The Truth About Blayds

BY A. A. MILNE

CHARACTERS

Oliver Blayds.
Isobel (his younger daughter).
Marion Blayds-Conway (his elder daughter).
William Blayds-Conway (his son-in-law).
Oliver Blayds-Conway }
Septima Blayds-Conway } (his grandchildren).
A. L. Royce.
Parsons.

* * * *

A room in OLIVER BLAYDS’ house in Portman Square.

* * * *

This play was first produced at the Globe Theatre on December 20, 1921, with the following cast:


ACT I

A solid, handsomely-furnished room in a house in Portman Square—solid round table, solid writing-desk, solid chairs and sofa, with no air of comfort, but only of dignity. Over the fireplace is a painting of OLIVER BLAYDS, also handsome and dignified.... OLIVER BLAYDS-CONWAY, his young grandson, comes in with ROYCE, the latter a
clean-shaven man of forty, whose thick dark hair shows a touch of grey. It is about three o’clock in the afternoon.

* * * * *

OLIVER (as he comes in). This way. (He holds the door open for ROYCE.)

ROYCE (coming in). Thanks.

OLIVER. Some of the family will be showing up directly. Make yourself comfortable. (For himself, he does his best in one of the dignified chairs.)

ROYCE. Thanks. (He looks round the room with interest, and sees the picture over the fireplace) Hallo, there he is.

OLIVER. What? (Bored) Oh, the old ’un, yes.

ROYCE (reverently). Oliver Blayds, the last of the Victorians. (OLIVER sighs and looks despairingly to Heaven.) I can’t take my hat off because it’s off already, but I should like to.

OLIVER. Good Lord, you don’t really feel like that, do you?

ROYCE. Of course. Don’t you?

OLIVER. Well, hardly. He’s my grandfather.

ROYCE. True. (Smiling) All the same, there’s nothing in the Ten Commandments about not honouring your grandfather.

OLIVER. Nothing about honouring ’em either. It’s left optional. Of course, he’s a wonderful old fellow—ninety, and still going strong; but—well, as I say, he’s my grandfather.

ROYCE. I’m afraid, Conway, that even the fact of his being your grandfather doesn’t prevent me thinking him a very great poet, a very great philosopher, and a very great man.
OLIVER (interested). I say, do you really mean that, or are you just quoting from the Address you’ve come to present?

ROYCE. Well, it’s in the Address, but then I wrote the Address, and got it up.

OLIVER. Yes, I know—you told me—“To Oliver Blayds on his ninetieth birthday: Homage from some of the younger writers.” Very pretty of them and all that, and the old boy will love it. But do they really feel like that about him—that’s what interests me. I’ve always thought of him as old-fashioned, early Victorian, and that kind of thing.

ROYCE. Oh, he is. Like Shakespeare. Early Elizabethan and that kind of thing.

OLIVER. Shakespeare’s different. I meant more like Longfellow.... Don’t think I am setting up my opinion against yours. If you say that Blayds’ poetry is as good as the best, I’ll take your word for it. Blayds the poet, you’re the authority. Blayds the grandfather, I am.

ROYCE. All right, then, you can take my word for it that his best is as good as the best. Simple as Wordsworth, sensuous as Tennyson, passionate as Swinburne.

OLIVER. Yes, but what about the modern Johnnies? The Georgians.

ROYCE. When they’re ninety I’ll tell you. If I’m alive.

OLIVER. Thanks very much.

(There is a short silence. ROYCE leaves the picture and comes slowly towards the writing-table.)

OLIVER (shaking his head). Oh, no!

ROYCE (turning round). What?

OLIVER. That’s not the table where the great masterpieces are written, and that’s not the pen they are written with.
ROYCE. My dear fellow——

OLIVER. Is there a pen there, by the way?

ROYCE (looking). Yes. Yours?

OLIVER. The family’s. You’ve no idea how difficult it is to keep pens there.

ROYCE. Why, where do they go to?

OLIVER. The United States, mostly. Everybody who’s let in here makes for the table sooner or later and pinches one of the pens. “Lands’ sake, what a head,” they say, waving at the picture with their right hand and feeling behind their back with the left; it’s wonderful to see ’em. Tim, my sister—Tim and I glued a pen on to the tray once when one of ’em was coming, and watched him clawing at it for about five minutes, and babbling about the picture the whole time. I should think he knew what the poet Blayds looked like by the time he got the pen into his pocket.

ROYCE (going back to the picture). Well, it’s a wonderful head.

OLIVER. Yes, I will say that for the old boy, he does look like somebody.

ROYCE. When was this done?

OLIVER. Oh, about eighteen years ago.

ROYCE. Yes. That was about when I met him.

OLIVER. You never told me you’d met him. Did you meet me by any chance?

ROYCE. No.
OLIVER. I was five then, and people who came to see Blayds the poet patted the head of Blayds the poet’s grandson and said: “Are you going to be a poet too, my little man, when you grow up?”

ROYCE (smiling). And what did Blayds the poet’s grandson say?

OLIVER. Urged on by Blayds the poet’s son-in-law, Blayds the poet’s grandson offered to recite his grandfather’s well-known poem, “A Child’s Thoughts on Waking.” I’m sorry you missed it, Royce, but it’s no good asking for it now.

ROYCE (half to himself). It was at Bournemouth. He was there with his daughter. Not your mother, she would have been younger than that.

OLIVER. You mean Aunt Isobel.

ROYCE. Isobel, yes. (After a little silence) Isobel Blayds. Yes, that was eighteen years ago. I was about your age.

OLIVER. A fine handsome young fellow like me?

ROYCE. Yes.

OLIVER. Any grandfathers living?

ROYCE. No.

OLIVER. Lucky devil. But I don’t suppose you realised it.

ROYCE. No, I don’t think I realised it.

OLIVER (thinking it out). I suppose if I had a famous father I shouldn’t mind so much. I should feel that it was partly my doing. I mean that he wouldn’t have begun to be famous until I had been born. But the poet Blayds was a world-wide celebrity long before I came on the scene, and I’ve had it hanging over me ever since.... Why do you suppose I am a member of the club?
ROYCE. Well, why not? It’s a decent club. We are all very happy there.

OLIVER. Yes, but why did they elect me?

ROYCE. Oh, well, if we once began to ask ourselves that——

OLIVER. Not at all. The answer in your case is because A. L. Royce is a well-known critic and a jolly good fellow. The answer in my case is because there’s a B. in both. In other words, because there’s a Blayds in Blayds-Conway. If my father had stuck to his William Conway when he got married, I should never have been elected. Not at the age of twenty-two, anyway.

ROYCE. Then I’m very glad he changed his name. Because otherwise, it seems, I might not have had the pleasure of meeting you.

OLIVER. Oh, well, there’s always a something. But, compliments aside, it isn’t much fun for a man when things happen to him just because of the Blayds in Blayds-Conway. You know what I am doing now, don’t you? I told you.

ROYCE. Secretary to some politician, isn’t it?

OLIVER. Yes. And why? Because of the Blayds in——

ROYCE. Oh, nonsense!

OLIVER. It’s true. Do you think I want to be a private secretary to a dashed politician? What’s a private secretary at his best but a superior sort of valet? I wanted to be a motor engineer. Not allowed. Why not? Because the Blayds in Blayds-Conway wouldn’t have been any use. But politicians simply live on that sort of thing.

ROYCE. What sort of thing?

OLIVER. Giving people jobs because they’re the grandsons of somebody.

ROYCE. Yes, I wonder if I was as cynical as you eighteen years ago.
OLIVER. Probably not; there wasn’t a Grandfather Royce. By the way, talking about being jolly good fellows and all that, have you noticed that I haven’t offered you a cigarette yet?

ROYCE. I don’t want to smoke.

OLIVER. Well, that’s lucky. Smoking isn’t allowed in here.

ROYCE (annoyed by this). Now look here, Conway, do you mind if I speak plainly?

OLIVER. Do. But just one moment before you begin. My name, unfortunately, is Blayds-Conway. Call me Conway at the Club and I’ll thank you for it. But if you call me Conway in the hearing of certain members of my family, I’m afraid there will be trouble. Now what were you going to say?

ROYCE (his annoyance gone). Doesn’t matter.

OLIVER. No, do go on, Mr. Blayds-Royce.

ROYCE. Very well, Mr. Blayds-Conway. I am old enough to be—no, not your grandfather—your uncle—and I want to say this. Oliver Blayds is a very great man and also a very old man, and I think that while you live in the house of this very great man, the inconveniences to which his old age puts you, my dear Conway——

OLIVER. Blayds-Conway.

ROYCE (smiling). Blayds-Conway, I’m sorry.

OLIVER. Perhaps you’d better call me Oliver.

ROYCE. Yes, I think I will. Well, then, Oliver——

OLIVER. Yes, but you’ve missed the whole point. The whole point is that I don’t want to live in his house. Do you realise that I’ve never had a house I could call my own? I mean a house where I could ask people. I brought you along this afternoon because you’d got
permission to come anyhow with that Address of yours. But I shouldn’t have dared to bring anybody else along from the club. Here we all are, and always have been, living not our lives, but his life. Because—well, just because he likes it so.

ROYCE (almost to himself). Yes ... yes.... I know.

OLIVER. Well!

(And there is so much conviction behind it that ROYCE has nothing to say. However, nothing is needed, for at this moment SEPTIMA BLAYDS-CONWAY comes in, a fair-haired nineteen-year-old modern, with no sentimental nonsense about her.)

SEPTIMA. Hallo!

OLIVER (half getting out of his chair). Hallo, Tim. Come and be introduced. This is Mr. A. L. Royce. My sister, Septima.

ROYCE (surprised). Septima? (Mechanically he quotes):

“Septima, seventh dark daughter; I saw her once where the black pines troop to the water— A rock-set river that broke into bottomless pools—”

SEPTIMA. Thank you very much, Mr. Royce. (Holding out her hand to OLIVER) Noll, I’ll trouble you.

OLIVER (feeling in his pockets). Damn! I did think, Royce—— (He hands her a shilling) Here you are.

SEPTIMA. Thanks. Thank you again, Mr. Royce.

ROYCE. I’m afraid I don’t understand.

SEPTIMA. It’s quite simple. I get a shilling when visitors quote “Septima” at me, and Noll gets a shilling when they don’t.

OLIVER (reproachfully). I did think that you would be able to control yourself, Royce.
ROYCE (*smiling*). Sorry! My only excuse is that I never met any one called Septima before, and that it came quite unconsciously.

SEPTIMA. Oh, don’t apologise. I admire you immensely for it. It’s the only fun I get out of the name.

OLIVER. Septima Blayds-Conway, when you’re the only daughter, and fair at that—I ask you.

ROYCE (*defensively*). It’s a beautiful poem.

SEPTIMA. Have you come to see Blayds the poet?

ROYCE. Yes.

OLIVER. One of the homage merchants.

ROYCE. Miss Blayds-Conway, I appeal to you.

SEPTIMA. Anything I can do in return for your shilling——

ROYCE. I have come here on behalf of some of my contemporaries, in order to acquaint that very great man Oliver Blayds with the feelings of admiration which we younger writers entertain for him. It appears now that not only is Blayds a great poet and a great philosopher, but also a——

OLIVER. Great-grandfather.

ROYCE. But also a grandfather. Do you think you can persuade your brother that Blayds’ public reputation as a poet is in no way affected by his private reputation as a grandfather, and beg him to spare me any further revelations?

SEPTIMA. Certainly; I could do all that for ninepence, and you’d still be threepence in hand. (*Sternly to OLIVER*) Blayds-Conway, young fellow, have you been making r-revelations about your ger-rand-father?
OLIVER. My dear girl, I’ve made no r-revelations whatever. What’s upset him probably is that I refused to recite to him “A Child’s Thoughts on Waking.”

SEPTIMA. Did he pat your head and ask you to?

ROYCE. No, he didn’t.

SEPTIMA. Well, you needn’t be huffy about it, Mr. Royce. You would have been in very good company. Meredith and Hardy have, and lots of others.

OLIVER. Well, anyway, I’ve never been kissed by Maeterlinck.

SEPTIMA (looking down coyly). Mr. Royce, you have surprised my secret, which I have kept hidden these seventeen years. Maeterlinck—Maurice and I——

ROYCE. Revelations was not quite the word. What I should have said was that I have been plunged suddenly, and a little unexpectedly, into an unromantic, matter-of-fact atmosphere, which hardly suits the occasion of my visit. On any other day—you see what I mean, Miss Septima.

SEPTIMA. You’re quite right. This is not the occasion for persiflage. Besides, we’re very proud of him really.

ROYCE. I’m sure you are.

SEPTIMA (weightily). You know, Noll, there are times when I think that possibly we have misjudged Blayds.

OLIVER. Blayds the poet or Blayds the man?

SEPTIMA. Blayds the man. After all, Uncle Thomas was devoted to him, and he was rather particular. Wasn’t he, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. I don’t think I know your Uncle Thomas, do I?

SEPTIMA. He wasn’t mine, he was mother’s.
OLIVER. The Sage of Chelsea.

ROYCE. Oh, Carlyle. Surely——

SEPTIMA. Mother called them all “uncle” in her day.

ROYCE. Well, now, there you are. That’s one of the most charming things about Oliver Blayds. He has always had a genius for friendship. Read the lives and letters of all the great Victorians, and you find it all the way. They loved him. They——

OLIVER (striking up). God save our gracious Queen!

ROYCE (with a good-humoured shrug). Oh, well!

SEPTIMA. Keep it for father and mother, Mr. Royce. We’re hopeless. Shall I tell you why?

ROYCE. Yes?

SEPTIMA. When you were a child, did you ever get the giggles in church?

ROYCE. Almost always—when the Vicar wasn’t looking.

SEPTIMA. There’s something about it, isn’t there—the solemnity of it all—which starts you giggling? When the Vicar isn’t looking.

ROYCE. Yes.

SEPTIMA. Exactly. And that’s why we giggle—when the Vicar isn’t looking.

MARION (from outside). Septima!

OLIVER. And here comes the Vicar’s wife.

(MARION BLAYDS-CONWAY is fifty-five now. A dear, foolish woman, who has never got over the fact that she is OLIVER BLAYDS’
daughter, but secretly thinks that it is almost more wonderful to be
WILLIAM BLAYDS-CONWAY’S wife.)

MARION. Oh, there you are. Why didn’t you—— (She sees ROYCE)
Oh!

OLIVER. This is Mr. A. L. Royce, Mother.

MARION (distantly). How do you do?

ROYCE. How do you do?

(There is an awkward silence.)

MARION. You’ll excuse me a moment, Mr.—er—er——

OLIVER. Royce, Mother, A. L. Royce.

