ENSEMBLE/
BENJAMIN
8.1

SCENE ONE

"SHIRTS AND THE UNIVERSE"

The curtain rises on a department of Continental Shirtmakers. There is only the minimum equipment on the stage, such as Mr. Gum's desk and the enormous clock at the front of the office. The rest is suggested by the movements of the workers. They sit on stools, their arms and hands making rigid, machine-like motions above their imaginary desks to indicate typing, filing, operating a comptometer, and so forth. Two middle-aged women are reciting numbers to each other, antiphonally, in high and sing-song voices. The girl at the (invisible) filing cabinet has the far-away stare of a schizophrenic as her arms work mechanically above the indexed cases. There is a glassy brilliance to the atmosphere: one feels that it must contain a highly selected death ray that penetrates living tissue straight to the heart and bestows a withering kiss on whatever diverges from an accepted pattern.

Gum is glancing at an enormous sales record book; he suddenly slams it down on the desk.

GUM [*bellowing*]: Alfred!

ALFRED [*turning quickly, snake-like*]: Yes, sir?

GUM: Where's Murphy?

ALFRED: He's been away from his desk about six minutes!

GUM [*to the office boy*]: Johnnie, go fetch Murphy out of the washroom.

JOHNNIE: He's not in the washhroom, Mr. Gum.

GUM: How do you know?

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JOHNNIE: I just been.

GUM: Fetch him out of the warehouse, then.

ALFRED: He's not in the warehouse either, Mr. Gum. —*I* just been.

GUM: Well, where the hell is he then?

ALFRED: I don't know, Mr. Gum. He disappears like this every once in a while.

GUM: Where does he disappear to?

ALFRED: That is a mystery, Mr. Gum.

GUM: We don't have any mysteries in the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers.

ALFRED: I didn't think we did. But Benjamin Murphy seems to have created one for us.

GUM: Aw, created one, has he? Johnnie, go look for Murphy and bring him back dead or alive.

[*An effeminate young man enters rapidly from the rear holding a stiff-front colored shirt.*]

DESIGNER: Oh, Mr. Gum, this No. W-2-O wasn't made up according to specifications! The stripes on the dickey should have been pale, *pale* blue but they're *al*-most *pur*-ple!

[*Gum glares at him ominously.*]

These little accessory buttons are mother-of-pearl— [*He rolls his*

eyes heavenward.] —I don't know what type of person would wear a shirt like this!

GUM: You don't but I do! —Take it up with Frankel in Specifications.

[*The Designer exits quickly one hand to forehead, the other holding the dickey thrust out behind him. Ben Murphy enters. He is a small young man with the nervous, defensive agility of a squirrel. Ten years of regimentation have made him frantic but have not subdued his spirit. He is one of those feverish, bright little people who might give God some very intelligent answers if they were asked. He has on white duck pants, a shirt with broad blue and white stripes, and—oddly enough—a pair of cowboy boots.*]

GUM [*with a bull-like roar*]: MURPHY!

[*Ben halts, paralyzed for a moment. He turns slowly to face the boss. His eyebrows climb in tense, polite enquiry.*]

Murphy, come here to my desk.

[*Ben crosses stiffly to Gum. Gum looking him up and down.*]

What's the idea of coming down to work in an outfit like that? That belt—emerald studded?

BEN: A souvenir of a summer in Arizona a long time ago. I wear the belt to be reminded of it.

GUM: No matter how small a man's position may be, it still has got some dignity attached to it.

BEN: Yes, sir.

 E1B p3

GUM: Where have you been for the last ten—fifteen minutes?

BEN: Been? I—went to the washroom.

GUM: Johnnie's just been in the washroom and says you weren't there.

BEN: I also went to the warehouse for a minute.

GUM: Alfred's just come from the warehouse. He didn't see you.

BEN: Well—I—I went upstairs for a minute.

