs EMMA'S voice raises a distant thread of indistinct rancour.]

EMMA: [off] Why don't you ring them?

OLIVE: [coming downstairs] I don't wanna.

EMMA: [following, a last jibe] No, you wouldn't.

[She goes off towards the kitchen, collecting the cup from the hall table. OLIVE appears in the archway, dressed for the street. ROO and BARNEY, whose attention has been caught by the above exchange, register her appearance with as much imperturbability as they can muster. OLIVE'S mood is difficult and strained.]

OLIVE: [coming into the room] The two great bruisers! You can bear to be together in the same room again, can you?

BARNEY: We was workin' out the damage.

OLIVE: Well, that shouldn't take you long. An old cracked vase and some decorations. Hardly worth your while, really.

BARNEY: We was takin' it a bit further than that.

OLIVE: How? Tatty decorations was all you had left to break, the rest went months ago.

ROO: [in half-shamed remonstrance] Olive!

OLIVE: Olive nothing!

BARNEY: The Sat'day-morning sulks, eh?

OLIVE: Yeah. Does it surprise you?

BARNEY: Not much. But don't get it into your head you're the only one losin' out over this bust-up. There's Roo and me too, you know.

OLIVE: [satirically] What have you lost—Pearl?

ROO: We don't have to have any more of that.

BARNEY: [overlapping ROO'S last words] I didn't mind Pearl.

If I hadn't been leavin' on Monday—

ROO: [commanding him] Barney.

[BARNEY cuts short. OLIVE'S eyes dart to ROO as he continues.]

You've got some packin' to do, haven't you?

[BARNEY pauses, offended, nods shortly and moves to exit.]

OLIVE: [sanoung it] Monday! Oh, no wonder you were lookin' over the damage.

ROO: Olive, I wanna talk to you.

OLIVE: I'll bet. Settling-up time already, is it? Well, make me an offer—vase, decorations, and everythin' else you've smashed—how much?

ROO: Now, just a minute.

OLIVE: This is where I collect, ain't it? In cold hard cash, Roo—seventeen years—what are they worth?

ROO: [*Incensed*] Will you stop your bitching long enough for me to tell you somethin'? Barney's the one that's going Monday, not me. I'm staying right here.

[*This quiets her, and he continues with disgust.*]

Takin' money that way. It's rotten!

OLIVE: I forgot. You're the sort that likes to leave it on the mantelpiece under the clock, aren't you?

ROO: [*Shocked and restrained*] Now look, Olive, that's enough. I know you've 'ad a bad spin and I know you're all on edge, but we've never been as low and cheap as that, ever.

OLIVE: Well, we are now. Low and cheap's just how I feel. ROO: Because of me?

OLIVE: You, Barney, the whole damned season. Even Pearl, the way she looked at me this mornin' when she told me I—I didn't know what livin' was.

ROO: That's a fine thing to let worry you, the way Pearl looks.

OLIVE: You didn't see her. And it's more than looking— [*this is difficult for her to say*] it's havin' another woman walking around knowin' your inside and sorry for you 'coz she thinks you've never been within cooec of the real thing. That's what hurts.

[*Her control gives way and she starts to cry. At first she tries to dam the tears, which results in a choked whisper.*]

ROO: [*with infinite love and pity*] Oh, hon.

[*He moves towards her. The floodgates are opened.*]

OLIVE: It was all true, everythin' I told her was true, an'— an' she didn't see any of it.

ROO: Hon, don't cry now, you couldn't help it.

OLIVE: B-but if she could have seen just a little bit, so she'd know.

ROO: Maybe she did.

OLIVE: [*breaking from him and collapsing into an armchair*] No, no she didn't. It was all different.

[*She bursts into hopeless sobs.*]

ROO: [*awkwardly sitting on the edge of the chair*] Well, that old Pearlie, she couldn't tell anyway, this isn't her cup of tea. Stop your crying now. [*Putting his arms around her*] We'll

just forget that she ever came here.

OLIVE: Y-yes.

[*She lies against him for a moment and he kisses her hair. Then she struggles up, sniffing.*]

I—I ought to have a hankie somewhere.

[*She fishes about and finds one in her sleeve, blows her nose sensibly and dabs her eyes.*]

ROO: [*in teasing warmth*] I never knew any cryin' woman look worse than you do.

OLIVE: It's 'coz I cry so—so hard. [*She gulps and dabs at her eyes again before speaking repentantly.*]

Roo...?

ROO: What?

OLIVE: Those butterflies, they—they did fall to pieces when I touched them.

ROO: I believe you.

OLIVE: But the dolls, I could've put them back. Only I was mad at you, and I wouldn't.

ROO: Doesn't matter.