MARION. Septima—— This is naturally rather a busy day, Mr.—er—— We hardly expected—— (She frowns at OLIVER, who ought to have known better by this time.) Septima, I want you just a moment—Oliver will look after his friend. I’m sure you’ll understand, Mr.—er——

ROYCE. Oh, quite. Of course.

SEPTIMA. Mr. Royce has come to see Grandfather, Mother.

MARION (appalled). To see Grandfather!

ROYCE. I was hoping—Mr. Blayds-Conway was good enough to say——

MARION. I am afraid it is quite impossible. I am very sorry, but really quite impossible. My son shouldn’t have held out hopes.

OLIVER. He didn’t. You’re barking up the wrong tree, Mother. It’s Father who invited him.

ROYCE. I am here on behalf of certain of my contemporaries——
OLIVER. Homage from some of our younger writers——

ROYCE. Mr. Blayds was gracious enough to indicate that——

SEPTIMA (in a violent whisper). A. L. Royce, Mother!

MARION. Oh! Oh, I beg your pardon. Why didn’t you tell me it was A. L. Royce, Oliver? Of course! We wrote to you.

ROYCE. Yes.

MARION (all hospitality). How silly of me! You must forgive me, Mr. Royce. Oliver ought to have told me. Grandfather—Mr. Blayds—will be ready at three-thirty. The doctor was very anxious that Grandfather shouldn’t see any one this year—outside the family, of course. I couldn’t tell you how many people wrote asking if they could come to-day. Presidents of Societies and that sort of thing. From all over the world. Father did tell us. Do you remember, Septima?

SEPTIMA. I’m afraid I don’t, Mother. I know I didn’t believe it.

MARION (to ROYCE). Septima—after the poem, you know. “Septima, seventh dark daughter——” (And she would quote the whole of it, but that her children interrupt.)

OLIVER (solemnly). Don’t say you’ve never heard of it, Royce.

SEPTIMA (distressed). I don’t believe he has.

OLIVER (encouragingly). You must read it. I think you’d like it.

MARION. It’s one of his best known. The Times quoted it only last week. We had the cutting. “Septima, seventh dark daughter——” It was a favourite of my husband’s even before he married me.

ROYCE. It has been a favourite of mine for many years.

MARION. And many other people’s, I’m sure. We often get letters—Oh, if you could see the letters we get!
ROYCE. I wonder you don’t have a secretary.

MARION (with dignity). My husband—Mr. Blayds-Conway—is Grandfather’s secretary. He was appointed to the post soon after he married me. Twenty-five years ago. There is almost nothing he mightn’t have done, but he saw where his duty lay, and he has devoted himself to Grandfather—to Mr. Blayds—ever since.

ROYCE. I am sure we are all grateful to him.

MARION. Grandfather, as you know, has refused a Peerage more than once. But I always say that if devotion to duty counts for anything, William, my husband, ought to have been knighted long ago. Perhaps when Grandfather has passed away—— But there!

ROYCE. I was telling Oliver that I did meet Mr. Blayds once—and Miss Blayds. Down at Bournemouth. She was looking after him. He wasn’t very well at the time.

MARION. Oh, Isobel, yes. A wonderful nurse. I don’t know what Grandfather would do without her.

ROYCE. She is still——? I thought perhaps she was married, or——

MARION. Oh, no! Isobel isn’t the marrying sort. I say that I don’t know what Grandfather would do without her, but I might almost say that I don’t know what she would do without Grandfather. (Looking at her watch) Dear me, I promised Father that I would get those letters off. Septima, dear, you must help me. Have you been round the house at all, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. No, I’ve only just come.

MARION. There are certain rooms which are shown to the public. Signed photographs, gifts from Tennyson, Ruskin, Carlyle and many others. Illuminated addresses and so on, all most interesting. Oliver, perhaps you would show Mr. Royce—if it would interest you——

ROYCE. Oh, indeed, yes.
MARION. Oliver!

OLIVER (throwing down the book he was looking at). Right. (He gets up.) Come on, Royce. (As they go out) There’s one thing that I can show you, anyway.

ROYCE. What’s that?

OLIVER (violently). My bedroom. We’re allowed to smoke there.

[They go out.

MARION (sitting down at the writing-table). He seems a nice man. About thirty-five, wouldn’t you say—or more?

SEPTIMA. Forty. But you never can tell with men. (She comes to the table.)

MARION (getting to work). Now those letters just want putting into their envelopes. And those want envelopes written for them. If you will read out the addresses, dear—I think that will be the quickest way—I will——

SEPTIMA (thinking her own thoughts). Mother!

MARION. Yes, dear? (Writing) Doctor John Treherne.

SEPTIMA. I want to speak to you.

MARION. Do you mean about anything important?

SEPTIMA. For me, yes.

MARION. You haven’t annoyed your grandfather, I hope.

SEPTIMA. It has nothing to do with Grandfather.
MARION. Beechcroft, Bexhill-on-Sea. We’ve been so busy all day. Naturally, being the Birthday. Couldn’t you leave it till to-morrow, dear?

SEPTIMA (eagerly). Rita Ferguson wants me to share rooms with her. You know I’ve always wanted to, and now she’s just heard of some; there’s a studio goes with it. On Campden Hill.

MARION. Yes, dear. We’ll see what Grandfather says.

SEPTIMA (annoyed). I said that this has nothing to do with Grandfather. We’re talking about me. It’s no good trying to do anything here, and——

MARION. There! I’ve written Campden Hill; how stupid of me. Haverstock Hill. We’ll see what Grandfather says, dear.

SEPTIMA (doggedly). It has nothing to do with Grandfather.

MARION (outraged). Septima!

SEPTIMA. “We’ll see what Grandfather says”—that has always been the answer to everything in this house.

MARION (as sarcastically as she can, but she is not very good at it). You can hardly have forgotten who Grandfather is.

SEPTIMA. I haven’t.

MARION (awed). What was it the Telegraph called him only this morning? “The Supreme Songster of an Earlier Epoch.” (Her own father!)

SEPTIMA. I said that I hadn’t forgotten what Grandfather is. You’re telling me what he was. He is an old man of ninety. I’m twenty. Anything that I do will affect him for at most five years. It will affect me for fifty years. That’s why I say this has nothing to do with Grandfather.
MARION (distressed). Septima, sometimes you almost seem as if you were irreligious. When you think who Grandfather is—and his birthday too. (Weakly) You must talk to your father.

SEPTIMA. That’s better. Father’s only sixty.

MARION. You must talk to your father. He will see what Grandfather says.

SEPTIMA. And there we are—back again to ninety! It’s always the way.

MARION (plaintively). I really don’t understand you children. You ought to be proud of living in the house of such a great man. I don’t know what Grandfather will say when he hears about it. (Tearfully) The Reverend William Styles ... Hockley Vicarage ... Bishop Stortford. (And from every line she extracts some slight religious comfort.)

SEPTIMA (thoughtfully). I suppose father would cut off my allowance if I just went.

MARION. Went?

SEPTIMA. Yes. Would he? It would be beastly unfair, of course, but I suppose he would.

MARION (at the end of her resources). Septima, you’re not to talk like that.

SEPTIMA. I think I’ll get Aunt Isobel to tackle Grandfather. She’s only forty. Perhaps she could persuade him.

MARION. I won’t hear another word. And you had better tidy yourself up. I will finish these letters myself.

SEPTIMA (going to the door). Yes, I must go and tidy up. (At the door) But I warn you, Mother, I mean to have it out this time. And if Grandfather—— (She breaks off as her father comes in) Oh, Lord! (She comes back into the room, making way for him.)
(WILLIAM BLAYDS-CONWAY was obviously meant for the Civil Service. His prim neatness, his gold pince-nez, his fussiness would be invaluable in almost any Department. However, running BLAYDS is the next best thing to running the Empire.)

WILLIAM. What is this, Septima? Where are you going?

SEPTIMA. Tidy myself up.

WILLIAM. That’s right. And then you might help your mother to entertain Mr. Royce until we send for him. Perhaps we might—wait a moment——

MARION. Oh, have you seen Mr. Royce, William? He seems a nice young man, doesn’t he? I’m sure Grandfather will like him.

WILLIAM (pontifically). I still think that it was very unwise of us to attempt to see anybody to-day. Naturally I made it clear to Mr. Royce what a very unexpected departure this is from our usual practice. I fancy that he realises the honour which we have paid to the younger school of writers. Those who are knocking at the door, so to speak.

MARION. Oh, I’m sure he does.

SEPTIMA (to the ceiling). Does anybody want me?

WILLIAM. Wait a moment, please. (He takes a key out of his pocket and considers.) Yes.... Yes.... (He gives the key to SEPTIMA) You may show Mr. Royce the autograph letter from Queen Victoria, on the occasion of your grandmother’s death. Be very careful, please. I think he might be allowed to take it in his hands—don’t you think so, Marion?—but lock it up immediately afterwards, and bring me back the key.

SEPTIMA. Yes, Father. (As she goes) What fun he’s going to have!

WILLIAM. Are those the letters?

MARION. Yes, dear, I’ve nearly finished them.
WILLIAM. They will do afterwards. (Handing her a bunch of telegrams) I want you to sort these telegrams. Isobel is seeing about the flowers?

MARION. Oh, yes, sure to be, dear. How do you mean, sort them?

WILLIAM. In three groups will be best. Those from societies or public bodies, those from distinguished people, including Royalty—you will find one from the Duchess there; her Royal Highness is very faithful to us—and those from unknown or anonymous admirers.

MARION. Oh, yes, I see, dear. (She gets to work.)

WILLIAM. He will like to know who have remembered him. I fancy that we have done even better than we did on the eightieth birthday, and of course the day is not yet over. (He walks about the room importantly, weighing great matters in his mind. This is his day.)

MARION. Yes, dear.

WILLIAM (frowning anxiously). What did we do last year about drinking the health? Was it in here, or did we go to his room?

MARION. He was down to lunch last year. Don’t you remember, dear?

WILLIAM. Ah, yes, of course. Stupid of me. Yes, this last year has made a great difference to him. He is breaking up, I fear. We cannot keep him with us for many more birthdays.

MARION. Don’t say that, dear.

WILLIAM. Well, we can but do our best.

MARION. What would you like to do, dear, about the health?

WILLIAM. H’m. Let me think. (He thinks.)
MARION (busy with the telegrams). Some of these are a little difficult. Do you think that Sir John and Lady Wilkins would look better among the distinguished people including Royalty, or with the unknown and anonymous ones?

WILLIAM. Anybody doubtful is unknown. I only want a rough grouping. We shall have a general acknowledgment in the Times. And oh, that reminds me. I want an announcement for the late editions of the evening papers. Perhaps you had better just take this down. You can finish those afterwards.

MARION. Yes, dear. (She gets ready) Yes, dear?

WILLIAM (after tremendous thought). Oliver Blayds, ninety to-day.

MARION (writing). Oliver Blayds, ninety to-day.

WILLIAM. The veteran poet spent his ninetieth birthday——

MARION (to herself). The veteran poet——

WILLIAM. Passed his ninetieth birthday—that’s better—passed his ninetieth birthday quietly, amid his family——

MARION. Amid his family——

WILLIAM. At his well-known house—residence—in Portman Square. (He stops suddenly. You thought he was just dictating, but his brain has been working all the time, and he has come to a decision. He announces it.) We will drink the health in here. See that there is an extra glass for Mr. Royce. “In Portman Square”—have you got that?

MARION. Yes, dear.

WILLIAM. Mr. William Blayds-Conway, who courteously gave—granted our representative an interview, informed us that the poet was in good health—— It’s a pity you never learnt shorthand, Marion.

MARION. I did try, dear.
WILLIAM (remembering that historic effort). Yes, I know ... in good health——

MARION. Good health——

WILLIAM. And keenly appreciative of the many tributes of affection which he had received.

MARION. Which he had received.

WILLIAM. Among those who called during the day were——

MARION. Yes, dear?

WILLIAM. Fill that in from the visitors’ book. (He holds out his hand for the paper) How does that go?

MARION (giving it to him). I wasn’t quite sure how many “p’s” there were in appreciative.

WILLIAM. Two.

MARION. Yes, I thought two was safer.

WILLIAM (handing it back to her). Yes, that’s all right. (Bringing out his keys) I shall want to make a few notes while Mr. Royce is being received. It may be that Oliver Blayds will say something worth recording. One would like to get something if it were possible. (He has unlocked a drawer in the table and brought out his manuscript book.) And see that that goes off now. I should think about eight names. Say three Society, three Artistic and Literary, and two Naval, Military and Political. (Again you see his brain working.... He has come to another decision. He announces it.) Perhaps two Society would be enough.

MARION. Yes, dear. (Beginning to make for the door) Will there be anything else you’ll want? (Holding out the paper) After I’ve done this?
WILLIAM (considering). No ... no.... I’m coming with you. (Taking out his keys) I must get the port. (He opens the door for her, and they go out together.)

(The room is empty for a moment, and then ISOBEL comes in. She is nearly forty. You can see how lovely she was at twenty, but she gave up being lovely eighteen years ago, said good-bye to ISOBEL, and became just Nurse. If BLAYDS wants cheerfulness, she is cheerful; if sympathy, sympathetic; if interest, interested. She is off duty now, and we see at once how tired she is. But she has some spiritual comfort, some secret pride to sustain her, and it is only occasionally that the tiredness, the deadness, shows through. She has flowers in her arms, and slowly, thoughtfully, she decks the room for the great man. We see now for a moment that she is much older than we thought; it is for her own ninetieth birthday that she is decorating the room.... Now she has finished, and she sits down, her hands in her lap, waiting, waiting patiently.... Some thought brings a wistful smile to her mouth. Yes, she must have been very lovely at twenty. Then ROYCE comes in.)

ROYCE. Oh, I beg your pardon. (He sees who it is.) Oh!

ISOBEL. It’s all right, I—— Are you waiting to see—— (She recognises him) Oh!

(They stand looking at each other, about six feet apart, not moving, saying nothing. Then very gently he begins to hum the refrain of a waltz. Slowly she remembers.)

ISOBEL. How long ago was it?

ROYCE. Eighteen years.

ISOBEL (who has lived eighty years since then). So little?

ROYCE (distressed). Isobel!

ISOBEL (remembering his name now). Austin.

ROYCE. It comes back to you?
ISOBEL. A few faded memories—and the smell of the pine woods. And there was a band, wasn’t there? That was the waltz they played. How did it go? (He gives her a bar or two again.... She nods) Yes. (She whispers the tune to herself.) Why does that make me think of—Didn’t you cut your wrist? On the rocks?