GUM: You went upstairs. Murphy, you may not know it, but you have just now made a remarkable statement.

BEN: How is that, Mr. Gum?

GUM: You say you went upstairs. To my best knowledge, Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers is on the sixteenth floor of a sixteen-story building.

BEN: I know that, Mr. Gum.

GUM: Then—how did you—go *upstairs*?

BEN: Mr. Gum, you probably never dreamed of such a thing but—there's a stairs to the roof.

GUM: A *what*?

BEN: A stairs to the roof.

[*Activity in the office is momentarily suspended. Everyone stares at Ben.*]

GUM: So there is a stairs to the roof?

BEN: Yes, sir.

GUM: How did you find out about it, Murphy?

BEN: Necessity, Mr. Gum. I was stifling in here.

GUM [*ominously*]: I see. Necessity being the mother of invention, you finally came to invent the stairs to the roof.

BEN: No, sir, I didn't invent them, they were already there, just waiting to be discovered.

GUM: And you discovered them?

BEN: Yes, sir.

GUM: I suppose you might be termed the Christopher Columbus of the Consolidated roof—and who was, so to speak, your Queen Isabella?

BEN: Curiosity, Mr. Gum. One day I noticed a little door at the top of the elevator shaft. I simply opened it and there they were—a little, narrow, winding flight of stairs that led to the roof.

GUM: Well!

BEN: After that, instead of smoking my cigarette in the washroom with the rest of the boys, I smoked it up there where I could take a look at the world, the sky, the bluffs across the river—and I must say it's definitely more inspiring to look at them than the plumbing fixtures in the men's lavatory. Also the air up there's a whole lot cleaner and fresher.

[*Pause.*]

JIM / BEN p1

SCENE THREE

"THE SCENE OF CELEBRATION"

A spot lights two tables and a jukebox in a downtown bar. A funeral wreath surrounds a placard which says: In Memory of our Credit Man.

Jim is seated at one of the two round tables—with an enormous twenty-six ounce glass of beer.

Bertha sits at the other.

Jim is a heavy-set fellow of thirty who looks somewhat older. He has a strong face beginning to go slack from tedium and a deep unconscious despair.

Bertha is a girl of twenty-five, who demonstrates vacuum cleaners in a department store. When she goes out on a date she loses her head and talks too much and makes her palpitations too apparent if the man does not call up for a second engagement. She has a lot of girlfriends, who meet once a week for contract bridge and try to excel each other in the preparation of refreshments, so that now what was originally "a little snack" between rubbers has turned into something like a Roman banquet. The girls are all getting heavy.

Ben enters the bar, a little unsteadily.

JIM [*with a smile that gives a fleeting youth to his face*]: Hello, Ben—you're late.

[*Ben sits down without speaking. Jim takes out a large watch.*]

JIM: You're eighteen minutes late, Ben. Punctuality is the courtesy of kings.

BEN: I'm not a king.

JIM [*wearily*]: Every man is a king—of a private kingdom. You look tired, Ben.

[*Ben nods slightly.*]

Hot day, awful hot. You're lucky you got that cooling system up at Continental. We don't have a dog-gone thing but those old-fashioned ceiling fans. Park Commissioner says in the paper the drought has killed sixteen of the Japanese cherry trees.

BARTENDER [*approaching leisurely*]: Beer?

JIM: Two times twenty-six ounces!

BEN: I don't want beer. Bourbon and seltzer, Mike.

[*The bartender exits.*]

JIM: Huh?

BEN: I stopped and had one on the way. Two, in fact.

JIM: I thought you had a buzz on, the way you came in.

BEN: I did. [*He looks up with a tired grin.*] Eight years ago, Jim, you got me drunk in this place to celebrate our graduation from college.

JIM: Uh-huh.

BEN: What a gloomy celebration! In exchange for our flaming youth we received a piece of parchment, fancy-lettered, tied up in a piece of pale blue satin ribbon. Life is full of phony transactions like that. A young man's dreams, ambitions, the fabulous golden cities of adolescence, sold down the river—for *what*? Eighteen-fifty a week!