OLIVE: Yes, it does. I'll do it after. And—and I might be able to get the birds fixed up a bit.

ROO: [*softly*] Y'know, a man's a fool to treat you as a woman. You're nothin' but a little girl about twelve years old.

OLIVE: T-try telling that to the mob on a Saturday night.

ROO: 'S true, just the same.

[*They kiss gently.*]

Have you really got to go to the pub today?

OLIVE: Yes, I ought to.

ROO: [*rising*] Take the day off, and we'll go for a picnic, just the two of us.

OLIVE: I'd like to, but there's Pearl away already and I said I'd sling a line to Clinitic for her. I just know what I must look like.

[*She goes to her bag at the mantelpiece. As she fumbles with the catch she speaks more brightly.*]

Why don't you and Barney come down for the afternoon?

ROO: He's going to the races with the boys.

OLIVE: Oh, [*inspecting the damage in her purse-flap mirror*] Talk about the wreck of the Hesperus. [*Fishing for cosmetics*] Is it

the boys he's nicking off with on Monday?

ROO: Yeah. Up the Murray for the grapes.

OLIVE: [*diverted from her search for a moment*] It'll be funny without Barney around. Can't you get him to stay?

ROO: [*negatively*] He won't take a job in the city.

OLIVE: Well, I don't blame him for that.

[*ROO reacts stiffly. Moving slowly towards him, she enquires somewhat nervously:*]

Would you like to—go up the Murray with him?

ROO: No.

OLIVE: [*not looking at him*] 'Coz if you would—I mean, I wouldn't mind it for just this once.

ROO: Are you tryin' to get rid of me?

OLIVE: No, but other times you've always left together; it doesn't seem right.

ROO: Olive, I'm staying here with you.

OLIVE: [*staring at him now*] Well—how will you meet up together for the season?

ROO: Say we don't? Barney'll get along, he doesn't need me any more, he knows plenty of fellers. And this young Dowd, it looks like they're gonna team up together.

OLIVE: But you, Roo—what'll happen to you?

ROO: Nothin'. I'm not goin' back, Olive. Not for this season or—or any other. [*Moving in to take her stiffened, bewildered body into his arms*] Let me get rid of this for a moment...

[*He takes the handbag from her unresisting fingers and drops it aside on the table.*]

OLIVE: [*almost whispering*] You're not going back?

ROO: [*tenderly*] Look, I know this is seventeen years too late, and what I'm offering is not much chop, but—I want to marry you, Ol.

[*There is a moment of frozen horror and then she pushes herself away from him, almost screaming with quivering intensity.*]

OLIVE: No!

ROO: Olive...

OLIVE: You can't get out of it like that—I won't let you...

ROO: [*appalled*] Olive, what the hell's wrong?

OLIVE: You've got to go back. It's the only hope we've got.

ROO: Stop that screamin', will yer...?

OLIVE: You think I'll let it all end up in marriage—every

day—a paint factory—you think I'll marry you?

ROO: [*grabbing her and shouting back*] What else can we do?

You gone mad or something? First you tell me I've made you low, and now look—you dunno what you want!

OLIVE: [*breaking away, possessed*] I do—I want what I had before. [*Rushing at him and pummelling his chest*] You give it back to me—give me back what you've taken.

ROO: [*grabbing her wrists and holding them tight*] Olive, it's gone—can't you understand? Every last little scrap of it—gone!

[*He throws her away from him, and she falls to the floor, grief-stricken, almost an animal in her sense of loss.*]

OLIVE: I won't let you. I'll kill you first!

ROO: [*lashing at her, hurting himself at the same time*] Kill me, then. But there's no more flyin' down out of the sun—no more eagles. [*Going down on one knee beside her and striking the floor with his hand*] This is the dust we're in and we're gonna walk through it like everyone else for the rest of our lives!

[*She gives a rasping cry and doubles over herself on the floor as if cradling an awful inner pain. ROO kneels watching her, his breath coming in gasps. EMMA comes quickly in from kitchen as BARNEY'S voice is heard calling in apprehension from upstairs.*]

BARNEY: [*off*] What's going on down there?

[*He comes hastily downstairs and into the room. EMMA meanwhile has come to crouch beside OLIVE.*]

EMMA: Olive...

ROO: [*backing away, choked*] Give it back to me, she says.

As if I'd taken it away from her—me.

EMMA: Oily, what's the matter? Tell me.

[*But OLIVE shakes her head dumbly, not looking up. She draws away from her mother and rises, screaming. Lifts her head to stare at ROO, his whole bearing one of uncompromising rejection. There is an unbelieving moment, then she stumbles forward to pick up her bag and move from the house. It is the progress of a drunk woman, her head hangs down, her hair is tumbled about her face, and she lurches as she walks. The only sound is a rhythmic gagging catch in her throat, too elemental to be defined as sobbing. On the verandah, she steadies herself for a moment against a post, clinging for support before relinquishing her grip*]

to plunge off front verandah and wander out of sight. After a pause EMMA rises and moves up to the archway. She speaks with low, grim determination.]