ROYCE. You remember? (He holds out his wrist) Look!

ISOBEL (nodding). I knew that came into it. I tied it up for you.

ROYCE (sentimentally). I have the handkerchief still. (More honestly) Somewhere.... I know I have it. (He tries to think where it would be.)

ISOBEL. There was a dog, wasn’t there?

ROYCE. How well you remember. Rags. A fox terrier.

ISOBEL (doubtfully). Yes?

ROYCE. Or was that later? I had an Aberdeen before that.

ISOBEL. Yes, that was it, I think.

ROYCE. Thomas.

ISOBEL (smiling). Thomas. Yes.... Only eighteen little years ago. But what worlds away. Just give me that tune again. (He gives it to her, and the memories stir again.) You had a pipe you were very proud of—with a cracked bowl—and a silver band to keep it together. What silly things one remembers ... you’d forgotten it.

ROYCE. I remember that pink cotton dress.

ISOBEL. Eighty years ago. Or is it only eighteen? And now we meet again. You married? I seem to remember hearing.

ROYCE (uncomfortably). Yes.

ISOBEL. I hope it was happy.
ROYCE. No. We separated.

ISOBEL. I am sorry.

ROYCE. Was it likely it would be?

ISOBEL (surprised). Was that all the chance of happiness you gave her?

ROYCE. You think I oughtn’t to have married?

ISOBEL. Oh, my dear, who am I to order people’s lives?

ROYCE. You ordered mine.

ISOBEL (ignoring this). But you have been happy? Marriage isn’t everything. You have been happy in your work, in your books, in your friends?

ROYCE (after thinking). Yes, Isobel, on the whole, yes.

ISOBEL. I’m glad.... (She holds out her hand suddenly with a smile) How do you do, Mr. Royce? (She is inviting him to step off the sentimental footing.)

ROYCE (stepping off). How do you do, Miss Blayds? It’s delightful to meet you again.

ISOBEL. Let’s sit down; shall we? (They sit down together.) My father will be coming in directly. You are here to see him, of course?

ROYCE. Yes. Tell me about him—or rather about yourself. You are still looking after him?

ISOBEL. Yes.

ROYCE. For eighteen years.

ISOBEL. Nearly twenty altogether.
ROYCE. And has it been worth it?

ISOBEL. He has written wonderful things in those twenty years. Not very much, but very wonderful.

ROYCE. Yes, that has always been the miracle about him, the way he has kept his youth. And the fire and spirit of youth. You have helped him there.

ISOBEL (proudly). Has it been worth it?

ROYCE (puzzled). I don’t know. It’s difficult to say. The world would think so; but I—naturally I am prejudiced.

ISOBEL. Yes.

ROYCE (smiling). You might have looked after me for those eighteen years.

ISOBEL. Did you want it as much as he? (As he protests) No, I don’t mean “want” it—need it?

ROYCE. Well, that’s always the problem, isn’t it—whether the old or the young have the better right to be selfish. We both needed you, in different ways. You gave yourself to him, and he has wasted your life. I don’t think I should have wasted it.

ISOBEL. I am proud to have helped him. No one will know. Everything which he wrote will be his. Only I shall know how much of it was mine. Well, that’s something. Not wasted.

ROYCE. Sacrificed.

ISOBEL. Am I to regret that?

ROYCE. Do you regret it?

ISOBEL (after considering). When you asked me to marry you I—I couldn’t. He was an old man then; he wanted me; I was everything to him. Oh, he has had his friends, more friends than any man, but he
had to be the head of a family too, and without me—I’ve kept him alive, active. He has sharpened his brains on me. (With a shrug) On whom else?

ROYCE. Yes, I understand that.

ISOBEL. You wouldn’t have married me and come to live with us all, as Marion and William have done?

ROYCE. No, no, that’s death.

ISOBEL. Yes, I knew you felt like that. But I couldn’t leave him. (ROYCE shrugs his shoulders unconvinced.) Oh, I did love you then; I did want to marry you! But I couldn’t. He wasn’t just an ordinary man—you must remember that, please. He was Blayds.... Oh, what are we in the world for but to find beauty, and who could find it as he, and who could help him as I?

ROYCE. I was ready to wait.

ISOBEL. Ah, but how could we? Until he died! Every day you would be thinking, “I wonder how he is to-day,” and I should be knowing that you were thinking that. Oh, horrible! Sitting and waiting for his death.

ROYCE (thoughtfully, recognising her point of view). Yes.... Yes.... But if you were back now, knowing what you know, would you do it again?

ISOBEL. I think so. I think it has been worth it. It isn’t fair to ask me. I’m glad now that I have given him those eighteen years, but perhaps I should have been afraid of it if I had known it was to be as long as that. It has been trying, of course—such a very old man in body, although so young in mind—but it has not been for an old man that I have done it; not for a selfish father; but for the glorious young poet who has never grown up, and who wanted me.

ROYCE (looking into her soul). But you have had your bad moments.

ISOBEL (distressed). Oh, don’t! It isn’t fair.
(ROYCE, his eyes still on her, begins the refrain again.)

ISOBEL (smiling sadly). Oh, no, Mr. Royce! That’s all over. I’m an old woman now.

ROYCE (rather ashamed). I’m sorry.... Yes, you’re older now.

ISOBEL. Twenty and thirty-eight—there’s a world of difference between them.

ROYCE. I’m forty.

ISOBEL (smiling). Don’t ask me to pity you. What’s forty to a man?

ROYCE. You’re right. In fact I’m masquerading here to-day as one of the younger writers.

ISOBEL (glad to be off the subject of herself). Father likes to feel that he is admired by the younger writers. So if you’ve brought all their signatures with you, he’ll be pleased to see you, Mr. Royce. I had better give you just one word of warning. Don’t be too hard on the 1863 volume.

ROYCE. I shan’t even mention it.

ISOBEL. But if he does——? It has been attacked so much that he has a sort of mother-love for it now, and even I feel protective towards it, and want to say, “Come here, darling, nobody loves you.” Say something kind if you can. Of course I know it isn’t his best, but when you’ve been praised as much as he, the little praise which is withheld is always the praise you want the most.

ROYCE. How delightfully human that sounds. That is just what I’ve always felt in my own small way.

WILLIAM comes fussily in.
WILLIAM. Is Mr. Royce——? Ah, there you are! (Looking round the room) You’ve done the flowers, Isobel? That’s right. Well, Mr. Royce, I hope they’ve been looking after you properly.

ROYCE. Oh, yes, thanks.

WILLIAM. That’s right. Isobel—(he looks, in a statesmanlike way, at his watch)—in five minutes, shall we say?

ISOBEL. Yes.

WILLIAM. How is he just now?

ISOBEL. He seems better to-day.

WILLIAM. That’s right. We shall drink the health in here.

ISOBEL. Very well. [She goes out.

WILLIAM. A little custom we have, Mr. Royce.

ROYCE. Oh, yes.

WILLIAM. We shall all wish him many happy returns of the day—you understand that he isn’t dressed now until the afternoon—and then I shall present you. After that, we shall all drink the health—you will join us, of course.

ROYCE (smiling). Certainly.

WILLIAM. Then, of course, it depends how we are feeling. We may feel in the mood for a little talk, or we may be too tired for anything more than a few words of greeting. You have the Address with you?

ROYCE. Yes. (Looking about him) At least I put it down somewhere.

WILLIAM (scandalised). You put it down—somewhere! My dear Mr. Royce (he searches anxiously)—at any moment now—— (He looks at his watch.) Perhaps I’d better—— (A Maid comes in with the
port and glasses) Parsons, have you seen a—— (He makes vague rectangular shapes with his hands.)

ROYCE. Here it is.

WILLIAM. Ah, that’s right. (As the Maid puts the tray down) Yes, there, I think, Parsons. How many glasses have you brought?

PARSONS. Seven, sir.

WILLIAM. There should be six. One—two—three——

PARSONS (firmly). Madam said seven, sir.

WILLIAM. Seven, yes, that’s right. When I ring the bell, you’ll tell Miss Isobel that we are ready.

PARSONS. Yes, sir.

(She goes out, making way for MARION, SEPTIMA, and OLIVER as she does so.)

WILLIAM. Ah, that’s right. Now then, let me see.... I think—— Marion, will you sit here? Septima, you there. Oliver—Oliver, that’s a very light suit you’re wearing.

OLIVER. It’s a birthday, Father, not a funeral.

WILLIAM (with dignity). Yes, but whose birthday? Well, it’s too late now—you sit there. Mr. Royce, you sit next to me, so that I can take you up. Now are we all ready?

SEPTIMA (wickedly). Wait a moment. (She blows her nose) Right.

WILLIAM. All ready? (He rings the bell with an air.)

(There is a solemn silence of expectation. Then OLIVER shifts a leg and catches his ankle against SEPTIMA’S chair.)

OLIVER. Damn! Oo! (He rubs his ankle.)
WILLIAM (in church). S’sh!

(There is another solemn silence, and then the Maid opens the door. BLAYDS, in an invalid chair, is wheeled in by ISOBEL. They all stand up. With his long white beard, his still plentiful white hair curling over his ears, OLIVER BLAYDS does indeed “look like somebody.” Only his eyes, under their shaggy brows, are still young. Indomitable spirit and humour gleam in them. With all the dignity, majesty even, which he brings to the part, you feel that he realises what great fun it is being OLIVER BLAYDS.)

BLAYDS. Good-day to you all.

MARION (going forward and kissing his forehead). Many happy returns of the day, Father.

BLAYDS. Thank you, Marion. Happy, I hope; many, I neither expect nor want.

(WILLIAM, who is just going forward, stops for a moment to jot this down on his shirt cuff. Then, beckoning to ROYCE to follow him, he approaches.)

WILLIAM. My heartiest congratulations, sir.

BLAYDS. Thank you, William. When you are ninety, I’ll do as much for you.

WILLIAM (laughing heartily). Ha, ha! Very good, sir. May I present Mr. A. L. Royce, the well-known critic?

BLAYDS (looking thoughtfully at ROYCE). We have met before, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. At Bournemouth, sir. Eighteen years ago.

BLAYDS (nodding). Yes. I remember.

WILLIAM. Wonderful, wonderful!
BLAYDS (*holding out his hand*). Thank you for wasting your time now on an old man. You must stay and talk to me afterwards.

ROYCE. It’s very kind of you, sir. I——

WILLIAM. Just a moment, Mr. Royce. (*He indicates SEPTIMA and OLIVER.*)

ROYCE. Oh, I beg your pardon. (*He steps on one side.*)

WILLIAM (*in a whisper*). Septima.

SEPTIMA (*coming forward*). Congratulations, Grandfather. (*She bends her head, and he kisses her.*)

BLAYDS. Thank you, my dear. I don’t know what I’ve done, but thank you.

OLIVER (*coming forward*). Congratulations, Grandfather. (*He bends down and BLAYDS puts a hand on his head.*)

BLAYDS. Thank you, my boy, thank you. (*Wistfully*) I was your age once.

(*WILLIAM, who has been very busy pouring out port, now gets busy distributing it. When they are all ready he holds up his glass.*)

WILLIAM. Are we all ready? (*They are.*) Blayds!

ALL. Blayds! (*They drink.*)

BLAYDS (*moved as always by this*). Thank you, thank you. (*Recovering himself*) Is that the Jubilee port, William?

WILLIAM. Yes, sir.

BLAYDS (*looking wistfully at ISOBEL*). May I?

ISOBEL. Yes, dear, if you like. William——
WILLIAM (anxiously). Do you think——? (She nods, and he pours out a glass.) Here you are, sir.

BLAYDS (taking it in rather a shaky hand). Mr. Royce, I will drink to you; and, through you, to all that eager youth which is seeking, each in his own way, for beauty. (He raises his glass.) May they find it at the last! (He drinks.)

ROYCE. Thank you very much, sir. I shall remember.

WILLIAM. Allow me, sir. (He recovers BLAYDS’ glass.) Marion, you have business to attend to? Oliver——? Septima——?

MARION. Yes, dear. (Cheerfully to BLAYDS) We’re going now, Grandfather.

BLAYDS (nodding). I shall talk a little to Mr. Royce.

MARION. That’s right, dear; don’t tire yourself. Come along, children.

(OLIVER comes along. SEPTIMA hesitates. She “means to have it out this time.”)

SEPTIMA (irresolutely). Grandfather——

BLAYDS. Well?

MARION. Come along, dear.

SEPTIMA (overawed by the majesty of BLAYDS). Oh—all right. (They go. But she will certainly have it out next time.)

WILLIAM (in a whisper to ROYCE). The Address? (To BLAYDS) Mr. Royce has a message of congratulation from some of the younger writers, which he wishes to present to you, sir. Mr. Royce——

(ROYCE comes forward with it.)
BLAYDS. It is very good of them.

ROYCE (doubtfully). Shall I read it, sir?

BLAYDS (smiling). The usual thing?

ROYCE (smiling too). Pretty much. A little better than usual, I hope, because I wrote it.

(WILLIAM is now at the writing-table, waiting hopefully for crumbs.)

BLAYDS (holding out his hand). Give it to me. And sit down, please. Near me. I don’t hear too well. (He takes the book and glances at it.) Pretty. (He glances at some of the names and says, with a pleased smile) I didn’t think they took any interest in an old man. Isobel, you will read it to me afterwards, and tell me who they all are?

ISOBEL. Yes, dear.

BLAYDS. Will that do, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. Of course, sir.... I should just like you to know, to have the privilege of telling you here, and on this day, that every one of us there has a very real admiration for your work and a very real reverence for yourself. And we feel that, in signing, we have done honour to ourselves, rather than honour to Blayds, whom no words of ours can honour as his own have done.

BLAYDS. Thank you.... You must read it to me, Isobel. (He gives her the book.) A very real admiration for all my work, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. Yes, sir.

BLAYDS. Except the 1863 volume?

ROYCE. I have never regretted that, sir.

BLAYDS (pleased). Ah! You hear, Isobel?
ROYCE. I don’t say that it is my own favourite, but I could quite understand if it were the author’s. There are things about it——

BLAYDS. Isobel, are you listening?

ISOBEL (smiling). Yes, Father.

ROYCE. Things outside your usual range, if I may say so——

BLAYDS (nodding and chuckling). You hear, Isobel? Didn’t I always tell you? Well, well, we mustn’t talk any more about that.... William!

WILLIAM (jumping up). Sir?

BLAYDS. What are you doing?

WILLIAM. Just finishing off a few letters, sir.

BLAYDS. Would you be good enough to bring me my Sordello?

WILLIAM. The one which Browning gave you, sir?

BLAYDS. Of course. I wish to show Mr. Royce the inscription——(to ROYCE)—an absurd one, all rhymes to Blayds. It will be in the library somewhere; it may have got moved.