JIM: I get twenty-two fifty.

BEN: Three cheers for the plutocrat! Remember the baccalaureate sermon? It was delivered by the Honorable J.T. Faraway Jones, President of the Board of Directors of Continental Shirtmakers. He told me the future was in my hands–Now *I'M* in *his*! [*He tosses down the whiskey, then bangs table with his glass.*] Suds! Suds! Suds! Another twenty-six ounces! Jim—we sat in this very same booth the night of that celebration. This mirror reflected our faces, the same piece of glass. *It* hasn't changed a damned bit–But *we* have, though. *You* used to be *good-looking*!

JIM [*huffily*]: Thank you. So did you—used to be.

BEN: You used to be athletic, an excellent swimmer. Now in your present condition I bet you would drown in the municipal birdbath. Even your eyes have changed color. They used to be blue, energetic. Now they're kind of shifty-looking gray.

JIM [*violently pushing back his chair*]: You've got a nerve to make sarcastic remarks about my personal appearance!

BEN: Don't get hot under the collar.

JIM: Who wouldn't get hot under the collar? Every man of thirty sees himself double in the mirror! The way he looks now—the way he looked at twenty! Nobody has to rub Siberian salt in the wound! And as for you, Mr. Apollo, take a look at yourself. I can't observe a great deal of physical progress.

BEN: I've kept in shape.

JIM: What kind of shape?

BEN: Thrice weekly work-outs in the gym at the downtown Y have preserved my youthful figure. But what I'm driving at is the fact that flesh is not a very durable substance. It's an awfully cheap package in view of what it contains.

JIM: What?

BEN: The wild, incredible fact of being alive!

JIM: Whew!

BEN: It must've been accidental—I mean conscious life. 'Cause surely if they'd planned on it from the start, they would have made a better kind of a box to put it in than this drab stuff we're made of that cracks with the cold and oozes with heat and shows such inordinate lust for disintegration! What do you remember of the time before you were born?

JIM: My recollection of that is kind of cloudy.

BEN: It's on the dark side of the moon. And after you're dead—that's also on the dark side of the moon. But here in the middle—[*He sticks his finger in the center of the table.*] —is one little instant of light—a pin-point of brilliance—right here in the very center of infinite—endless—dark! What are you doing with it? What wonderful use are you making of this one instant?

JIM: I don't like you when you're like this.

BEN: Like what?

JIM: Morbidly profound—the Hamlet of Continental Shirtmakers.

BEN: Yep. I've seen my father's ghost. But he walked at noon and he told me that something was rotten in more than *Denmark*.

JIM: What's happened? A run-in with Gum?

BEN: Yeah.

ENS/GIRL

SCENE EIGHT

"DID SOMEBODY CALL THE NIGHT WATCHMAN?"

The lights come up on a downtown corner at midnight. On the corner stands Continental Shirtmakers, the sixteen-story shaft (projected on the backdrop) dwindles skywards in exaggerated perspective. Around it are similar shafts, a maze of buildings. Cold and glacial in their appearance at midnight—sharp as knives they ward off the softness of heaven. They bristle defensively shrieking "Stay back!" to God.

A ghostly music is heard.

The Girl appears, tiny, gnat-like among these giants of stone. She stares up at them in wonder and fear and confusion. Hastily, timidly, she runs up to the portal of Continental Shirtmakers.

GIRL [*crying plaintively*]: Night watchman! Oh, night watchman!

[*There is a hollow echo among the walls of stone. She continues desperately.*]

Night watchman, night watchman, night watchman!

[*An echo is heard away in the distance. A uniformed policeman steps around the corner and strikes his stick.*]

OFFICER: What do you want, young lady?

GIRL: I want to get into that building.

OFFICER: This building's closed. It won't be open till morning.

