

Act 1

THE SALON OF SUNNYVALE HOTEL AND SPA, 1923. THERE ARE TWO ENTRANCES, THOUGH THEY NEED NOT BE PHYSICAL DOORS. PEOPLE ENTER EITHER FROM THE INTERIOR OF THE HOTEL OR FROM THE OUTSIDE. MR COPLEY IS SEATED ALONE DOWNSTAGE. HE IS A NERVOUS TYPE. MISS DAISY DAWSON ENTERS WITH A HUGE FLOWER ARRANGEMENT WHICH SHE PLACES IN A PROMINENT LOCATION UPSTAGE CENTRE. SHE IS FOLLOWED BY MRS THETA ECHO. WHEN THE LADIES ENTER MR COPLEY STANDS UP, BUT THEY DON'T NOTICE HIM. MR COPLEY STANDS ABOUT AWKWARDLY TRYING NOT TO LISTEN, UNCERTAIN WHETHER OR HOW TO LEAVE THE ROOM.

MRS ECHO: They look expensive.

MISS DAWSON: Lovely, aren't they? We want to make a good impression on our guests, don't we Theta? Especially Miss Heathcote.

MRS ECHO: We must tighten our belts Daisy dear, I keep telling you. If things don't improve soon the bank will take Sunnyvale from us, and then what shall we do? Homeless at our time of life.

MISS DAWSON: I'm teasing you, Theta, don't be cross. They didn't cost a penny. (*Slyly*) They were a gift from an admirer of mine.

MRS ECHO: Well you needn't tell me his name. You know I take no interest in your private life.

MISS DAWSON: (*Laughing*) Oh you are a cross pussy today! As if I have an admirer, an old spinster like me. It's only some flowers from the garden.

MRS ECHO: Daisy, we have five new guests arriving, some of them very influential people, and you spend your time thinking of ways to vex me. Is it any wonder I get cross with you sometimes? I have so many *shauries* (*MR COPLEY reacts to this word*) about the business and you don't seem to care at all.

MISS DAWSON: (*Soothingly*) I'm sorry Theta dearest. You know I have no head for business. I just try to take your mind off things and cheer you up in my clumsy way. But Theta, aren't you just dying to see the infant millionaire Miss Imogen Heathcote? She's in all the society columns, you know.

MRS ECHO: Daisy, she is neither an infant nor a millionaire, as I'm sure you know, since you thrive on social gossip. She is almost 21 years old and *may* inherit her grandfather's fortune *if* her uncle does not come forward in the next 3 months.

MISS DAWSON: Oh, that old uncle nonsense. He's been dead for years –

MR COPLEY coughs to attract their attention. MRS ECHO seems disproportionately distressed that he has been (unwittingly) eavesdropping.

MRS ECHO: Mr Copley! We didn't know you were there!

COPLEY: I beg your pardons, Ladies; I had no wish to overhear –

MISS DAWSON: Don't distress yourself, Mr Copley, but you have discovered our secret. (*MRS ECHO looks appalled*) Yes, we are tiresome gossips like other ladies. Are you scandalised?

COPLEY: Of course not, Miss Dawson. I'm so very sorry I –

A phone rings. GRANT enters as though to answer it.

MRS ECHO: I'll answer it, Grant. Will you please check that Alice has finished preparing the bedrooms for our new guests?

GRANT: Of course, Madame.

GRANT exits. MRS ECHO answers the phone.

MRS ECHO: Good Afternoon, Sunnyvale Health Spa, Mrs Echo speaking. (*Pause*) This evening? I'll have to check.

MISS DAWSON: (*To COPLEY*) I'm rather embarrassed that you heard me teasing poor Mrs Echo. I'm rather cruel sometimes, you see.

COPLEY: I heard nothing to be ashamed of, but I must correct you on one point.

MISS DAWSON: (*A little archly*) Oh indeed? And what point is that?

During the following conversation, MRS ECHO completes her telephone conversation, writes something in the bookings diary, then exits.