WILLIAM. Certainly, sir.

ISOBEL. Father——

BLAYDS (holding up a hand to stop her). Thank you, William. (William goes out.) You were saying, Isobel?

ISOBEL. Nothing. I thought it was in your bedroom. I was reading to you last night.

BLAYDS (sharply). Of course it’s in my bedroom. But can’t I get my own son-in-law out of the room if I want to?

ISOBEL (soothingly). Of course, dear. It was silly of me.
BLAYDS. My son-in-law, Mr. Royce, meditates after my death a little book called “Blaydsiana.” He hasn’t said so, but I see it written all over him. In addition, you understand, to the official life in two volumes. There may be another one called “On the Track of Blayds in the Cotswolds,” but I am not certain of this yet. (*He chuckles to himself.*)

ISOBEL (*reproachfully*). Father!

BLAYDS (*apologetically*). All right, Isobel. Mr. Royce won’t mind.

ISOBEL (*smiling reluctantly*). It’s very unkind.

BLAYDS. You never knew Whistler, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. No, sir; he was a bit before my time.

BLAYDS. Ah, he was the one to say unkind things. But you forgave him because he had a way with him. And there was always the hope that when he had finished with you, he would say something still worse about one of your friends. (*He chuckles to himself again.*) I sent him a book of mine once—which one was it, Isobel?

ISOBEL. Helen.

BLAYDS. *Helen,* yes. I got a postcard from him a few days later: “Dear Oliver, rub it out and do it again.” Well, I happened to meet him the next day, and I said that I was sorry I couldn’t take his advice, as it was too late now to do anything about it. “Yes,” said Jimmie, “as God said when he’d made Swinburne.”

ISOBEL. You’ve heard that, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. No. Ought I to have?

ISOBEL. It has been published.

BLAYDS (*wickedly*). I told my son-in-law. Anything which I tell my son-in-law is published.
ISOBEL. I always say that father made it up.

BLAYDS. You didn’t know Jimmie, my dear. There was nothing he couldn’t have said. But a most stimulating companion.

ROYCE. Yes, he must have been.

BLAYDS. So was Alfred. He had a great sense of humour. All of us who knew him well knew that.

ROYCE. It is curious how many people nowadays regard Tennyson as something of a prig, with no sense of humour. I always feel that his association with Queen Victoria had something to do with it. A Court poet is so very un-stimulating.

BLAYDS. I think you’re right. It was a pity. (He chuckles to himself. ROYCE waits expectantly.) I went to Court once.

ROYCE (surprised). You?

BLAYDS (nodding). Yes, I went to Osborne to see the Queen. Alfred’s doing I always suspected, but he wouldn’t own to it. (He chuckles.)

ISOBEL. Tell him about it, dear.

BLAYDS. I had a new pair of boots. They squeaked. They squeaked all the way from London to the Isle of Wight. The Queen was waiting for me at the end of a long room. I squeaked in. I bowed. I squeaked my way up to her. We talked. I was not allowed to sit down, of course; I just stood shifting from one foot to the other—and squeaking. She said: “Don’t you think Lord Tennyson’s poetry is very beautiful?” and I squeaked and said, “Damn these boots!” A gentleman-in-waiting told me afterwards that it was contrary to etiquette to start a new topic of conversation with Royalty—so I suppose that that is why I have never been asked to Court again.

ISOBEL. It was your joke, Father, not the gentleman-in-waiting’s. (BLAYDS chuckles.)
ROYCE. Yes, I’m sure of that.

BLAYDS. Isobel knows all my stories.... When you’re ninety, they know all your stories.

ISOBEL. I like hearing them again, dear, and Mr. Royce hasn’t heard them.

BLAYDS. I’ll tell you one you don’t know, Isobel.

ISOBEL. Not you.

BLAYDS. Will you bet?

ISOBEL. It’s taking your money.

BLAYDS. Mr. Royce will hold the stakes. A shilling.

ISOBEL. You will be ruined. (She takes out her purse.)

BLAYDS (childishly). Have you got one for me too?

ISOBEL (taking out two). One for you and one for me. Here you are, Mr. Royce.

ROYCE. Thank you. Both good ones? Right.

BLAYDS. George Meredith told me this. Are you fond of cricket, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. Yes, very.

BLAYDS. So was Meredith, so was I.... A young boy playing for his school. The important match of the year; he gets his colours only if he plays—you understand? Just before the game began, he was sitting in one of those—what do they call them?—deck chairs, when it collapsed, his hand between the hinges. Three crushed fingers; no chance of playing; no colours. At that age a tragedy; it seems that one’s whole life is over. You understand?
ROYCE. Yes. Oh, very well.

BLAYDS. But if once the match begins with him, he has his colours, whatever happens afterwards. So he decides to say nothing about the fingers. He keeps his hand in his pocket; nobody has seen the accident, nobody guesses. His side is in first. He watches—his hand is in his pocket. When his turn comes to bat, he forces a glove over the crushed fingers and goes to the wickets. He makes nothing—well, that doesn’t matter; he is the wicket-keeper and has gone in last. But he knows now that he can never take his place in the field; and he knows, too, what an unfair thing he has done to his school to let them start their game with a cripple. It is impossible now to confess.... So, in between the innings, he arranges another accident with his chair, and falls back on it, with his fingers—his already crushed fingers this time—in the hinges. So nobody ever knew. Not until he was a man, and it all seemed very little and far away.

ISOBEL. What a horrible story! Give him the money, Mr. Royce.

BLAYDS. Keep it for me, Isobel. (ISOBEL takes it.)

ROYCE. Is it true, sir?

BLAYDS. So Meredith said. He told me.

ROYCE. Lord, what pluck! I think I should have forgiven him for that.

BLAYDS. Yes, an unfair thing to do; but having done it, he carried it off in the grand manner.

ISOBEL. To save himself.

BLAYDS. Well, well. But he had qualities. Don’t you think so, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. I do indeed.
(There is a silence. The excitement of the occasion has died away, and you can almost see BLAYDS getting older.)

BLAYDS (after a pause). I could tell you another story, Isobel, which you don’t know.... Of another boy who carried it off.

ISOBEL. Not now, dear. You mustn’t tire yourself.

BLAYDS (a very old man suddenly). No, not now. But I shall tell you one day. Yes, I shall have to tell you.... I shall have to tell you.

ISOBEL (quietly, to ROYCE). I think perhaps——

ROYCE (getting up). It is very kind of you to have seen me, sir. I mustn’t let you get tired of me.

BLAYDS (very tired). Good-bye, Mr. Royce. He liked the 1863 volume, Isobel.

ISOBEL. Yes, Father.

ROYCE. Good-bye, sir, and thank you; I shall always remember.

ISOBEL (in a whisper to ROYCE). You can find your way out, can’t you? I don’t like to leave him.

ROYCE. Of course. I may see you again?

ISOBEL (her tragedy). I am always here.

ROYCE. Good-bye.

[He goes.

BLAYDS. Isobel, where are you?

ISOBEL (at his side again). Here I am, dear.

BLAYDS. How old did you say I was?
ISOBEL. Ninety.

BLAYDS. Ninety.... I’m tired.

ISOBEL. It has been too much for you, dear. I oughtn’t to have let him stay so long. You’d like to go to bed now, wouldn’t you? (She walks away to ring the bell.)

BLAYDS (a frightened child). Where are you going? Don’t leave me.

ISOBEL (stopping). Only to ring the bell, dear.

BLAYDS. Don’t leave me. I want you to hold my hand.

ISOBEL. Yes, dear. (She holds it.)

BLAYDS. Did you say I was ninety? There’s no going back at ninety. Only forward—into the grave that’s waiting for you. So cold and lonely there, Isobel.

ISOBEL. I am always with you, dear.

BLAYDS. Hold me tight. I’m frightened.... Did I tell you about the boy—who carried it off?

ISOBEL. Yes, dear, you told us.

BLAYDS. No, not that boy—the other one. Are we alone, Isobel?

ISOBEL. Yes, dear.

BLAYDS. Listen, Isobel. I want to tell you——

ISOBEL. Tell me to-morrow, dear.

BLAYDS (in weak anger, because he is frightened). There are no to-morrows when you are ninety ... when you are ninety ... and they have all left you ... alone.

ISOBEL. Very well, dear. Tell me now.
BLAYDS (eagerly). Yes, yes, come closer.... Listen, Isobel. (He draws her still closer and begins.) Isobel....

(But we do not hear it until afterwards.)

ACT II

SCENE: The same room a few days later.

OLIVER comes in dressed in the deepest black, having just returned from the funeral of OLIVER BLAYDS. He looks round the room, and then up at the old gentleman who has now left it for ever, and draws his first deep breath of freedom. Then, sitting at his ease on the sofa, he takes out a cigarette and lights it.

* * * * *

OLIVER (blowing out smoke). Ah!

SEPTIMA comes in.

SEPTIMA (seeing the cigarette). Hallo!

OLIVER (a little on the defensive). Hallo!

SEPTIMA. I think I’ll join you. Got one?

OLIVER. I expect so. (He offers her one.)

SEPTIMA. Thanks. (He lights it for her.) Thanks. (She also takes her first deep breath.) Well, that’s that.

OLIVER. What did you think of it?

SEPTIMA. It’s rather awful, isn’t it? I mean awe-inspiring.
OLIVER. Yes. I don’t know why it should be. Did you cry? You looked like it once or twice.

SEPTIMA. Yes. Not because it was Grandfather. Not because it was Oliver Blayds. But—just because.

OLIVER. Because it was the last time.

SEPTIMA. Yes.... I suppose that’s why one cries at weddings. Or at—no, I’ve never been to a christening.

OLIVER. You have. And I bet you cried.

SEPTIMA. Oh, my own, yes....

OLIVER. Wonderful crowd of people. I don’t think I ever realised before what a great man he was.

SEPTIMA. No, one doesn’t....

OLIVER (after a pause). You know there’s a lot of rot talked about death.

SEPTIMA. A lot of rot talked about everything.

OLIVER. Here was Oliver Blayds—the greatest man of his day—seen everything, known everybody, ninety years old, honoured by all—and then he goes out. Well!

SEPTIMA. Nothing is here for tears, in fact.

OLIVER. Not only nothing for tears, but everything for rejoicings. I don’t understand these religious people. They’re quite certain that there’s an after life, and that this life is only a preparation for it—like a cold bath in the morning to the rest of the day. And yet they are always the people who make the most fuss, and cover themselves with black, and say, “Poor Grandfather!” ever after. Why poor? He is richer than ever according to them.
SEPTIMA. Can’t you see Oliver Blayds in Heaven enjoying it all? What poetry he would make of it!

OLIVER. “A Child’s Thoughts on Waking”—eh? I’ve laughed at it, and loathed it, but it was the real stuff, you know. What’s the text—“Except ye be born again as a little child, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven”—is that right? His thoughts—on waking in Heaven.

SEPTIMA (thoughtfully). Septima Blayds-Conway. It’s rather a thing to be, you know.

OLIVER. I used to think once that, when the old boy died, I’d chuck the Blayds and just be plain Oliver Conway. I’m beginning to think I was wrong.... Oliver Blayds-Conway.

SEPTIMA. The well-known statesman. Sorry—I mean engineer.

OLIVER. Well, I wonder about that.

SEPTIMA. What sort of wondering?

OLIVER. Things will be a bit different now. I’m the only genuine Blayds left——

SEPTIMA. Oh, indeed!

OLIVER. You know what I mean—male Blayds. And it’s rather up to me not to let the old man down. Oliver Blayds-Conway, M.P. There’s something in it, you know. I was thinking about it in the church. Or should I drop the Conway and just be Blayds? Or Conway Blayds and drop the Oliver? It’s a bit of a problem.

SEPTIMA. I shall keep the Blayds when I marry. Drop the Conway, of course.

OLIVER. It’s a dirty game, politics, but that’s all the more reason why there should be some really good people in it. Irreproachable people, I mean. Conway Blayds.... (And the Duke of Devonshire, and so forth).
SEPTIMA (*after a pause*). I wonder what Aunt Isobel wants to talk to us all about.

OLIVER. The old man’s last dying instructions or something. I was rather hoping to get down to the Oval. I’ve got the day off. Bit of a change to go to the Oval when you really *have* buried your grandfather. But perhaps I ought to be careful if I’m going in seriously for politics.

SEPTIMA. Noll, have you realised that it’s all going to be rather interesting now?

OLIVER. Of course it is. But why particularly?

SEPTIMA. Father.

OLIVER. You mean he’s lost his job.

SEPTIMA. Yes. It’s terribly exciting when your father’s out of work.

OLIVER. He’ll have more work than ever. He’ll write Blayds’ life. That’ll take him years.

SEPTIMA. Yes; but, don’t you see, he hasn’t any real standing now. Who is he? Only Blayds’ late secretary. Whose house is this now, do you think?

OLIVER. Depends how the old man left it.

SEPTIMA. Of course it does. But you can be quite sure he didn’t leave it to father. I think it’s all going to be rather exciting.

OLIVER. Well, you won’t be here to see it, my child.

SEPTIMA. Why not?

OLIVER. I thought you were going to live with that Ferguson girl.
SEPTIMA. Not so sure now. There’s no hurry anyway. I think I’ll wait here a bit, and see what happens. It’s all going to be so different.

OLIVER. It is. *(He smiles at his thoughts.)*

SEPTIMA. What?

OLIVER *(smiling broadly).* It’s just on the cards that it’s my house now. *(Looking round the room.)* I don’t think I shall let father smoke in here.

SEPTIMA. What fun that would be!... I hope he’s left Aunt Isobel something.

OLIVER. Yes, poor dear, she’s rather in the air, isn’t she?

SEPTIMA. It’s funny how little we know her.

OLIVER. We’ve hardly ever seen her, apart from the old man. I don’t suppose there’s much to know. A born nurse, and that’s all there is to it.

SEPTIMA. Perhaps you’re right.

OLIVER. I’m sure I am.

*WILLIAM and MARION come on.*

WILLIAM *(continuing a conversation which has obviously been going on since BLAYDS died).* I say again, Oliver Blayds ought to have been buried in the Abbey. The nation expected it. The nation had the right to it.

MARION. Yes, dear, but we couldn’t go against his own wish. His last wish.

WILLIAM. If it was his wish, why did he not express it to me?

MARION. He told Isobel, dear.
WILLIAM. So we are to believe. And of course I was careful to let
the public understand that this was so in my letter to the *Times*. But in
what circumstances did he express the wish? (*He suddenly realises
OLIVER’S cigarette and says sharply*) Oliver, you know quite well
that your grandfather—— (*But then he remembers where grandfather
is.*)

OLIVER (*not understanding*). Yes?