GIRL: If I could get the night watchman's attention I think he might let me in.

OFFICER: The night watchman's deaf.

GIRL: Deaf?

OFFICER: Yes, deaf as stone! He won't hear you! He's also blind as a bat.

GIRL: Then how can he watch?

OFFICER: He can't.

GIRL: What'll I do?

OFFICER: Go home and sleep like other respectable ladies.

GIRL: I can't sleep.

OFFICER: You have something on your conscience?

GIRL: Yes.

OFFICER: What?

GIRL: A letter. I wrote a letter.

OFFICER: What kind of a letter?

GIRL: A love letter. It's locked in that building. I've got to get it back before he reads it.

OFFICER: I never heard of a love letter being written inside that building before.

GIRL: Well, now you've heard of it, though. I'll come back after a while and try again.

"O, Harry—Thou hast robb'd me of my youth!"*

[Distant choral singing is heard. High in the Gothic tower above the quadrangle the bells begin to chime the midnight hour. Ben turns slowly back to the exalted statue of youth. He raises his arms in a baffled, imploring gesture. But the bells ring on, slowly and obliviously. He drops his arms—falls sobbing against the marble pediment of the statue. Footsteps ring along the stone. The singing comes up stronger and clearer. A Youth in military uniform appears. Ben turns to face him. The Youth salutes and starts to pass by.]

Hey!

[The Youth pauses with a smile. Ben continues, extending the tasseled cap.]

Is this yours?

YOUTH: It *was*. But I have a *new* one. *[He touches the visor of his cap.]*

BEN *[slowly and bitterly]*: You have in your body about three gallons of blood. Is that enough to wash the world's dirty hands?

YOUTH: How do I know? Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. So long. *[He smiles brightly and strangely and passes out of sight.]*

[The light fades and the music fades.]

BLACKOUT

[MRS. E sighs offstage.]

* *Henry IV: Part One, Act V, Scene IV,* Hotspur.

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SCENE SIX

"WHITE LACE CURTAINS"

A spot comes up on the corner of the living room in Jim's bungalow on Peach Street—or is it Elm? White lace curtains are at a window; there is a ridiculously large and ornate radio-Victrola with a goldfish bowl on top. On the wall above the radio is a picture of "Hope" seated blindfolded and playing a broken-stringed lyre. Jim is seated beside the radio-Victrola with a glass of ice water. He has on purple pongee pajamas with white-frogged buttonholes.

His wife Edna calls from offstage.

EDNA: Jim!

JIM: Yep.

EDNA: Comin' t' bed?

JIM: Soon as I cool off a little. I'm worried about Ben Murphy. I'm afraid he's going to pieces.

EDNA: Ben has always been an absolute screwball. Even his wife admits it. She told me yesterday that he's been going down to the office in cowboy boots! Confidentially, she said, I'm just about through!

JIM: He's plunging back into his adolescence. Talks about rebellion. Rebellion is all right for the upper classes and the lower classes, but for the middle classes—it will never do! The middle has always got to be the middle.

EDNA: Please close the bedroom door and talk the whole thing over with yourself.

JIM *[wearily]*: Okay, sweetheart. *[He steps out of the spot and*

F.E./B/J p2

can be heard closing the door. He returns and switches on the radio.]

H. V. KALTENBORN*: Was described as being in a sea of flames: Very little damage was done to military objectives but the civilian population suffered terrible casualties. The sky at midnight was a blazing inferno. Wave after wave of dive bombers swooped down upon the already blasted metropolis. The whole residential section was laid to waste. Helpless women and children by the tens of thousands—

[*Jim casually switches the dial.*]

BABY-TALK SINGER: But this little piggy was a *bad* little piggy
And he boogie-woogied all the way home!

[*The doorbell rings. Jim turns off the radio and moves out of the spot. He can be heard admitting the caller—Ben.*]

JIM: Aw, *you* again.

