

MADAME ARCATI. (*Offstage.*) I've leant my bike up against that little bush; it will be *perfectly* all right if no one touches it.

EDITH. (*Appearing.*) Madame Arcati.

RUTH. How nice of you to have come all this way.

(**MADAME ARCATI** enters. *She is a striking woman, dressed not too extravagantly but with a decided bias towards the barbaric. She might be any age between forty-five and sixty-five. RUTH ushers her in. RUTH and CHARLES greet her simultaneously.*)

CHARLES. My dear Madame Arcati!

MADAME ARCATI. I'm afraid I'm rather late; but I had a sudden presentiment that I was going to have a puncture so I went back to fetch my pump.

(**MADAME ARCATI** takes off her cloak and hands it to **RUTH**, who puts it on the chair right of the door.)

And then, of course, I didn't have a puncture at all.

CHARLES. Perhaps you will on the way home.

MADAME ARCATI. (*Moving below RUTH to right to shake hands with DR. BRADMAN. Greeting him.*) Doctor Bradman – the man with the gentle hands!

DR. BRADMAN. I'm delighted to see you looking so well. This is my wife.

(**MADAME ARCATI** shakes hands with **MRS. BRADMAN** over the back of the sofa. **DR. BRADMAN** moves to the fireplace.)

MADAME ARCATI. We are old friends – we meet coming out of shops.

CHARLES. Would you like a cocktail?

MADAME ARCATI. (*Peeling off some rather strange-looking gloves.*) If it's a dry martini, yes – if it's a concoction, no. Experience has taught me to be very wary of concoctions.

CHARLES. (*Up to the drinks table.*) It is a dry martini.

(**MADAME ARCATI** moves to **RUTH**, center.)

MADAME ARCATI. How delicious. It was wonderful cycling through the woods this evening. I was deafened with bird song.

RUTH. It's been lovely all day.

MADAME ARCATI. But the evening's the time – mark my words.

(*She takes the cocktail CHARLES gives her, he having come down on her right.*)

Thank you. Cheers! Cheers!

(*RUTH leads MADAME ARCATI downstage to the left end of the sofa, where she sits. RUTH sits on the right arm of the armchair. DR. BRADMAN is at the fireplace. CHARLES is above the center table.*)

RUTH. Don't you find it very tiring bicycling everywhere?

MADAME ARCATI. On the contrary, it stimulates me. I was getting far too sedentary in London. That horrid little flat with dim lights! They had to be dim, you know; the clients expect it.

MRS. BRADMAN. I must say I find bicycling very exhausting.

MADAME ARCATI. Steady rhythm, that's what counts. Once you get the knack of it you need never look back. On you get and away you go.

MRS. BRADMAN. But the hills, Madame Arcati; pushing up those awful hills.

MADAME ARCATI. Just knack again. Down with your head, up with your heart, and you're over the top like a flash and skimming down the other side like a dragonfly. This is the best dry martini I've had for years.

CHARLES. Will you have another?

MADAME ARCATI. (*Holding out her glass.*) Certainly.

(*CHARLES takes her glass and refills it at the drinks table.*)

You're a very clever man. Anybody can write books, but it takes an artist to make a dry martini that's dry enough.

RUTH. Are you writing anything nowadays, Madame Arcati?

MADAME ARCATI. Every morning regular as clockwork, seven till one.

CHARLES. (*Giving MADAME ARCATI a cocktail.*) Is it a novel or a memoir?

MADAME ARCATI. It's a children's book. I have to finish it by the end of October to catch the Christmas sales. It's mostly about very small animals; the hero is a moss beetle.

(**MRS. BRADMAN** *laughs nervously.*)

I had to give up my memoir of Princess Palliatani because she died in April. I talked to her about it the other day and she implored me to go on with it. But I really hadn't the heart.

MRS. BRADMAN. (*Incredulously.*) You *talked* to her about it the other day?

MADAME ARCATI. Yes, through my control, of course. She sounded very irritable.

MRS. BRADMAN. It's funny to think of people in the spirit world being irritable, isn't it? I mean, one can hardly imagine it, can one?

CHARLES. (*Coming down on the left of RUTH.*) We have no reliable guarantee that the after life will be any less exasperating than this one, have we?

MRS. BRADMAN. (*Laughing.*) Oh, Mr. Condomine, how *can* you?

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RUTH. I expect it's dreadfully ignorant of me not to know – but who was Princess Palliatani?

MADAME ARCATI. She was originally a Jewess from Odessa of quite remarkable beauty. It was an accepted fact that people used to stand on the seats of railway stations to watch her whizz by.