MARION. I think Father meant—of course Grandfather can’t see you
now—not to mind.

WILLIAM. I should have thought your instinct would have told you
that this is hardly the moment, when Oliver Blayds is just laid to
rest——

MARION. Your cigarette, dear.

OLIVER. Oh! (*He throws it away.*) Sorry, Mother, if you mind. I
didn’t think it would matter either way—now.

MARION. That’s all right, dear.

WILLIAM. As I was saying, in what circumstances did he express the
wish?

MARION. What, dear?

WILLIAM. On his death-bed, his faculties rapidly going, he may have
indicated preference for a simple ceremony. But certainly up to a few
weeks of his passing, although it was naturally a subject which I did
not care myself to initiate, he always gave me the impression that he
anticipated an interment in the Abbey.

MARION. Yes, dear. I daresay I shall feel it more later, but just now I
like to think of him where he wanted to be himself.

SEPTIMA. After all, Shakespeare isn’t buried in the Abbey.
WILLIAM. I don’t think that that has anything to do with it, Septima. I am not saying that the reputation of Oliver Blayds will suffer by reason of his absence from the national Valhalla—he has built his own monument in a thousand deathless lines; but speaking as an Englishman, I say that the Abbey had a right to him.

MARION. Well, it’s too late now, dear.

WILLIAM. I shall speak to Isobel again; I still feel sure she was mistaken.

MARION. Very well, dear. But don’t worry her more than you need. I feel rather uneasy about her. She has been so strange since he died.

WILLIAM. She will be worried enough as it is. Of all the extraordinary wills to make!

(OLIVER and SEPTIMA exchange glances.)

OLIVER. Why, what’s he done? We were wondering about that.

WILLIAM. Yes, yes, yes, you will know in good time, my boy.

OLIVER. Why not now? This seems a very good time.

SEPTIMA. Are we too young to be told?

WILLIAM (ignoring them). Marion, don’t let me forget that message to the public—returning thanks for their sympathy, and so on. (Moving to the desk.) We might draft that now.

MARION. Yes, dear.

SEPTIMA. Oliver was asking you about the will, Father.

WILLIAM. Yes, yes, another time. Marion——

OLIVER. I suppose I am mentioned in it?

WILLIAM. Of course, of course.
OLIVER. To what extent?

*(WILLIAM is too busy to answer.)*

SEPTIMA. Father, don’t be so childish.

WILLIAM *(outraged).* Septima!

MARION. Septima dear, you oughtn’t to talk to your father like that.

WILLIAM *(with dignity).* I think you had better go to your room.

SEPTIMA *(unmoved).* But that’s the whole point. Is it my room? *(WILLIAM looks bewildered.)* Or is it Oliver’s, or Mother’s, or Aunt Isobel’s?

OLIVER. I believe he has left everything to Aunt Isobel.

MARION. Oh no, dear, he wouldn’t do that. He would never have favourites. Share and share alike.

SEPTIMA. Half for you and half for Aunt Isobel?

MARION. Of course, dear. And all to you and Oliver after our death. And something down to you now. I forget how much. *(To WILLIAM)* What was it, dear?

WILLIAM *(sulkily).* A thousand pounds each.

OLIVER. Sportsman! What about you, Father? Do you get anything?

MARION. Father gets a thousand too.

SEPTIMA. Then why “of all the extraordinary wills——”?

MARION. It’s because of Aunt Isobel being made sole executor—literary executor too—isn’t that it, dear?

WILLIAM *(mumbling).* Yes.
OLIVER. Oho! Meaning that she runs Blayds now? New editions, biographies, unpublished fragments, and all the rest of it?

MARION. Naturally she will leave it in Father’s hands. But, of course, Father is a little hurt that Grandfather didn’t think of that for himself.

OLIVER. Oh, well, I don’t suppose it matters much. Then that’s why she wants to see us all now.

(WILLIAM grunts assent; and stands up as ISOBEL comes in.)

WILLIAM. Ah, here you are.

ISOBEL. I’m sorry if I have kept you waiting.

MARION. It’s all right, dear.

WILLIAM. I was just telling Marion that I am more than ever convinced that Oliver Blayds’ rightful resting-place was the Abbey.

ISOBEL (shaking her head wearily). No.

WILLIAM. I was saying to Marion, even if he expressed the wish in his last moments for a quiet interment——

ISOBEL. He never expressed the wish, one way or the other.

WILLIAM. My dear Isobel! You distinctly told us——

MARION. You did say, dear.

ISOBEL. Yes, I owe you an apology about that.

WILLIAM (indignantly). An apology!

ISOBEL. There is something I have to tell you all. Will you please listen, all of you? Won’t you sit down, William? (They sit down.)
MARION. What is it, dear?

WILLIAM. You’ve been very mysterious these last few days.

ISOBEL. I didn’t want to say anything until he had been buried. I shall not be mysterious now; I shall be only too plain.

SEPTIMA (to OLIVER). I say, what’s up?

(OLIVER shrugs his shoulders.)

WILLIAM. Well?

ISOBEL. I told you that Father didn’t want to be buried in the Abbey, not because he had said so, but because it was quite impossible that he should be buried in the Abbey.

WILLIAM. Impossible!

MARION. I’m sure the Dean would have been only——

ISOBEL. Impossible because he had done nothing to make him worthy of that honour.

WILLIAM. Well!

OLIVER. Oh no, Aunt Isobel, you’re wrong there. I mean when you think of some of the people——

ISOBEL. Will you listen to me, please? And ask any questions afterwards. You may think I’m mad; I’m not.... I wish I were.

WILLIAM. Well, what is it?

(She tells them; it is almost as if she were repeating a lesson which she had learnt by heart. BLAYDS, you may be sure, made a story of it when he told her—we seem to hear snatches of that story now.)

ISOBEL. Nearly seventy years ago there were two young men, boys almost, twenty-three, perhaps, living together in rooms in Islington.
Both poor, both eager, ambitious, certain of themselves, very certain of their destiny. But only one of them was a genius. He was a poet, this one; perhaps the greater poet because he knew that he had not long to live. The poetry came bubbling out of him, and he wrote it down feverishly, quick, quick before the hand became cold and the fingers could no longer write. That was all his ambition. He had no thoughts of present fame; there was no time for it. He was content to live unknown, so that when dead he might live for ever. His friend was ambitious in a different way. He wanted the present delights of fame. So they lived together there, one writing and writing, always writing; the other writing and then stopping to think how famous he was going to be, and envying those who were already famous, and then regretfully writing again. A time came when the poet grew very ill, and lay in bed, but still writing, but still hurrying, hurrying to keep pace with the divine music in his brain. Then one day there was no more writing, no more music. The poet was dead. (She is silent for a little.)

WILLIAM (as her meaning slowly comes to him). Isobel, what are you saying?

MARION. I don’t understand. Who was it?

OLIVER. Good Lord!

ISOBEL (in the same quiet voice). The friend was left—with the body of the poet—and all that great monument which the dead man had raised for himself. The poet had no friends but this one; no relations of whom he had ever spoken or who claimed him now. He was dead, and it was left to his friend to see that he won now that immortality for which he had given his life.... His friend betrayed him.

SEPTIMA. I say!

WILLIAM. I won’t believe it! It’s monstrous!

MARION. I don’t understand.

ISOBEL (wearily). One can see the temptation. There he was, this young man of talent, of great ambition, and there were these works of
genius lying at his feet, waiting to be picked up—and fathered by him. I suppose that, like every other temptation, it came suddenly. He writes out some of the verses, scribbled down anyhow by the poet in his mad hurry, and sends them to a publisher; one can imagine the publisher’s natural acceptance of the friend as the true author, the friend’s awkwardness in undeceiving him, and then his sudden determination to make the most of the opportunity given him.... Oh, one can imagine many things—but what remains? Always and always this. That Oliver Blayds was not a poet; that he did not write the works attributed to him; and that he betrayed his friend. (She stops and then says in an ordinary matter-of-fact voice) That was why I thought that he ought not to be buried in the Abbey.

OLIVER. Good Lord!

WILLIAM (sharply). Is this true, Isobel?

ISOBEL. It isn’t the sort of story that I should make up.

MARION. I don’t understand. (To WILLIAM) What is it? I don’t understand.

WILLIAM. Isobel is telling us that Oliver Blayds stole all his poetry from another man.

MARION. Stole it!

WILLIAM. Passed it off as his own.

MARION (firmly to ISOBEL). Oh no, dear, you must be wrong. Why should Grandfather want to steal anybody else’s poetry when he wrote so beautifully himself?

SEPTIMA. That’s just the point, Mother. Aunt Isobel says that he didn’t write anything himself.

MARION. But there are the books with his name on them!

ISOBEL. Stolen—from his friend.
MARION (*shocked*). Isobel, how can you? Your own father!

WILLIAM. I don’t believe it. I had the privilege of knowing Oliver Blayds for nearly thirty years and I say that I don’t believe it.

ISOBEL. I knew him for some time too. He was my father.

WILLIAM. When did he tell you this?

OLIVER. It’s a dashed funny thing that——

WILLIAM. If you will allow me, Oliver. I want to get to the bottom of this. When did he tell you?

ISOBEL. That last evening. His birthday.

WILLIAM. How? Why? Why should he tell you?

ISOBEL. He seemed frightened suddenly—of dying. I suppose he’d always meant to tell somebody before he died.

MARION. Why didn’t you tell us before, dear?

WILLIAM (*holding up his hand*). Please. Let me. (*To ISOBEL*) Why didn’t you tell us before?

ISOBEL. I promised not to say anything until he was dead. Then I thought I would wait until he was buried.

MARION. You couldn’t have made a mistake? You couldn’t have misunderstood him?

ISOBEL (*smiling sadly*). No.

WILLIAM. You say that this other man died—how many years ago?

ISOBEL. Sixty, seventy.

WILLIAM. Ah! (*Sarcastically*) And sixty years after he was dead he was apparently still writing poetry for Oliver Blayds to steal?
ISOBEL. He had already written it—sixty years ago—for Oliver Blayds to steal.

OLIVER. Good Lord! What a man!

SEPTIMA. You mean that his last volume——

WILLIAM (holding up his hand). Please, Septima.... Take this last volume published when he was over eighty. You say that everything there had been written by this other man sixty years ago?

ISOBEL. Yes.

WILLIAM. And the manuscripts were kept by Oliver Blayds for sixty years, written out again by him and published in his old age as his own?

ISOBEL. Yes.

WILLIAM (triumphantly). And can you explain how it was that he didn’t publish them earlier if he had had them in his possession all those years?

ISOBEL. He didn’t dare to. He was afraid of being left with nothing to publish. He took care always to have something in reserve. And that’s why everybody said how wonderfully vigorous and youthful his mind was at eighty, how amazing that the spirit and fire of youth had remained with him so long. Yes, it was the spirit and fire of youth, but of a youth who died seventy years ago.

OLIVER (impressed). Gad, you know, fancy the old chap keeping it up like that. Shows how little one really knows people. I had no idea he was such a sportsman.

SEPTIMA. Such a liar.

OLIVER. Same thing, sometimes.

SEPTIMA. I call it perfectly disgusting.
WILLIAM. Please, please! We shan’t arrive at the truth like that. (To ISOBEL) You want me to understand that Oliver Blayds has never written a line of his own poetry in his life?

MARION. Why, Grandfather was always writing poetry. Even as a child I remember——

SEPTIMA (impatiently). Mother, can’t you understand that the Oliver Blayds we thought we knew never existed?

MARION. But I was telling you, dear, that even as a child——

SEPTIMA (to OLIVER). It’s no good, she’s hopelessly muddled.

WILLIAM. Yes, yes.... Do you wish me to understand——

ISOBEL. I wish you to know the truth. We’ve been living in a lie, all of us, all our lives, and now at last we have found the truth. You talk as if, for some reason, I wanted to spread slanders about Oliver Blayds now that he is dead; as if in some way all this great lie were my doing; as if it were no pain but a sort of a pleasure to me to find out what sort of man my father really was. Ask me questions—I want you to know everything; but don’t cross-examine me as if I were keeping back the truth.

WILLIAM (upset and apologetic). Quite so, quite so. It’s the truth which we want.

MARION. As Grandfather said so beautifully himself in his “Ode to Truth”—What are the lines?

SEPTIMA (hopelessly). Oh, Mother!

MARION. Yes, and that was what I was going to say—could a man who wrote so beautifully about Truth as Grandfather did tell lies and deceive people as Isobel says he did? (To ISOBEL) I’m sure you must have made a mistake, dear.

OLIVER. You never told us—what was the other fellow’s name?
WILLIAM. I am coming to that directly. What I am asking you now is this. Did Oliver Blayds write no line of poetry himself at all?

ISOBEL. He wrote the 1863 volume.

WILLIAM (staggered). Oh!

OLIVER. The wash-out? By Jove! Then that explains it!

ISOBEL. Yes, that explains it. He tried to tell himself that he was a poet too; that he had only used the other man in order to give himself a start. So he brought out a volume of his own poems. And then when everybody said “Blayds is finished,” he went back hastily to his friend and never ventured by himself again. And that explains why he resented the criticism of that volume, why he was so pleased when it was praised. It was all that he had written.

WILLIAM (defeated now). Yes, that would explain it. (To himself) Oliver Blayds!...

(They are all silent for a little.)

SEPTIMA. Then he didn’t write “Septima.”

OLIVER. Of course he didn’t. You’re illegitimate, old girl.

SEPTIMA. Who did?

ISOBEL. The other man’s name was Jenkins.

SEPTIMA (in disgust). Christened after Jenkins!

OLIVER. Oliver Jenkins-Conway, M.P. Good Lord!

SEPTIMA. It will have to be Oliver Conway now.

OLIVER (gloomily). Yes, I suppose so. But everybody will know.
WILLIAM (*still fighting*). His friends, Isobel. The great friends he had had. The stories he has told us about them—were those all lies too? No, they couldn’t have been. I’ve seen them here myself.

MARION. Why, I remember going to see Uncle Thomas once when I was a little girl—Carlyle—Uncle Thomas I called him.

OLIVER. Well, if it comes to that, *I* can remember——

ISOBEL. Oh, the friends were there. They accepted him for what he seemed to be, just as we did. He deceived them as cleverly as he deceived us.

WILLIAM. Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne——

ISOBEL (*bitterly*). Oh, he had his qualities. He talked well. There were his books. Why should they doubt him?

WILLIAM. Yes.... Yes.

(*There is silence for a little.*)

MARION (*going over to ISOBEL and shaking her by the arm*). Is it really true what you’ve been saying?