BEN: Yeah. Me again.

[*They step into the spot. Ben's appearance is completely demonic.*]

EDNA [*sharply*]: Who on earth was that ringing the doorbell at this time of night?

JIM [*puts finger to lips*]: Nobody, sweetheart. Go to sleep.

EDNA: Nobody? Awwwww! —You mean Mr. Benjamin Murphy!

* American news commentator for CBS and NBC; famed for his frontline radio broadcasts during World War II.

BEN [*sorrowfully*]: What a dreadful bitch that woman is.

JIM: Shhh! Sit down.

BEN: It's hot as blazes in here.

JIM: Edna's got the fan.

BEN: So has Alma.

JIM: Why are you barging in here at this time of night?

BEN: Partly to ask your pardon for what I said at Mike's. I didn't mean to be nasty about your appearance.

JIM: Oh, well. I'm not self-conscious. Besides—

BEN: Huh?

JIM: I recognized a certain amount of truth in some of your statements.

BEN: Did you?

JIM: Yes.

BEN: Which ones? About your loss of resistance?

[*Jim nods slowly.*]

Then what'll you do about it?

JIM: Nothing.

BEN: You'll do nothing?

GIRL / F. ENSEMBLE

SCENE SEVEN

"THE LETTER"

A spot lights a bed in a rooming house. On the edge of it the Girl is seated forlornly in pajamas. Bertha, her roommate, enters.

BERTHA: Still up? —Why didn't you meet me at Mike's?

GIRL: I didn't feel able to.

BERTHA: You missed it! Romance came into my life with a bang, but the man was married. [*She sits on the bed to remove her shoes.*] Married to a woman named Edna who massages her chest with Vick's Vapo-Rub every night. You look sort of down in the mouth. What's the matter? [*She removes her stockings.*] Still holding the torch for Mr. Warren B. Thatcher?

GIRL: I'm desperate, Bertha.

BERTHA: Forget it. Just let it all go. Drop it like you would a piece of loose thread. Say to yourself tonight as you go to sleep, "Tomorrow I won't think about him."

GIRL: Why should I lie to myself when I know that I will? Besides—there won't be any tomorrow.

BERTHA: You know what you ought to do? Go to church, read a book, learn how to play contract bridge.

GIRL: You don't understand.

BERTHA: Don't you think I ever had a crush?

GIRL: This man isn't a crush.

BERTHA: What would you call it, then?

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GIRL: Love.

BERTHA: Because he's your boss and he wears a white linen suit and a pale blue tie every day, you think you're in love.

GIRL: Oh, Bertha. [*She stands.*] Bertha, am I invisible?

BERTHA: What an idea!

GIRL: Nobody seems to notice me, nobody seems to be conscious of my existence!

BERTHA: Men, you mean? Don't be discouraged. For every surprise there happen to be at least fifteen disappointments. And nowadays men are concentrating on war at the cost of sex. What of it. Your day will come! How would you like a bromide?

GIRL: No, thanks.

BERTHA: I had another girlfriend kept brooding over some man that worked at her office. He never looked at her even. Drop it, I said, "like you would a piece of loose thread." She wouldn't take my advice. "Willard," she said, "Willard, Willard"! —That was his name. —You know what she finally did?

GIRL: Killed herself?

BERTHA: No. Went into *dementia praecox*, I couldn't stop her. Insulin shock couldn't save her.

GIRL: I've done something awful.

BERTHA: What?

GIRL: Oh, I can't tell you! I wrote him a letter!

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BERTHA: Come on! What awful thing? Mr. Warren B. Thatcher?

GIRL: Yes!

BERTHA: Did you mail it?

GIRL: I left it on his desk. He'd already gone for the afternoon.

BERTHA: What did you write Mr. Thatcher?

GIRL: I wrote him I loved him.

BERTHA: Oh. —You come right out with it, huh?