There's nothin' you can do for her now—except to clear out and never come back. The lay-offs in this house are finished—for all of you.

[She turns and exits to the kitchen, suddenly seeming a worn-out, old, shambling woman. BARNEX stares after her for a second, then looks at ROO, standing immobile by the table. BARNEX makes a decision and begins quietly, but with tremendous purpose:]

BARNEX: To hell with Dowd! To hell with all the boys! They can pick grapes or do anythin' they want to, I won't even get in touch with them. We'll go off on our own, Roo, we'll make a fresh start. There's plenty of places we can go to—that bloke up in Warwick, he always said he'd give us a job any time we ever wanted one.

[ROO moves towards the window to look after OLIVE.]

Or even—look, we don't have to go any place we've ever been before, even. How about that, Roo? We've been goin' to the same places for so long and doin' the same things that we've started to run ourselves into the ground. That's what's wrong with us! (*Moving behind roo*) And there's a whole bloody country out there—wide open before us.

[ROO's gaze fixes on the seventeenth doll on top of the piano.] There's all the West—we can hit Perth, and then work our way right through up to Broome there. Or even—

[ROO, breathing heavily, picks up the doll. BARNEX, knowing he has failed, carries on in a desperate rising tone, but backing away from the wrath he senses is to come.]

Look, Roo, this is even better. That Rum Jungle you hear so much about! There's a packet in it, they reckon. I bet fellers like us could really clean up there—and we wouldn't have to give a Continental for—

[He breaks off as ROO, in a baffled, insensate rage, begins to beat the doll down and down again on the piano, smashing and tearing at it until it is nothing but a litter of broken cane, tinsel and celluloid. Only when it is in this state does it drop from his hands, leaving one torn shred of silk caught between his fingers.

His body sags as the tremendous energy sustaining him through this last effort starts to drain away. Swaying a little on his feet like a beaten bull, he slowly folds down on to the piano stool and buries his face in his hands. Something breaks deep down within him, but there is no movement in his body, he is far too inarticulate for the release of tears. After a pause, BARNEX, with a wisdom that momentarily transcends his usual shallow self, comes in slowly to put his hands on the big man's shoulders.]

Come on, Roo. Come on, boy.

[He pats the shoulder under his hand once, comfortingly, then moves up to collect his coat, sling it over his back, and stand waiting. ROO comes out of his collapse and the shred of silk between his fingers takes his attention. He rises, staring at it in a helpless sort of anguished misery, then opens his fingers to let it flutter down to the rest of the mess on the floor. He looks across at BARNEX, and in this brief meeting of eyes there is no bravado or questing hope, it is a completely open acknowledgment of what they have lost. BARNEX jerks his head indicating the open front door. ROO joins him, and they move out on to the front verandah, and leave the house.]

THE END

EDITOR'S NOTE

The author has made a number of minor revisions to the play in this edition.

The chief of these are a description of Nancy [p. 8 lines 33-49]; the addition of a returned soldier's badge to Barney's lapel [p. 17 line 30] and an increase in Roo's age from thirty-eight to forty-one [p. 18 line 29].

GLOSSARY

- BLUDGER [coll.], idler, one who avoids work or responsibility.
BLUE [coll.], an argument or row.
CASSA, lover, derivative of Casanova.
COOR [coll.], a fool.
FIDDLE, FIDDLE-DEE, a pound [rhyming slang for *quid*].
GET A SET ON [coll.], bear a grudge against someone.
JAG [coll.], a spree, usually a drinking bout.
LAMMIN', beating.
MOSSIES [coll.], mosquitoes.
ON THE TEAR [coll.], from tearaway, behaving like a hooligan, usually involving the consumption of beer.
OSCAR, cash, money [rhyming slang for *Oscar Asche*].
PHENYLE, brand name for a household deodorant.
PIGS [coll.], abbreviation of pig's arse, untrue, nonsense.
POKE MULLOCK [coll.], deride, ridicule; *mullock* is rock from which gold has been extracted.
PRICKLY PEAR, kind of cactus with pear-shaped, edible fruit.
RAZOO [coll.], small sum of money.
RUSSELL STREET, Melbourne police headquarters.
SHANGHAI, catapult.
SHEILA [coll.], young woman.
SKITE [coll.], boast, brag.
SNAKY, dangerous-looking, irritable.
SNOUT ON, to have a snout on [someone] [coll.], a strong dislike.
STOUSH [coll.], fight.

ALMA

Anthony Hill