COPLEY: You fibbed you know Miss Dawson. I believe you have many admirers, and one I know is most sincere. You know better than anyone that I am a man broken in body and spirit –

MISS DAWSON: That is nonsense! You have a little nervous disorder. You have suffered many trials, but you are recovering well.

COPLEY: My dear Miss Dawson, Daisy, dare I ask you to wait a little?

MISS DAWSON: Hush, Mr Copley, Theta will hear.

COPLEY: Ah yes, your friend, Mrs Echo. She seems most agitated and anxious.

MISS DAWSON: Poor Theta, she takes life very seriously. She *is* anxious to be ready for our new guests. She has many worries, or *shauries* as she calls them.

COPLEY: Yes, I noticed she uses the Swahili word. When did she live in Africa?

MISS DAWSON: Africa? Oh I don't think – really, she never talks about the past. I know she had a very unhappy marriage, but I never press her to speak on painful subjects. Shush, here she comes.

Enter MRS ECHO

MRS ECHO: Can you believe it, two more guests arriving this evening? A Mrs Campbell and her brother. Well, Miss Heathcote's suite is ready, at any rate.

COPLEY: Ah, yes. Forgive me, but I overheard you mention the young lady earlier. She is an heiress I believe?

MRS ECHO: Her inheritance is by no means secure. She arrives shortly with her companion. Her lawyer Mr Waugh arranged it all, and he too is visiting us. You shall have company at last Mr Copley.

COPLEY: When you have spent as much time alone as I have, with native bearers as your only friends, the company of two such charming ladies is very precious. You have begun to civilise me a little. I'm not sure I'm ready to share you. But it might surprise you to know I am as fond of a little gossip as any woman. Pray, tell me about the uncle.

MISS DAWSON: Oh, the blessed uncle! Mortimer Heathcote was the older son and heir of Miss Heathcote's grandfather. He fell out with the old man, 'never darken my door again' and so forth. Mort goes off to Africa to do the Great White Hunter malarkey –

MRS ECHO: Daisy! Mr Copley has been a hunter in Africa.

MISS DAWSON: Oh! Do forgive me for being so flippant. Of course, it was a heroic, manly thing to do.

COPLEY: No need to apologise, Miss Dawson, I'm used to your playful ways.

MISS DAWSON: Well, to continue: old man regrets harsh words, tries to find long lost son. Long lost son slaughtered by natives at mission siege. Second son, Miss Imogen's dear papa, becomes heir presumptive. Unlucky second son and charmingly elegant wife die in hideous accident involving an experimental zeppelin flight over Germany. Poor Miss Heathcote: orphaned, but rich.

COPLEY: I've heard something of Mortimer Heathcote. There *were* rumours that he was at Green River at the time of the massacre, but if I recall, many bodies were unidentifiable after the fire?

MISS DAWSON: But he must have died there, or else why hasn't he come forward and claimed his fortune?

COPLEY: Not all men seek wealth. Perhaps he had a religious experience and is living in a desert cave somewhere?

There is a moment of awkward silence after this strange remark.

MRS ECHO: Well, as it stands, no one can prove he's dead. If he died at the massacre of the Green River mission, as many believe, then he pre-deceased his father and the second son, Imogen's father, became the heir. But what if he died after the old man?

MISS DAWSON: I really can't see what difference it makes.

MRS ECHO: All the difference in the world dear. If he married and had an heir.

COPLEY: Do you think he married? I never heard that he did.

MRS ECHO: (*Evasively*) But he may have done. And if he did -

MISS DAWSON: Too many ifs, Theta dearest. All I know is that according to the newspapers old Uncle Mort's got about 3 months left to resurrect himself before being declared legally dead. Imagine! All that money at her age and not a care in the world. Lucky thing!

MRS ECHO: You and your imaginings, Daisy. The poor orphaned child. Well unfortunately we are not so carefree. I believe I hear a motorcar. I must check on Grant and Alice.

Exit MRS ECHO

COPLEY: Do you really care so much about money, Miss Dawson.

MISS DAWSON: You think me rather shallow, don't you? It is easy to sneer about money when you have plenty. Mrs Echo and I have our little all tied up in this place.