[*The Girl covers her face. Pause.*]

Honey, get into yuh things.

GIRL: Get on my things?

BERTHA: Yeah, get dressed!

GIRL: What for?

BERTHA: You're going down to that office and pick up that letter before Mr. Thatcher sees it.

GIRL: The building's closed.

BERTHA: Wake up the night watchman, baby, an' get that letter! You take it from me it would be an awful mistake for him to read it! I made a confession like that to a boss once myself, and, boy, oh, boy, was I *unem*ployed the next morning! Get into yuh things, sweetheart. —Be quick about it!

GIRL: But, Bertha—

BERTHA: Yeah?

GIRL: What I said in the letter was *true*!

BERTHA: Never mind that. That's strictly incidental.

GIRL: I *do* love him!

BERTHA: Get into yuh things—yuh hear me?

GIRL: Yes, I will, I will— But that doesn't solve any problems! I'm desperate, Bertha.

BERTHA: Well, all I can say is, it's better to be desperate with a job than desperate without one. —Here's your— [*She throws the Girl's underwear at her.*]

BLACKOUT

[*Mr. E laughs offstage.*]

F. ENS / BEN

SCENE FOUR

"BLUE HEAVEN"

The stage is dark. There is a musical interlude: a satirical treatment of Irving Berlin's "Blue Heaven" with twittering bird-notes, etc. A blue spot lights a double bed with a stout woman on it, Ben's wife, Alma. Her face is glittering with cold cream, and her hair is done up in wire curlers. She is a woman corresponding to the spider of a certain species that devours her mate when he has served his procreative function.

In the hall off stage a cuckoo clock begins to strike the hour. Alma sits up in bed and listens attentively.

There is the sound of a cautious entrance. The bedroom door opens a crack and spills light from the hall.

A cat screeches with diabolical vehemence.

ALMA [*furiously*]: What didja do? Step on 'er?

BEN: No!

ALMA: She wouldn't have screeched like that unless she was hurt.

BEN: She's just got it in for me, that's all.

ALMA: If she's got it in for you, it's because you do 'er some kind of deliberate injury every chance you get. Where have you been? Out drinking?

BEN: I was out with Jim.

ALMA: That answers the question. How much beer did you drink?

BEN: Three times twenty-six ounces, whatever that makes.

ALMA: I thought we decided to put your beer money up for the baby's carriage.

BEN: Man proposes—God disposes, Alma.

ALMA: All right. We'll just put the baby on roller skates I suppose. Mother just got off the phone.

BEN: Was she on the phone?

ALMA: She thinks it's absolutely outrageous.

BEN: What does she think is outrageous?

ALMA: You know what. I waited for you one solid hour. I made th' spaghetti dish. I kept it hot in the oven till nearly seven and then I ate it myself, ev'ry scrap of it, too. I said to Mother, "Why should I keep his food for 'im? He don't come home or even call th' house." "If Ben makes yuh nervous," she said, "just pack up yuh things an' come home; in your condition you can't afford t' be nervous!"

[*Ben has undressed in the dark. He collapses on the bed in his shorts.*]

I guess we ought to have twin beds in the summer. Stay on your own side, please.

BEN: Don't worry, Alma. I'm going to stay on my side.

ALMA: I been to the doctor's. Dr. Robertson is a lovely young man. He has a beautiful respect for motherhood. He said, "Mrs. Murphy, you're doing a wonderful thing. You're going to bring a brand-new life into the world!"

BEN/GIRL

BEN: Put out? About what! —I'm just a little bit disillusioned, that's all.

GIRL: Why should you be?

BEN: We meet on a dark street corner. You're cool and [redacted] mysterious. You have a remote and unspecific charm. Where are you from? From away up north somewhere. Not from Minneapolis, not from Chicago, but just from away up north, a place of lakes and cedars and mountains covered with snow. Then, all at once, like a silly jack-in-the-box, your boss projects his ugly head in the picture! A head that looks like an over-ripe tomato!