ISOBEL. Oh, how I wish it weren’t.

MARION (*to WILLIAM*). *Is* it true?

WILLIAM. He told her. She wouldn’t make it up.

MARION. But there’s all that beautiful poetry. I’ve been brought up to believe in it all my life. I’ve lived on it. And now you’ve taken it away, and you’ve left—nothing.

ISOBEL. Nothing.

MARION (*quite lost*). I don’t understand. (*She goes back in a vague, bewildered way to her chair....*)
SEPTIMA (defiantly). The poetry is still there—and Jenkins.

OLIVER (shouting). Shut up, Tim!

SEPTIMA (angrily). Shut up about what?

OLIVER. Jenkins. Don’t rub it in. It’s much worse for Mother than it is for us.

SEPTIMA. Oh, all right! But you don’t gain anything by not being frank about it.

(The little storm dies down as suddenly as it began. There is another silence.)

OLIVER. Good Lord! I’ve just thought of something. (They look at him.) The money.

WILLIAM. The money?

OLIVER. All this. (He indicates the room) Who does it belong to?

WILLIAM. According to the provisions of your Grandfather’s will—

OLIVER. Yes, but it wasn’t his to leave.

WILLIAM. Not his to——

OLIVER. No, Jenkins.

SEPTIMA. I thought we weren’t going to mention Mr. Jenkins.

OLIVER. Shut up, Tim, that’s different. (To the others) All the money comes from the books—at least I suppose it does—and the books aren’t his, so the money isn’t either.

WILLIAM (turning in a bewildered way to ISOBEL). Is that so?

ISOBEL (with a shrug). I suppose so.
WILLIAM. You say he had no family, this other man.

ISOBEL. None who bothered about him. But there must be relations somewhere.

WILLIAM. We shall have to find that out.

ISOBEL. Anyhow, as Oliver says, the money isn’t ours. (Bitterly) I wouldn’t touch a penny.

WILLIAM. Some of the money would be rightfully his. There was that one volume anyhow. It may not have been praised, but it was bought. Then there’s the question of his investments. It may prove that some of his most profitable investments were made about that time—with that very money. In which case, if it could be established——

ISOBEL (indignantly). Oh, how can you talk like that! As if it mattered. It’s tainted money, all of it.

WILLIAM. I think that is going too far. Very much too far. I recognise, of course, that we have certain obligations towards the relatives of this man—er—Jenkins. Obviously we must fulfil those obligations. But when that is done——

MARION (to ISOBEL). We shall be generous, of course, dear, that’s only fair.

OLIVER. Yes, but what are you going to do if no relations turn up?

WILLIAM (turning doubtfully to ISOBEL). Well, there is that, of course.

MARION. In that case we couldn’t do anything, could we, dear?

ISOBEL. We could throw the money into the sea; we could bury it deep in the ground; we could even give it away, Marion.

WILLIAM. That’s going much too far.
OLIVER. It’s rather a problem, you know.

SEPTIMA. It isn’t a problem at all. May I speak for a moment? I really think I have a right to say something.

WILLIAM. Well?

SEPTIMA. I want to say this. Oliver and I have been brought up in a certain way to expect certain things. Oliver wanted to be an engineer; he wasn’t allowed to, as Grandfather wanted him to go into politics. I wanted to share a studio with a friend and try and get on with my painting; I wasn’t allowed to, as Grandfather wanted me at home. Perhaps if Oliver had been an engineer, he would have been doing well by now. Perhaps if I had had my way, I might have been earning my living by now. As it is, we have been brought up as the children and grandchildren of rich people; I can’t earn my own living, and Oliver is in a profession in which money means success. Aunt Isobel has been telling us how a young man of Oliver’s age, seventy years ago, was cheated out of his rights. Apparently she thinks that the best way now of making up for that is to cheat Oliver and me out of our rights. I don’t agree with her.

OLIVER. Yes, there’s a good deal in that. Well done, Tim.

ISOBEL. It’s hard on you, I know. But you are young; you still have your lives in front of you, to make what you will of them.

SEPTIMA. That’s what old people always say to people of our age, and they seem to think that it excuses any injustice.

MARION. Poor Grandfather!

SEPTIMA. Yes, but I don’t see why it should be “Poor Oliver” and “Poor Septima” too. Suppose any relation did turn up—(to WILLIAM)—suppose they do, Father. Well, what will they all be? Grand-nephews, or fifth cousins twice removed or something, who have never heard of Jenkins, who never did anything for Jenkins, and on whose lives Jenkins has had no effect whatever. Is there any sort of justice which says that they ought to have the money? But Noll and I
have given up a good deal for Oliver Blayds, and he owes us something.

ISOBEL (with ironic sadness). Oh yes, you have given up a good deal for Oliver Blayds. It ought to be paid back to you.

WILLIAM (still trying to be fair). There’s another thing we must remember. Even if this other man——

SEPTIMA. Jenkins.

WILLIAM. Yes, even if he wrote all the books—always excepting the 1863 volume—even so, it was Oliver Blayds who arranged for their publication. He could fairly claim, therefore, an agent’s commission on all moneys received. Ten per cent.

ISOBEL (scornfully). Oliver Blayds, the well-known commission agent!

WILLIAM. Ten per cent of all moneys, therefore, is, in any case, rightfully ours.

MARION. Only ten per cent, dear. That seems very little.

WILLIAM. I am working on a minimum basis. Isobel says, “Throw all the money into the sea; it doesn’t belong to us.” I say no, that is going too far. We have one volume which is certainly ours. We have the ten per cent commission which is certainly ours. There may be other sums due to us, such as the profits of certain of the investments. We can look into the matter carefully at our leisure. The great point, I take it, is that we want to be fair to the relatives of this man Jenkins, but also fair to the relatives of Oliver Blayds, who, as Septima points out, have at least done something to earn any money that comes to them.

MARION (to ISOBEL). We want to be fair to everybody, dear.

SEPTIMA. Well, I think you are going to give the Jenkinsses much too much. What right have the Jenkinsses got to any of the money which Grandfather made by investing?
OLIVER. Well, it was Jenkins’ money which was invested.

MARION. We shouldn’t like to think of them starving because we weren’t quite fair.

SEPTIMA. They let Jenkins starve. They didn’t worry about him.

OLIVER. Of course they didn’t, they weren’t even born.

WILLIAM. The whole question is extremely difficult. We may require an arbitrator, or, at any rate, a qualified chartered accountant.

MARION. Yes, that would be better, dear. To let somebody else decide what is fair and what isn’t.

ISOBEL (in a low voice). Oh, it’s horrible ... horrible.

MARION. What, dear?

ISOBEL. The way you talk—about the money. As if all that we had lost was so much money. As if you could estimate the wrong that Oliver Blayds did to his friend in the terms of money. I said the money was tainted. It is. How can you bear to touch it? How can you bear to profit by such a betrayal?

SEPTIMA. That’s pure sentiment, Aunt Isobel. Quite apart from not being reasonable, it isn’t even practical. Where are you going to draw the line? If you’re going to throw the money away, then you’ve got to throw the house away and everything in the house away—all our clothes to begin with. Because everything—everything that belongs to us owes itself to that betrayal of seventy years ago.... We should look very funny, the five of us, walking out of the house to-morrow, with nothing on, and starting life all over again.

MARION. Septima, dear, I don’t think that’s quite——

(SEPTIMA begins to laugh to herself at the picture of them.)
OLIVER. That isn’t fair, Tim. An extreme case makes anything seem absurd. (*Earnestly to ISOBEL*) You know, I do see what you mean and I do sympathise. But even if we kept all the money, would that matter very much? All this man Jenkins wanted was to leave an immortal name behind him. You’ve just told us that nothing else interested him. Jenkins—I don’t say it’s much of a name, but neither was Keats for that matter. Well, Grandfather robbed him of that, and a damned shame too, but now we are giving it back to him. So all that’s happened is that he’s had seventy years less immortality than he expected. But he can’t worry seriously about that, any more than Wordsworth can worry because he was born two hundred years after Shakespeare. They are all equally immortal.

MARION (*to ISOBEL*). You see, dear, that’s quite fair to everybody.

ISOBEL. One can’t argue about it; you feel it or you don’t. And I give up my share of the money, so there should be plenty for all of you, even after you have been “fair” to the others.

WILLIAM (*who has felt ISOBEL’S scorn deeply*). Isobel! I don’t think you can realise how much you have hurt me by your words. After the first shock of your revelation it has been my one object to keep my real feelings, my very deep feelings, under control. I suppose that this revelation, this appalling revelation, has meant more to me than to any one in this room. Put quite simply, it means the end of my life work, the end of a career.... I think you know how I devoted myself to Oliver Blayds——

MARION. Simply devoted himself, dear.

WILLIAM. I gave up whatever other ambitions I may have had——

MARION (*to the children*). I always said that Father could have done anything.

WILLIAM. —And I set myself from that day on to live for one thing only, Oliver Blayds. It was a great pride to me to be his son-in-law, a great pride to be his secretary, but the greatest pride of all was the thought that I was helping others to know and to love, as I knew and loved him, that very great poet, that very great man, Oliver Blayds.
You tell me now that he is—(he snaps his fingers)—nothing. A hollow mask. (His voice rises) I think I have some right to be angry; I think I have some right to bear resentment against this man who has tricked me, who has been making a fool of me for all these years. When I think of the years of labour which I have spent already in getting the materials together for this great man’s life; when I think how I have listened to him and taken down eagerly his every word; when I think that to-morrow I am to be held up to the derision of the world for the gullible fool I have shown myself to be, I think I have a right to be angry. (With a great effort he controls himself and goes on more quietly) But I have tried to control my feelings. I have remembered that he was your father and Marion’s father, and I have tried to control myself. To forget my own feelings, and to consider only how best to clear up this wreckage that Oliver Blayds has left behind. It is not for you to scorn me, me who have been the chief one to suffer.

MARION. Poor Father! (She puts out a hand.)

WILLIAM (patting it). That’s all right. I don’t want pity. I just want Isobel to try to realise what it means to me.

OLIVER. Yes, by Jove, it is a bit rough on the governor.

SEPTIMA. Rough on all of us.

MARION. But your father has suffered most. You must always remember that.

ISOBEL. Poor William! Yes, it is hard on you. Your occupation’s gone.

WILLIAM. It is a terrible blow to us all, this dreadful news that you have given us. But you can understand that to me it is absolutely crushing.

ISOBEL (in a whisper). And to me? (They look at her in surprise.) What has it been to me?

WILLIAM. Well, as I was saying——
ISOBEL. You have enjoyed your life here, yes, every moment of it. If you hadn’t been secretary to Oliver Blayds, you would have been secretary to somebody else—it’s what you’re best fitted for. Yes, you have lived your life; you have had interests, a hundred interests every day to keep you active and eager.... *(Almost to herself)* But I say, what of me? What has my life been? Look at me now—what am I?—a wasted woman. I might have been a wife, a mother—with a man of my own, children of my own, in my own home. Look at me now...!

MARION. My dear, I never dreamt——

ISOBEL *(eighteen years away from them all)*. He asked me to marry him. Tall and straight and clean he was, and he asked me to marry him. Ah, how happy we should have been together, he and I—should we not have been happy? He asked me to marry him.

MARION. Isobel!

ISOBEL. Such a long time ago. I was young then, and pretty then, and the world was very full then of beautiful things. I used to laugh then—we laughed together—such a gay world it was all those years ago. And he asked me to marry him.... *(In a hard voice)* I didn’t. I sent him away. I said that I must stay with my father, Oliver Blayds, the great poet. Yes, I was helping the great poet. *(With a bitter laugh)* Helping!... And I sent my man away.

SEPTIMA *(distressed)*. Oh, don’t!

ISOBEL. You thought I liked nursing. “A born nurse”—I can hear you saying it. *(Fiercely it bursts out after all these years)* I hated it! Do you know what it’s like nursing a sick old man—day after day, night after night? And then year after year. Always a little older, a little more difficult. Do you know what it is to live with an old man when you are young, as I was young once, to live always with old age and never with youth, and to watch your own youth gradually creeping up to join his old age? Ah, but I was doing it for Blayds, for the sake of his immortal poetry. *(She laughs—such a laugh)* And look at me now, all wasted. The wife I might have been, the mother I might
have been. (In a whisper) How beautiful the world was, all those years ago!

(They say nothing, for there is nothing to say. ISOBEL looks in front of her, seeing nothing which they can see. Very gently they go out, leaving her there with her memories....)

ACT III

Afternoon, three days later. ROYCE is at the desk, at work on a statement for publication. He has various documents at hand, to which he refers from time to time. OLIVER comes in.

* * * * *

OLIVER. Hallo!

ROYCE (without looking up). Hallo!

OLIVER (after waiting hopefully). Very busy! (He sits down.)

ROYCE. Yes.

OLIVER. Where is everybody?

ROYCE. About somewhere.

OLIVER. Oh!... I’ve been away for a couple of days. My chief made a speech at Bradford. My God! Just for my benefit he dragged in a reference to Oliver Blayds. Also “My God.”

ROYCE (realising suddenly that somebody is talking). Oh! (He goes on with his work.)

OLIVER. Yes, you seem quite excited about it.

ROYCE. Sorry, but I’ve really got rather a lot to do, and not too much time to do it in.
OLIVER. Oh!... You won’t mind my asking, but are you living in the house?

ROYCE. Practically. For the last three days.

OLIVER. Oh, I say, are you really? I was being sarcastic—as practised by the best politicians.

ROYCE. Don’t mention it.

OLIVER. What’s happened?

ROYCE. Miss Blayds asked me to help her. As you know, she is executor to Blayds. Of course your father is helping too, but there’s a good deal to be done.

OLIVER. I see. (Awkwardly) I say, I suppose you—I mean, what about——

ROYCE. Miss Blayds has told me.

OLIVER. Oh! Nobody else yet?

ROYCE. No.

OLIVER. I’ve been rushing for the papers every morning expecting to see something about it.

ROYCE. We want to get everything in order first—the financial side of it as well as the other—and then make a plain straightforward statement of what has happened and what we propose to do.

OLIVER. Yes, of course you can’t just write to The Times and say: “Dear Sir, Blayds’ poetry was written by Jenkins, Yours faithfully.”... When will it be, do you think?

ROYCE. We ought to have it ready by to-morrow.

OLIVER. H’m.... Then I had better start looking for a job at once.
ROYCE. Nonsense!

OLIVER. It isn’t nonsense. What do you think my chief will want me for, if I’m not Blayds the poet’s grandson?

ROYCE. Your intrinsic qualities.

OLIVER. I’m afraid they are not intrinsic enough in the present state of the market.