COPLEY: I don't think you shallow, Miss Dawson. But can you not conceive that a man might reject wealth for a more spiritual life? Say the uncle were alive, might he not be ashamed to step forward and deprive his niece?

MISS DAWSON: A noble sentiment. I know that you are a deeply spiritual person, Mr Copley, but I think there is not another man in ten thousand that is as virtuous.

COPLEY: (*Embarrassed and flustered by her praise*) Please excuse me. I'm not quite ready to meet your new guests.

Exit MR COPLEY. Enter COLONEL AMSTEAD.

MISS DAWSON: Good afternoon, you must be the military gentleman we've been expecting.

AMSTEAD: Colonel Amstead at your service.

MISS DAWSON: Miss Dawson, at yours. You're here to take the waters I believe? I shall create a personal therapeutic programme for you. I have healing hands, you know.

AMSTEAD: Dashed civil of you Miss Dawson. Rotten old war wound, you know. Not something I talk about, you know.

MISS DAWSON: Oh, you war heroes are all so modest. But I've heard about you. I won't embarrass you by mentioning it to the other guests.

AMSTEAD: Dashed kind of you. Did my duty, you know, just like all the other poor chaps. Nothing to brag about.

MISS DAWSON: Just relax, Colonel, put yourself in my hands. I'll make a new man of you in no time. Now, take a seat and I'll fetch you a cup of tea.

Exit MISS DAWSON. MR WAUGH enters followed by MISS SPELT carrying their bags. He sees AMSTEAD and greets him.

MR WAUGH: How do you do sir? Albert Waugh.

AMSTEAD: Colonel Amstead, at your service.

MR WAUGH: Colonel, eh? What regiment? See any action.

AMSTEAD: Indeed I did. And this charming lady must be your wife?

Enter MRS ECHO.

MR WAUGH: Good God no! My secretary, Miss Spelt. Hurry along there, Spelt.

MISS SPELT: Yes sir.

MRS ECHO: How do you do Mr Waugh. Miss Spelt, let me help you with those bags. Briggs should have taken them from you. So sorry. Shall I show you the rooms, dear?

MISS SPELT: Yes please.

They exit. AMSTEAD and WAUGH are in conversation.

AMSTEAD: A lawyer, eh? You could be just the chap I'm looking for. Need a good business lawyer, you know. Got my hands on a prime piece of Surrey, opening a golf course, you know. Wonderful business opportunity. And there's still room for one or two investors, if you know any solid types. Absolute gold mine, don't you know.

WAUGH: I'd be very interested to hear all about it; do you have a prospectus? I have other business on hand here, but it can wait.

DAISY enters with DAVID COPLEY. He is carrying the tea tray.

MISS DAWSON: Really, Mr Copley, you needn't have. As you see, you have some company at last. Let me introduce you to our new guests.

COPLEY: I can assure you, Miss Dawson, you are all the company I desire.

MISS DAWSON: Really, Mr Copley, I shall blush if you continue. May I present Mr Waugh, a legal gentleman.

COPLEY: How do you sir? David Copley, very pleased to make your acquaintance.

WAUGH: How do you do?

MISS DAWSON: Mr Copley has been a solitary sojourner here for a few weeks. I'm sure he'll be glad of some masculine company at last. This gentleman is Colonel Amstead.

COPLEY: How do you do? Colonel did you say? Sorry I didn't quite hear your name?

AMSTEAD: (*Emphatically*) Amstead, Ernest Amstead at your service. Perhaps you know my people in Lincolnshire?

COPLEY: No, I don't know any family of that name, but perhaps I know your regiment. Have you ever served in Africa?

MISS DAWSON: Now who's for tea?

AMSTEAD: Excellent, that's the ticket, the cup that refreshes, don't you know. (*To COPLEY, as though absent-mindedly*) No, never been to Africa. France you know, whole bally show. Don't like to talk about it you know.

MRS ECHO and MISS SPELT return.

MRS ECHO: Now do sit down, Miss Spelt, and let Miss Dawson pour you a cup of tea. I believe more guests are arriving, and I must make sure Briggs is there to take the bags.

Exit MRS ECHO.