GIRL: That isn't the way his head looks.

BEN: All right! What does he look like?

GIRL: YOU.

BEN: *What?*

GIRL: You, you, you! He looks very much like you. Don't you remember how I gasped when you struck that match on the corner? I saw your face and the white linen suit and it startled me so that I had to gasp out loud! You know what I thought for a moment?

BEN: What?

GIRL: I thought you were actually *him*!

BEN: Absurd!

GIRL: Isn't it, though? If love could be dignified, it wouldn't be

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so awful. But it isn't dignified. —At least not for me. —I make a fool of myself. Today for instance he asked me the name of a plaintiff who charged that some weather stripping had not been put in correctly. A man named—Deisseldorff! —You see how fantastic it is? He wanted me to find the correspondence. I couldn't find it.

BEN: Don't you have files in your office?

GIRL: Oh, of course we have files. —But did you ever try to remember the alphabet when you're in love?

BEN: No. How did this dreadful, frustrated passion get started?

GIRL: His secretary got married, he needed another, and I had just completed a three months' course at Rubicam Business College.

BEN: Very exciting. Sounds like the first paragraph of something called "Stolen Moments" in a Macfadden publication. Go on!

GIRL: No, I won't. [*She sobs.*] I'm not asking for sympathy—but I don't need sarcasm, either!

BEN [*taking her hand*]: Forgive me, Alice. Go on— You applied for the job?

GIRL: I applied for the job. I was terribly scared.

BEN: What about?

GIRL: I'm always frightened, it's something organic, I guess. My tongue gets stuck in my throat. —I want to be charming and brilliant—a person who says clever things. —I sit with my teeth in my mouth—as dumb as an owl! —Only afterwards—when I'm

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alone—I think of what to say! —So when I applied for the job—I lost my voice. I could only speak in a whisper. —He smiled. I got back my courage. —He wanted to know what my typing speed was and he gave me a little dictation. Come back Monday, he said—the position is yours!

BEN: Ahhh!

GIRL: I had on a light pink dress—

BEN: A bad mistake.

GIRL: Yes, it turned out that it was. 'Cause when I got up from the desk—Warren—I mean Mr. Thatcher—he looked up quickly and said, "I'd rather you didn't wear pink. I've got an allergy to pink." That's the only personal thing he ever said to me the whole time I've been employed there.

BEN: Goodness!

GIRL: And just today—I wore the pink dress again.

BEN: Why?

GIRL: Out of sheer desperation! I thought it might force him to look at me and say something personal to me.

BEN: Did he?

GIRL: No, he just frowned a little when I came in the office. You see, he wears a white linen suit—a fresh one every single day of the week—and when I have a pink dress on, I suppose—I suppose he thinks it makes it look a little bit too much like a garden party.

BEN: That is probably what he thinks it makes it look a little bit too much like.

[*Pause. The ghostly music is heard.*]

GIRL: It—wasn't much—at first.

BEN: What wasn't?

GIRL: My love for the boss.

BEN: Oh. But it improved later on?

GIRL: Got worse—and worse.

BEN: I see.

GIRL: At first I only thought to myself—"I like the shape of his head!" It's like a fever—it started out very slowly. Hardly noticeable, you know. A fraction of a degree one day, another fraction the next, till all of the sudden—and just as though you hadn't received any warning—you're literally burning up! You're all on fire. Even your *bones* are melting! Oh, why didn't somebody tell me that things like this are able to happen to people! You know what they ought to have? A sentry outside of life, a man with a big red lantern— A warning bell, gates like at railroad crossings! —With a big sign that says—"*DANGER! LOVE AHEAD!*" That's what they ought to have at the entrance to life. So none but the brave would go forward, and those that are weak or frightened—the way I am—could turn around and go back where it's safe and dark . . .

[*Pause. The song of the carousel is heard again.*]

BEN: Yep, love's a peculiar sickness, I imagine.