ROYCE. Well, you said you wanted to be a motor engineer—now’s your chance.

OLIVER. Helpful fellow, Royce. Now, as he says, is my chance. (There is a pause and then he says suddenly) I say, what do you think about it all?

ROYCE. What do you mean, think about it all? What is there to think? One tries not to think. It’s—shattering.

OLIVER. No, I don’t mean that. I mean—do you really think he did it?

ROYCE. Did what?

OLIVER. Did it. Did Jenkins.

ROYCE. I don’t understand. Is there any doubt about it?

OLIVER. Well, that’s just it.... The fact is, I had a brain-wave at Bradford.

ROYCE. Oh?

OLIVER. Yes. Quite suddenly it flashed across me, and I said, “By Jove! Of course! That’s it!”

ROYCE. What’s what?
OLIVER. He never did it! He just imagined it! It was all—what was the word I used?

ROYCE. Hallucination?

OLIVER. Hallucination. (He nods) That’s the word. I wrote to Father last night. I said, “Hallucination.” You can back it both ways, Royce, and you won’t be far out.

ROYCE. Yes, I can see how attractive the word must have looked—up at Bradford.

OLIVER. You don’t think it looks so well down here?

ROYCE. I’m afraid not.

OLIVER. Well, why not? Which is more probable, that Oliver Blayds carried out this colossal fraud for more than sixty years, or that when he was an old man of ninety his brain wobbled a bit, and he started imagining things?

ROYCE (shaking his head regretfully). No.

OLIVER. It’s all very well to say “No.” Anybody can say “No.” As the Old Man said yesterday, you refuse to face the facts, Royce. Look at all the Will cases you see in the papers. Whenever an old gentleman over seventy leaves his money to anybody but his loving nephews and nieces, they always bring an action to prove that he can’t have been quite right in the head when he died; and nine times out of ten they win. Well, Blayds was ninety.

ROYCE. Yes, but I thought he left you a thousand pounds.

OLIVER. Well, I suppose that was a lucid interval.... Look here, you think it over seriously. I read a book once about a fellow who stole another man’s novel. Perhaps Blayds read it too and got it mixed up. Why not at that age? Or perhaps he was thinking of using the idea himself. And turning it over and over in his mind, living with it, so to speak, day and night, he might very easily begin to think that it was something that had happened to himself. At his age. And then on his
death-bed, feeling that he must confess something—thoroughly muddled, poor old fellow—well, you see how easily it might happen. Hallucination.

ROYCE (regarding him admiringly). You know, Oliver, I think you underrate your intrinsic qualities as a politician. You mustn’t waste yourself on engineering.

OLIVER. Thanks very much. I suppose Father hasn’t mentioned the word “hallucination” to you yet?

ROYCE. No, not yet.

OLIVER. Perhaps he hadn’t got my letter this morning. But it’s worth thinking about, it is really.

ROYCE (hard at it again). Yes, I am sure it is.

OLIVER. You know——

ROYCE. You know, Oliver, I’m really very busy.

OLIVER (getting up). Oh, all right. And I want a wash anyway. Is Father in his study?

ROYCE. Yes. Also very busy. If you really are going, I wish you’d see if Miss Blayds could spare me a moment.

OLIVER. Right. (Turning to the door and seeing ISOBEL come in) She can. Hallo, Aunt Isobel!

ISOBEL. I thought I heard your voice. Did you have an interesting time?

OLIVER. Rather! I was telling Royce. (He takes her hand and pats it kindly) And I say, it’s all right. Quite all right. (He kisses her hand) Believe me, it’s going to be absolutely all right. You see. (He pats her hand soothingly and goes out.)

ISOBEL (rather touched). Dear boy!
ROYCE. Yes, Oliver has a great future in politics.

ISOBEL (going to the sofa). I’m tired.

ROYCE. You’ve been doing too much. Sit down and rest a little.

ISOBEL (sitting). No, go on. I shan’t disturb you?

ROYCE. Talk to me. I’ve worked quite enough too.

ISOBEL. Shall we be ready by to-morrow?

ROYCE. I think so.

ISOBEL. I want to be rid of it—to get it out of my head where it just goes round and round. It will be a relief when the whole world knows. (With a little smile) What a sensation for them!

ROYCE. Yes. (Also smiling) Isn’t it funny how that comes in?

ISOBEL. What?

ROYCE. The excitement at the back of one’s mind when anything unusual happens, however disastrous.

ISOBEL (smiling). Did I sound very excited?

ROYCE. You sounded alive for the first time.

ISOBEL. These last two days have helped me. It has been a great comfort to have you here. It was good of you to come.

ROYCE. But of course I came.

ISOBEL. I was looking up Who’s Who for an address, and I went on to your name—you know how one does. I hadn’t realised you were so famous or so busy. It was good of you to come.... Your wife died?

ROYCE (surprised). Yes.
ISOBEL. I didn’t know.

ROYCE. Ten years ago. Surely——

ISOBEL. Is there a special manner of a man whose wife died ten years ago which I ought to have recognised?

ROYCE (laughing). Well, no. But one always feels that a fact with which one has lived for years must have impressed itself somehow on others.

ISOBEL. I didn’t know....

ROYCE (suddenly). I wish I could persuade you that you were quite wrong not to take any of this money.

ISOBEL. Am I “quite wrong”?

ROYCE (shaking his head). No. That’s why it’s so hopeless my trying to persuade you.... What are you going to do?

ISOBEL (rather sadly). Aren’t I a “born nurse”?

ROYCE. You tied my hand up once.

ISOBEL (smiling). Well, there you are.... Oh, I daresay it’s just pride, but somehow I can’t take the money. The others can; you were right about that—I was wrong; but they have not been so near to him as I have.... I thought the whole world was at an end at first. But now——

ROYCE. But now you don’t.

ISOBEL. No. I don’t know why. How hopeful we are. How—unbreakable. If I were God, I should be very proud of Man.

ROYCE. Let Him go on being proud of you.

ISOBEL. Oh, I’m tough. You can’t be a nurse without being tough. I shan’t break.
ROYCE. And just a smile occasionally?

ISOBEL (smiling). And even perhaps just a smile occasionally?

ROYCE. Thank you.

(WILLIAM comes in fussily. But there is a suppressed air of excitement about him. He has OLIVER’S letter in his hand.)

WILLIAM. Isobel, there are two pass-books missing—two of the early ones. I thought you had found them all. You haven’t seen them, Mr. Royce?

ROYCE. No, I’ve had nothing to do with them.

WILLIAM. You found most of the early ones in the bottom drawer of his desk, you told me.

ISOBEL (getting up). I may have overlooked one; I’ll go and see. There was a great deal of rubbish there.

ROYCE. Can’t I?

ISOBEL. Would you? You know where. Thank you so much.

ROYCE (going). Right.

WILLIAM. Thank you very much, Mr. Royce, I’m sorry to trouble you.

(There is a little silence after ROYCE is gone. ISOBEL is thinking her own thoughts, not quite such unhappy ones now; WILLIAM is nervous and excited. After much polishing of his glasses he begins.)

WILLIAM. Isobel, I have been thinking very deeply of late about this terrible business.

ISOBEL. Yes?
WILLIAM (going to the desk). Is this the statement?

ISOBEL. Is it?

WILLIAM (glancing over it). Yes ... yes. I’ve been wondering if we’ve been going too far.

ISOBEL. About the money?

WILLIAM. No, no. No, no, I wasn’t thinking about the money.

ISOBEL. What, then?

WILLIAM. Well.... Well.... I’m wondering.... Can we feel quite certain that if we make this announcement—can we feel quite certain that we are not—well—going too far?

ISOBEL. You mean about the money?

WILLIAM. No, no, no, no.

ISOBEL. Then what else? I don’t understand.

WILLIAM. Suppose—I only say suppose—it were not true. I mean, can we be so certain that it is true? You see, once we make this announcement it is then too late. We cannot contradict it afterwards and say that we have made a mistake. It is irrevocable.

ISOBEL (hardly able to believe it). Are you suggesting that we should—hush it up?

WILLIAM. Now you are putting words into my mouth that I have not yet used. I say that it has occurred to me, thinking things over very earnestly, that possibly we are in too much of a hurry to believe this story of—er—this Jenkins story.

ISOBEL. You mean that I have invented it, dreamed it, imagined it— —?
WILLIAM. No, no, no, no, please. It would never occur to me to suggest any such thing. What I do suggest as a possibility worth considering is that Oliver Blayds—er—imagined it.

ISOBEL. You mean he thought it was the other man’s poetry when it was really his own?

WILLIAM. You must remember that he was a very old man. I was saying to Marion in this very room, talking over what I understood then to be his last wish for a simple funeral, that the dying words of an old man were not to be taken too seriously. Indeed, I used on that occasion this actual phrase, “An old man, his faculties rapidly going.” I repeat the phrase. I say again that an old man, his faculties rapidly going, may have imagined this story. In short, it has occurred to me that the whole thing may very well be—hallucination.

ISOBEL (looking at him fixedly). Or self-deception.

WILLIAM (misunderstanding her). Exactly. Well, in short, I suggest there never was anybody called Jenkins.

ISOBEL (brightly—after a pause). Wouldn’t it be nice?

WILLIAM. One can understand how upon his death-bed a man feels the need of confession, of forgiveness and absolution. It may well be that Oliver Blayds, instinctively feeling this need, bared his soul to you, not of some real misdeed of his own, but of some imaginary misdeed with which, by who knows what association of ideas, his mind had become occupied.

ISOBEL. You mean he meant to confess to a murder or something, and got muddled.

WILLIAM. Heaven forbid that I should attribute any misdeed to so noble, so knightly a man as Oliver Blayds.

ISOBEL. Knightly?

WILLIAM. I am of course assuming that this man Jenkins never existed.
ISOBEL. Oh, you are assuming that?

WILLIAM. The more I think of it, the more plain it becomes to me that we must assume it.

ISOBEL. Yes, I quite see that the more one thinks of it, the more—— (She indicates the rest of the sentence with her fingers.)

WILLIAM. Well, what do you think of the suggestion?

ISOBEL. It’s so obvious that I’m wondering why it didn’t occur to you before.

WILLIAM. The truth is I was stunned.

ISOBEL. Oh yes.

WILLIAM. And then, I confess, the fact of the 1863 volume seemed for the moment conclusive.

ISOBEL. But now it doesn’t?

WILLIAM. I explain it now, as one always explained it when he was alive. Every great poet has these lapses.

ISOBEL. Oh! (She is silent, looking at WILLIAM wonderingly, almost admiringly.)

WILLIAM (after waiting for her comment). Well?

ISOBEL. What can I say, William, except again how nice it will be? No scandal, no poverty, no fuss, and his life in two volumes just as before. We are a little too late for the Abbey, but, apart from that, everything is as nice as it can be.

WILLIAM (solemnly). You have not mentioned the best thing of all, Isobel.

ISOBEL. What?
WILLIAM (looking up reverently at the picture). That our faith in him has not been misplaced.

(She wonders at him, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry.)

ISOBEL. Oh!... oh!... (But there are no words available.)

MARION comes in.

MARION (excitedly). Isobel, dear, have you heard? Have you heard the wonderful news?

ISOBEL (turning to her blankly). News?

MARION. About the hallucination. I always felt that there must have been some mistake. And now our faith has been justified—as faith always is. It’s such a comfort to know. Really to know at last. Poor dear Grandfather! He was so very old. I think sometimes we forget how very old he was. And the excitement of that last day—his birthday—and perhaps the glass of port. No wonder.

WILLIAM (shaking his head wisely). Very strange, very strange, but, as you say, not unexpected. One might almost have predicated some such end.

MARION. I shall never forgive myself for having doubted. (To ISOBEL) I think Grandfather will forgive us, dear. I can’t help feeling that wherever he is, he will forgive us.

WILLIAM (nodding). Yes, yes.... I shall say nothing about it in the book, of course—this curious lapse in his faculties at the last.

MARION. Of course not, dear.

WILLIAM. I shall merely——

ISOBEL. Then you won’t want that pass-book now?

MARION. Pass-book?
ISOBEL. Yes. You were going into the accounts, weren’t you, to see how much——

WILLIAM. Oh—ah—yes, the Jenkins Fund.

MARION. But of course there is no Jenkins now! So there can’t be a Jenkins Fund. Such a comfort from every point of view.

ISOBEL (to WILLIAM). You’re quite happy about the money, then?

WILLIAM (who obviously isn’t). Er—yes—I.... That is to say, that, while absolutely satisfied that this man Jenkins never existed, I—at the same time—I—well, perhaps to be on the safe side—there are certain charities.... As I say, there are certain charities for distressed writers, and so on, and perhaps one would feel—you see what I mean. (He goes to the desk.)

ISOBEL. Yes. It’s what they call conscience-money, isn’t it?

WILLIAM. But of course all that can be settled later. (He picks up ROYCE’S statement.) The main point is that this will not now be wanted. (He prepares to tear it in two.)

ISOBEL (fiercely). No! Put that down!

(Startled he puts it down, and she snatches it up and holds it close to her heart.)

MARION. Isobel, dear!

ISOBEL. It’s his, and you’re not to touch it! He has given his time to it, and you’re not going to throw it away as if it were nothing. It’s for him to say.

WILLIAM (upset). Really! I was only just——

ROYCE comes in.

ROYCE (excitedly). I say!
ISOBEL. Mr. Royce, we have some news for you. We have decided that the man Jenkins never existed. Isn’t it nice?

ROYCE. Never existed?

ISOBEL. He was just an hallucination. *(To WILLIAM)* Wasn’t that the word?

ROYCE *(laughing).* Oh, I see. That’s rather funny. For what do you think I’ve got here? *(He holds up a faded piece of paper.)* Stuck in this old pass-book. A letter from Jenkins!

WILLIAM *(staggered).* O-o-o-o-oh!

MARION *(bewildered).* It must be another Jenkins. Because we’ve just decided that our one never lived.

ISOBEL. What is it? What does it say?

ROYCE *(reading).* “Dear Oliver, You have given me everything. I leave you everything. Little enough, but it is yours. God bless you, dear Oliver.”

ISOBEL *(moved).* Oh!

WILLIAM. Let me look. *(He takes it.)*

ISOBEL *(to herself).* All those years ago!

WILLIAM. Yes, there’s no doubt of it. *(He gives the paper back to ROYCE.)* Wait! Let me think. *(He sits down, head in hands.)*

ROYCE. Well, that settles the money side of it, anyway. Whatever should have been the other man’s came rightly to Oliver Blayds.

ISOBEL. Except the immortality.