MISS DAWSON: Will you be enjoying any of our therapeutic treatments, Miss Spelt? The hot baths are most relaxing. And my therapeutic massage is legendary.

MISS SPELT: Sadly, no, Miss Dawson. I am here to work. My employer is a very busy man. Whenever he is away from the office he insists I accompany him. No doubt he will want to dictate letters after tea.

MISS DAWSON: How tiresome of him. Well I intend to make sure you have some fun while you're here.

MISS SPELT: I hope you don't think I am dissatisfied.

MISS DAWSON: No, but I think you should be. Don't worry, I'll slip the old duffer a Mickey Finn and get you an afternoon off.

MISS SPELT: That's very obliging of you. Do please give me advance notice so I can plan an excursion.

MRS ECHO enters, leading MISS HEATHCOTE and followed by MISS LEEBURY.

MRS ECHO: So delighted you'll be staying with us, Miss Heathcote. I'm sure you and your companion will have a most restful time.

IMOGEN: Will there be any dancing?

MRS ECHO: Well we do have a gramophone, perhaps one afternoon . . .

MISS DAWSON: Or we could bring in the local orchestra for a Thé Dansant?

MRS ECHO: Really, Daisy, we're not the Aërated Bread Company. But . . . perhaps . . . oh, why not?

MR. WAUGH: Good afternoon, Imogen.

IMOGEN: Hello Uncle Bertie, how are you? How do you do, Miss Spelt?

MISS SPELT: Good afternoon Miss Heathcote. How are you?

IMOGEN: Very well Miss Spelt. I have a surprise for Uncle Bertie.

MISS SPELT: Will he like it?

IMOGEN: Oh no, he'll hate it.

MISS SPELT: How thoughtful of you to plan it.

WAUGH: May I present Colonel Amstead? My ward, Miss Heathcote.

AMSTEAD: At your service, my dear.

IMOGEN: How do you do, sir?

WAUGH: And this gentleman is Mr Copley the famous explorer.

COPLEY: How do you do Miss Heathcote? I'm delighted to meet you at last.

IMOGEN: Have you been waiting long? And are you really famous?

COPLEY: Believe it or not, Miss Heathcote, you are the famous one. I have heard your name mentioned in the Muthaiga Club, and your peculiar destiny discussed even in the Kalahari.

IMOGEN: Gracious, how strange. I suppose the painful loss of my parents is less fascinating than the fact that I may one day be rich. How odd that strangers should discuss one's fate. It's a rather uncomfortable feeling.

MRS ECHO: You haven't been introduced to my business partner, Miss Heathcote. May I introduce Miss Dawson?

MISS DAWSON: Welcome to Sunnyvale, Miss Heathcote. Do you like to bathe?

IMOGEN: Oh yes, I love it. (*Stage whisper*) I have one of those new one-piece bathing suits.

MISS DAWSON: (*Conspiratorially*) Oh, I should love one of those! (*Normal voice*) Who is this charming lady?

IMOGEN: Oh! I've forgotten dear Auntie X! This is my relative, Miss Leebury. I call her Auntie X as her given name is Xanthi. She pretends it makes her cross but she secretly likes it.

MISS DAWSON & MRS ECHO: How do you do Miss Leebury.

MISS LEEBURY: Good afternoon, ladies. What a delightful establishment you have here.

MRS ECHO: So glad you like it. We'll do our best to make you comfortable. Will you be taking the waters?

MISS LEEBURY: Oh I'm here purely for Miss Heathcote's benefit. Though perhaps I shall bathe. I find it most relaxing.

MRS ECHO: And I can recommend Miss Dawson's massage, manual or electrical. She has healing hands, they say.

MISS LEEBURY: You'll forgive me if I say it, but I think that is twiddle-twaddle.

MRS ECHO: (*Ringling a small hand bell*) More tea I think.

MISS LEEBURY: I should like to unpack. May I take mine in my room?

Enter GRANT.

MRS ECHO: Grant, will you please bring up more tea? And could you show Miss Leebury to the suite reserved for Miss Heathcote and see that she has tea in their private sitting room?