GIRL: If I could cry out, if I could scream, if I could make a big scene— It might be some relief.

[Still not recognizing him, the Girl turns slowly and produces a match from her pocketbook and strikes it. In the match light she sees it is Ben and utters a startled cry of relief. They stare at each other silently for a moment. Then with a grateful childlike laugh she nestles into his arms. He continues softly.]

Tears? Tears? For *me*? You're a woman of miracles, Alice. One moment you're a swan—the next you're a bird of paradise... Now all of a sudden, and most miraculous of all, you're a woman—shedding real honest-to-God tears for me, the first time that has occurred since I came home to Mother with my first black eye some twenty years ago.

[Back of the curtains on the box, stage music commences again. The Clown comes by joyfully leading his little fox terrier on a brilliantly jeweled collar and chain.]

CLOWN *[softly and rapturously]*: Found! Found! Never to be lost again!

[They jingle away offstage. Ben and the Girl embrace. The curtains of the box stage open to reveal Beauty and the Beast—in a ghostly white radiance—locked in a corresponding embrace.]

CURTAIN

[Mr. E chuckles offstage.]

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SCENE TWELVE

"THIS CORNER'S WHERE WE MET"

The street corner again. A gray light of morning has begun to filter among the downtown towers.

In the display window of Continental Shirtmakers the Designer is dressing a dummy. He puts the shirt with the purple dickey and mother of pearl buttons on him, arranges the arms and torso in a pose that is very graceful and effete—then stands off to admire his creation. He sighs and disappears into the interior.

Ben and the Girl appear. The Girl clings to Ben's arms, her eyes shut, his lips faintly smiling.

BEN: You're walking in your sleep.

GIRL: I thought I must be. I had such a lovely dream. Is it morning?

BEN: Yes. This corner's where we met some time ago.

GIRL: Centuries ago. I didn't know eternity could be so nice! Poor rabbit! You need a shave. *[She tenderly touches his face.]* I had no idea you were so funny looking. *[She giggles.]*

BEN *[a little resentfully]*: Funny?

GIRL: Yes, funny and sweet. I like your looks.

BEN: Because I look like your boss?

GIRL: I think I must have forgotten about my boss. He seems to belong to the year one thousand B.C.! Now there's you and now there's me, and I'm not looking for apples! *[She hugs him. He pushes her gently away.]*

BEN: Morning's the time for looking reality square in the face, you know.

GIRL [*staring at him fondly*]: I'm looking—I'm looking!

BEN: I wonder if you are? I don't believe you know what reality is!

GIRL: Tell me about it. Tell me about reality. I'll believe. Only, when you tell me, hold my hand!

BEN [*taking her hand*]: Reality is composed of some very harsh ingredients, little girl. One of them is the fact I'm out of a job, or almost out of a job. Another one is—I'm married!

GIRL: Oh. [*She turns slowly.*] This is reality—isn't it?

BEN: Yeah. Kind of, I guess. [*Pause.*] Don't be resentful.

GIRL: I'm not.

BEN: Please don't be hurt about anything.

GIRL: I'm not.

BEN: Tonight has been nice, don't you think?

GIRL: Yes.

BEN: We each gave the other something. I gave you Warren. You gave me the swan.

GIRL: You gave more than Warren. You gave me the Wonderland! [*She extends her hand.*] Good-bye!

[*He takes her hand. Then suddenly he embraces her, kissing her roughly. He runs to the corner, turns and makes an odd, awkward salute.*]

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BEN: So long, Alice!

[*The Girl starts to wave. He disappears around the corner. The Girl turns slowly, as one who walks in her sleep, and moves in the other direction. The Designer reappears in the window. He makes an ecstatic gesture and embraces the dummy. The music of morning rises amongst the buildings—quick and martial. The day has begun.*]

BLACKOUT

[*Mr. E chuckles offstage.*]