ROYCE. Ah, yes. I say nothing of that. *(Going to the desk and picking up his statement)* I shall have to rewrite this.... Well, the first
part can stand.... I’m glad we aren’t going to be bothered about money. It would have been an impossible business to settle.

WILLIAM (triumphantly). I’ve got it!

MARION. What, dear?

WILLIAM. Now I understand everything.

ROYCE. What?

WILLIAM. The 1863 volume. That always puzzled me. Always! Now, at last, we have the true explanation. (Dramatically) The 1863 volume was written by Jenkins!

(ISOBEL and ROYCE look at him in amazement; MARION in admiration.)

ROYCE (to himself). Poor old Jenkins.

MARION. Of course I liked all Grandfather’s poetry. There was some of it I didn’t understand, but I felt that he knew——

WILLIAM. No, we can be frank now. The 1863 volume was bad. And now we see why. He wished to give this dear dead friend of his a chance. I can see these two friends—Oliver—and—er—— (Going to ROYCE) What was Mr.—er—Jenkins’ other name? (He reads it over ROYCE’S shoulder) Ah, yes, Willoughby—I can see that last scene when Willoughby lay dying, and his friend Oliver stood by his side. I can hear Willoughby lamenting that none of his poetry will ever be heard now in the mouths of others—and Oliver’s silent resolve that in some way, at some time, Willoughby’s work shall be given to the world. And so in 1863, when his own position was firmly established, he issues this little collection of his dead friend’s poetry, these few choicest sheaves from poor Willoughby’s indiscriminate harvest, sheltering them, as he hoped, from the storm of criticism with the mantle of his own great name. A noble resolve, a chivalrous undertaking, but alas! of no avail.

ROYCE. You will say this in your life of Oliver Blayds?
WILLIAM. I shall—er—hint at the doubtful authorship of the 1863 volume; perhaps it would be better not to go into the matter too fully.

MARION (to ISOBEL). It would be much nicer, dear, if we didn’t refer to any of the unhappy thoughts which we have all had about Grandfather in the last few days. We know now that we never ought to have doubted. He was—Grandfather.

ISOBEL (after a pause, to ROYCE). Well? (He shrugs his shoulders.) Will you find the children? I think they ought to know this.

ROYCE. Right. Do you want me to come back?

ISOBEL. Please. (He goes out. When he has gone she turns to WILLIAM) I am going to publish the truth about Oliver Blayds.

MARION. But that’s what we all want to do, dear.

WILLIAM. What do you mean by the truth?

ISOBEL. What we all know to be the truth in our hearts.

WILLIAM. I deny it. I deny it utterly. I am convinced that the explanation which I have given is the true one.

ISOBEL. Then I shall publish the explanation which he gave me.

WILLIAM. Isobel, I should have thought that you, of all people, would have wanted to believe in Oliver Blayds.

ISOBEL. Wanted to! If only “wanting to” were the same as believing, how easy life would be!

MARION. It is very nearly the same, dear. If you try very hard. I have found it a great comfort.

WILLIAM. I must beg you to reconsider your decision. I had the honour of the friendship of Oliver Blayds for many years, and I tell
you frankly that I will not allow this slander of a dead man to pass unchallenged.

ISOBEL. Which dead man?

WILLIAM (a little upset). This slander on Oliver Blayds.

ISOBEL. It is not slander. I shall tell the truth about him.

WILLIAM. Then I shall tell the truth about him too.

(ISOBEL turns away with a shrug, and sees SEPTIMA, ROYCE, and OLIVER coming in.)

ISOBEL. Thank you, Mr. Royce. Septima, Oliver——

(Shes gives them the letter to read.)

OLIVER (after reading). By Jove! Sportsman! I always said——
(Frankly) No, I didn’t.

SEPTIMA (after reading). Good. Well, that’s all right then.

ISOBEL. We have been talking over what I told you the other day, and your father now has a theory that it was the 1863 volume which was written by this man, and that your grandfather in telling me the story had got it into his head somehow——

WILLIAM. A very old man, his faculties rapidly going——

ISOBEL. Had muddled the story up.

OLIVER (brightening up). Good for you, Father! I see! Of course! Then it was hallucination after all?

ISOBEL. You had discussed it before?

OLIVER. Oh, rather!

ISOBEL (to SEPTIMA). And you?
OLIVER. I told Septima the idea.

ISOBEL. And what does Septima say?

(They all turn to her.)

SEPTIMA (emphatically). Rot!

MARION (shocked). Septima! Your father!

SEPTIMA. Well, you asked me what I said, and I’m telling you. Rot. R-O-T.

WILLIAM (coldly). Kindly explain yourself a little more lucidly.

OLIVER. It’s all rot saying “rot”——

WILLIAM. One at a time, please. Septima?

SEPTIMA. I think it’s rot, trying to deceive ourselves by making up a story about Grandfather, just because we don’t like the one which he told Aunt Isobel. What does it all matter anyhow? There’s the poetry, and jolly good too, most of it. What does it matter when you’ve quoted it, whether you add, “As Blayds nobly said” or “As Jenkins nobly said”? It’s the same poetry. There was Grandfather. We all knew him well, and we all had plenty of chances of making up our minds about him. How can what he did seventy years ago, when he was another person altogether, make any difference to our opinion of him? And then there’s the money. I said that it ought to be ours, and it is ours. Well, there we are.

WILLIAM. You are quite content that your Aunt should publish, as she proposes to, this story of—er—Willoughby Jenkins, which I am convinced is a base libel on the reputation of Oliver Blayds?

OLIVER. I say, Aunt Isobel, are you really going to? I mean do you still believe——

ISOBEL. I am afraid I do, Oliver.
OLIVER. Good Lord!

WILLIAM. Well—Septima?

SEPTIMA. I am quite content with the truth. And if you want the truth about Septima Blayds-Conway, it is that the truth about Blayds is not really any great concern of hers.

OLIVER. Well, that’s a pretty selfish way of looking at it.

MARION. I don’t know what Grandfather would say if he could hear you.

ISOBEL. Thank you, Septima. You’re honest anyhow.

SEPTIMA. Well, of course.

OLIVER. It’s all very well for her to talk like that, but it’s a jolly big concern of mine. If it comes out, I’m done. As a politician anyway.

ROYCE. What do you believe, Oliver?

OLIVER. I told you. Hallucination. At least it seems just as likely as the other. And that being so, I think we ought to give it the benefit of the doubt. What is the truth about Blayds—I don’t know——

ISOBEL (calmly). I do, Oliver.

WILLIAM (sharply). So do I.

OLIVER. Well, I mean, there you are. Probably the truth lies somewhere in between——

ROYCE (with a smile, speaking almost unconsciously). No, no, you mustn’t waste yourself on engineering. (Recovering himself with a start) I beg your pardon.
OLIVER. Anyway, I’m with Father. I don’t think we ought to take the risk of doing Oliver Blayds an injustice by saying anything about this—this hallucination.

WILLIAM. There is no question of risk. It’s a certainty. Come, Marion. *(He leads the way to the door.)* We have much to do. *(Challengingly)* We have much work yet to do upon the life of this great poet, this great and chivalrous gentleman, Oliver Blayds!

MARION *(meekly)*. Yes, dear.

*[They go out.]*

OLIVER. Oh, Lord, a family row! I’m not sure that that isn’t worse.... “Interviewed by our representative, Mr. Oliver Blayds-Conway said that he preferred not to express an opinion.” I think that’s my line.

SEPTIMA. Yes, it would be.

OLIVER. Well, I must go. *(Grandly)* We have much work yet to do.... Coming, Tim?

SEPTIMA *(getting up)*. Yes. *(She goes slowly after him, hesitates, and then comes back to ISOBEL. Awkwardly she touches her shoulder and says)* Good luck!

*[Then she goes out.]*

*(ROYCE and ISOBEL stand looking at each other. First he begins to smile; then she. Suddenly they are both laughing.)*

ISOBEL. How absurd!

ROYCE. I was afraid you wouldn’t appreciate it. Well, what are you going to do?

ISOBEL. What can I do but tell the world the truth?

ROYCE. H’m! I wonder if the world will be grateful.
ISOBEL. Does that matter?

ROYCE. Yes, I think it does. I think you ought to feel that you are benefiting somebody—other than yourself.

ISOBEL (with a smile). I am hardly benefiting myself.

ROYCE. Not materially, of course—but spiritually? Aren’t you just easing your conscience?

ISOBEL. I don’t see why the poor thing shouldn’t be eased.

ROYCE. At the other people’s expense?

ISOBEL. Oh, but no, Austin, no. I’m sure that’s wrong. Surely the truth means more than that. Surely it’s an end in itself. The only end. Call it Truth or call it Beauty, it’s all we’re here for.

ROYCE. You know, the trouble is that the Truth about Blayds won’t seem very beautiful. There’s your truth, and then there’s William’s truth, too. To the public it will seem not so much like Beauty as like an undignified family squabble. And William will win. His story can be made to sound so much more likely than yours. No, it’s no good. You can’t start another miserable Shakespeare-Bacon controversy. Because that is what it would be in a few years. There would be no established truth, but just a Jenkins’ theory. Hadn’t we better just leave him with the poetry?

ISOBEL. It seems so unfair that this poor dead boy should be robbed of the immortality which he wanted.

ROYCE. Hasn’t he got it? There are his works. Didn’t he have the wonderful happiness and pain of writing them? How can you do anything for him now? It’s just pure sentiment, isn’t it?

ISOBEL (meekly). If you say so, sir.

ROYCE (laughing). Am I lecturing? I’m sorry.
ISOBEL. No, I don’t mind. And I expect you’re right. I can’t do anything. (After a pause) Are one’s motives ever pure?

ROYCE. One hopes so. One never knows.

ISOBEL. I keep telling myself that I want the truth to prevail—but is it only that? Or is it that I want to punish him?... He hurt me so. All those years he was pretending that I helped him. And all the time it was just a game to him. A game—and he was laughing. Do you wonder that I was bitter? It was just a game to him.

ROYCE. As he said, he carried it off.

ISOBEL. Yes, he carried it off.... Even in those last moments he was carrying it off. Just that. He was frightened at first—he was dying; it was so lonely in the grave; there was no audience there; no one to listen, to admire. Only God. Ah, but when he had begun his story, how quickly he was the artist again! No fear now, no remorse. Just the artist glorying in his story; putting all he knew into the telling of it, making me see that dead boy whom he had betrayed so vividly that I could have stretched out my hand to him and said, “Oh, my dear, I’m sorry—I will make it all right for you.” Oh, he had his qualities, Oliver Blayds. My father, yes; but somehow he never seemed that. A great man; a little man; but never quite my father.

ROYCE. A great man, I think.

ISOBEL. Yes, he was a great man, and he did less hurt to the world than most great men do.

ROYCE (picking up his statement). Then I can tear up this?

ISOBEL (after a little struggle with herself). Yes! Let us bury the dead, and forget about them. (He tears it up. She gives a sigh of relief) There!

ROYCE (coming to her). Isobel!

ISOBEL. Ah—but she’s dead too. Let’s forget about her.
ROYCE. She is not dead. I have seen her.

ISOBEL. When did you see her?

ROYCE. To-day I have seen her. She peeped out for a moment, and was gone.

ISOBEL. She just peeped out to say good-by to you.

ROYCE (shaking his head). No. To say “How do you do” to me.

ISOBEL. My dear, she died eighteen years ago, that child.

ROYCE (smiling). Then introduce me to her mother.

ISOBEL (gravely, with a smile behind it). Mr. Royce, let me introduce you to my mother—thirty-eight, poor dear. (Bowling) How do you do, Mr. Royce? I have heard my daughter speak of you.

ROYCE. How do you do, Mrs. Blayds? I’m glad to meet you, because I once asked your daughter to marry me.

ISOBEL. Ah, don’t, don’t!

ROYCE (cheerfully). Do you know what she said? She said, like all properly brought up girls, “You must ask my mother.” So now I ask her—“Isobel’s mother, will you marry me?”

ISOBEL. Oh!

ROYCE. Isobel was quite right. I was too old for her. Look, I’m grey. And then I’ve got a bit of rheumatism about me somewhere—I really want a nurse. Isobel said you were a born nurse.... Isobel’s mother, will you marry me?

ISOBEL. I’m afraid to. I shall be so jealous.

ROYCE. Jealous! Of whom?
ISOBEL. Of that girl we call my daughter. You will always be looking for her. You will think that I shan’t see; you will try to hide it from me; but I shall see. Always you will be looking for her—and I shall see.

ROYCE. I shall find her.

ISOBEL. No, it’s too late now.

ROYCE (confidently). I shall find her. Not yet, perhaps; but some day. Perhaps it will be on a day in April, when the primroses are out between the wood-stacks, and there is a chatter of rooks in the tall elms. Then, a child again, she will laugh for joy of the clean blue morning, and I shall find her. And when I have found her, I shall say——

ISOBEL (gently). Yes?

ROYCE. I shall say, “Thank God, you are so like your mother—whom I love.”

ISOBEL. No, no, it can’t be true.

ROYCE. It is true. (Holding out his hands) I want you—not her.

ISOBEL. Oh, my dear!

(She puts out her hands to his. As he takes them, MARION comes in hurriedly. Their hands drop, and they stand there, looking happily at each other.)

MARION. Isobel! I had to come and tell you how hurt William is. Dear, don’t you think you could believe—just for William’s sake——

ISOBEL (gently). It’s all right, dear. I am not going to say anything.

MARION (eagerly). You mean you believe? (WILLIAM comes in, and she rushes to him) She believes! She believes!

(ISOBEL and ROYCE exchange a smile.)
WILLIAM (with satisfaction). Ah! I am very glad to hear this. As regards the biography. In the circumstances, since we are all agreed as to the facts, I almost think we might record the story of Oliver Blayds’ chivalrous attempt to assist his friend, definitely assigning to Willoughby Jenkins the 1863 volume. (He looks at them for approval. MARION nods.)

ISOBEL (looking demurely at ROYCE and then back again). Yes, William.

WILLIAM. I feel strongly, and I am sure you will agree with me, that it is our duty to tell the whole truth about that great man. (Again he looks to MARION for approval. She assents.)

ISOBEL (aside to ROYCE—enjoying it with him). Do I still say, “Yes, William”? (He smiles and nods.) Yes, William.

(And so that is how the story will be handed down. But, as SEPTIMA says, the poetry will still be there.)

Printed in Great Britain by R. & R. Clark, Limited, Edinburgh.

Inconsistent hyphenation (buttonhole/button-hole, Good morning/Good-morning, half-measures/half measures, postcard/postcard, runaway/run-away, safety-razor/safety razor) and inconsistent spelling (Hallo/Hullo) have been left as printed in the original.