GRANT: (*Superciliously*) Of course Mrs Echo. At once. (*To MISS LEEBURY*) This way, Madame, if you would be so kind.

MISS LEEBURY: (*To MISS HEATHCOTE*) Do you mind, my dear, if I take tea in private?

IMOGEN: Don't worry Auntie. I shan't be able to get into any trouble with Uncle Bertie to keep an eye on me.

Exit GRANT and MISS LEEBURY.

IMOGEN: (*Catching MR COPLEY's eye*) Though I might have a dashed good try.

MISS DAWSON and MRS ECHO draw aside.

MISS DAWSON: Theta, we really must do something about Grant. His tone is quite unacceptable.

MRS ECHO: But Daisy, what can I do? You know he has a hold over me. I must avoid a scandal for my child's sake.

MRS ECHO joins MISS SPELT, AMSTEAD and WAUGH to form one conversational group, MISS DAWSON, MISS HEATHCOTE and COPLEY form another, though WAUGH keeps half an eye on MISS HEATHCOTE as MRS ECHO does on MISS DAWSON. MISS SPELT keeps a cynical eye on everything. COPLEY is apparently fascinated by MISS HEATHCOTE, who is flirting with him. MISS DAWSON is rather jealous that her tame beau is apparently enamoured of MISS HEATHCOTE.

AMSTEAD: As I was explaining to Mr Waugh, it's a splendid investment opportunity. Golf is set to really take off in the next few years. I would certainly advise any friend to invest in a golf course if they had the opportunity.

MISS SPELT: I wish you every success, Colonel, sounds marvellous. Lucky you.

MISS SPELT's ironic tone is not lost on AMSTEAD, who smiles at her indulgently.

AMSTEAD: Yes, I have a twenty-five percent stake. So does my brother, on my advice. Wish I could buy the remaining shares, but most of my money is tied up in bonds, you know. Plenty of dosh, can't release it, don't you know. Crying shame.

WAUGH: So you're looking for further investors?

AMSTEAD: Wouldn't dream of asking you for money old chap. Not on so slight an acquaintance, you know. Not to put too fine a point on it, don't you know, just been introduced. You say you're a lawyer, so do all these charming ladies, but how do I know? No offence intended, you know. Same for you, you don't know me from Adam, why would you offer me the opportunity of a lifetime? No, you'd go to your friends and family first, stands to reason, don't it?

WAUGH: I'm not offended, Colonel, your reasoning is perfectly sound. Perhaps I should look out for a similar thing?

MRS ECHO: If only I had the money to put in. Miss Dawson and I have all our money invested in this hotel and spa.

AMSTEAD: Little goldmine, I shouldn't wonder?

GRANT enters with the tea, which he places on a side table and then surveys the room.

MRS ECHO: Oh, we muddle along, you know. Oh, here's the tea, excuse me.

GRANT and MRS ECHO busy themselves with the tea things, pouring tea and distributing it around the guests. GRANT will exit once everyone has tea.

GRANT: Is that the rich young lady?

MRS ECHO: Yes Grant. Try not to stare.

GRANT: And you try not to speak to me so sharply, Mrs Echo.

MRS ECHO: I'm so sorry Grant. My nerves are somewhat strained today. Perhaps you might help me with the tea?

GRANT: Of course, Mrs Echo, since you ask so politely.

AMSTEAD: I was thinking of your professional skills Mr Waugh. Urgently in need of a man at law, don't you know. And your excellent Miss Spelt would be an invaluable ally, I'm sure.

MISS SPELT: You seem very sure of my excellence, on so short an acquaintance, Colonel Amstead.

AMSTEAD: You have an intelligent face, a ruthless eye and a quick wit. You don't suffer fools gladly, I'd say. Am I right, Mr Waugh?

WAUGH: Spot on, Colonel. I'd be lost without Miss Spelt.

MISS SPELT and AMSTEAD exchange a look of understanding; he is flattering her that he perceives she is doing all the work while WAUGH takes the credit.

AMSTEAD: I believe you, sir.

WAUGH: (*Complacently*) Sometimes I think she almost knows the law as well as I do.