

A Family Man

by

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ACT I

SCENE I

The study of JOHN BUILDER in the provincial town of Breconridge. A panelled room wherein nothing is ever studied, except perhaps BUILDER'S face in the mirror over the fireplace. It is, however, comfortable, and has large leather chairs and a writing table in the centre, on which is a typewriter, and many papers. At the back is a large window with French outside shutters, overlooking the street, for the house is an old one, built in an age when the homes of doctors, lawyers and so forth were part of a provincial town, and not yet suburban. There are two or three fine old prints on the walls, Right and Left; and a fine, old fireplace, Left, with a fender on which one can sit. A door, Left back, leads into the dining-room, and a door, Right forward, into the hall.

JOHN BUILDER is sitting in his after-breakfast chair before the fire with The Times in his hands. He has breakfasted well, and is in that condition of first-pipe serenity in which the affairs of the nation seem almost bearable. He is a tallish, square, personable man of forty-seven, with a well-coloured, jowly, fullish face, marked under the eyes, which have very small pupils and a good deal of light in them. His bearing has force and importance, as of a man accustomed to rising and ownerships, sure in his opinions, and not lacking in geniality when things go his way. Essentially a Midlander. His wife, a woman of forty-one, of ivory tint, with a thin, trim figure and a face so strangely composed as to be almost like a mask (essentially from Jersey) is putting a nib into a pen-holder, and filling an inkpot at the writing-table.

As the curtain rises CAMILLE enters with a rather broken-down cardboard box containing flowers. She is a young woman with a good figure, a pale face, the warm brown eyes and complete poise of a Frenchwoman. She takes the box to MRS BUILDER.

MRS BUILDER. The blue vase, please, Camille.

[CAMILLE fetches a vase. MRS BUILDER puts the flowers into the vase. CAMILLE gathers up the debris; and with a glance at BUILDER goes out.]

BUILDER. Glorious October! I ought to have a damned good day's shooting with Chantrey tomorrow.

MRS BUILDER. [Arranging the flowers] Aren't you going to the office this morning?

BUILDER. Well, no, I was going to take a couple of days off. If you feel at the top of your form, take a rest--then you go on feeling at the top. [He looks at her, as if calculating] What do you say to looking up Athene?

MRS BUILDER. [Palpably astonished] Athene? But you said you'd done with her?

BUILDER. [Smiling] Six weeks ago; but, dash it, one can't have done with one's own daughter. That's the weakness of an Englishman; he can't keep up his resentments. In a town like this it doesn't do to have her living by herself. One of these days it'll get out we've had a row. That wouldn't do me any good.

MRS BUILDER. I see.

BUILDER. Besides, I miss her. Maud's so self-absorbed. It makes a big hole in the family, Julia. You've got her address, haven't you?

MRS BUILDER. Yes. [Very still] But do you think it's dignified, John?

BUILDER. [Genially] Oh, hang dignity! I rather pride myself on knowing when to stand on my dignity and when to sit on it. If she's still crazy about Art, she can live at home, and go out to study.

MRS BUILDER. Her craze was for liberty.

BUILDER. A few weeks' discomfort soon cures that. She can't live on her pittance. She'll have found that out by now. Get your things on and come with me at twelve o'clock.

MRS BUILDER. I think you'll regret it. She'll refuse.

BUILDER. Not if I'm nice to her. A child could play with me to-day. Shall I tell you a secret, Julia?

MRS BUILDER. It would be pleasant for a change.

BUILDER. The Mayor's coming round at eleven, and I know perfectly well what he's coming for.

MRS BUILDER. Well?

BUILDER. I'm to be nominated for Mayor next month. Harris tipped me the wink at the last Council meeting. Not so bad at forty-seven--h'm? I can make a thundering good Mayor. I can do things for this town that nobody else can.

MRS BUILDER. Now I understand about Athene.

BUILDER. [Good-humouredly] Well, it's partly that. But [more seriously] it's more the feeling I get that I'm not doing my duty by her. Goodness knows whom she may be picking up with! Artists are a loose lot. And young people in these days are the limit. I quite believe in moving with the times, but one's either born a Conservative, or one isn't. So you be ready at twelve, see. By the way, that French maid of yours, Julia--

MRS BUILDER. What about her?

BUILDER. Is she--er--is she all right? We don't want any trouble with Topping.

MRS BUILDER. There will be none with--Topping.

[She opens the door Left.]

BUILDER. I don't know; she strikes me as--very French.

[MRS BUILDER smiles and passes out.]

[BUILDER fills his second pipe. He is just taking up the paper again when the door from the hall is opened, and the manservant TOPPING, dried, dark, sub-humorous, in a black cut-away, announces:]

TOPPING. The Mayor, Sir, and Mr Harris!

[THE MAYOR of Breconridge enters, He is clean-shaven, red-faced, light-eyed, about sixty, shrewd, poll-parrot, naturally jovial, dressed with the indefinable wrongness of a burgher; he is followed by his Secretary HARRIS, a man all eyes and cleverness. TOPPING retires.]

BUILDER. [Rising] Hallo, Mayor! What brings you so early? Glad to see you. Morning, Harris!

MAYOR. Morning, Builder, morning.

HARRIS. Good-morning, Sir.

BUILDER. Sit down-sit down! Have a cigar!

[The MAYOR takes a cigar HARRIS a cigarette from his own case.]

BUILDER. Well, Mayor, what's gone wrong with the works?

[He and HARRIS exchange a look.]

MAYOR. [With his first puff] After you left the Council the other day, Builder, we came to a decision.

BUILDER. Deuce you did! Shall I agree with it?

MAYOR. We shall see. We want to nominate you for Mayor. You willin' to stand?

BUILDER. [Stolid] That requires consideration.

MAYOR. The only alternative is Chantrey; but he's a light weight, and rather too much County. What's your objection?

BUILDER. It's a bit unexpected, Mayor. [Looks at HARRIS] Am I the right man? Following you, you know. I'm shooting with Chantrey to-morrow. What does he feel about it?

MAYOR. What do you say, 'Arris?

HARRIS. Mr Chantrey's a public school and University man, Sir; he's not what I call ambitious.

BUILDER. Nor am I, Harris.

HARRIS. No, sir; of course you've a high sense of duty. Mr Chantrey's rather dilettante.

MAYOR. We want a solid man.

BUILDER. I'm very busy, you know, Mayor.

MAYOR. But you've got all the qualifications--big business, family man, live in the town, church-goer, experience on the Council and the Bench. Better say "yes," Builder.

BUILDER. It's a lot of extra work. I don't take things up lightly.

MAYOR. Dangerous times, these. Authority questioned all over the place. We want a man that feels his responsibilities, and we think we've got him in you.

BUILDER. Very good of you, Mayor. I don't know, I'm sure. I must think of the good of the town.

HARRIS. I shouldn't worry about that, sir.

MAYOR. The name John Builder carries weight. You're looked up to as a man who can manage his own affairs. Madam and the young ladies well?

BUILDER. First-rate.

MAYOR. [Rises] That's right. Well, if you'd like to talk it over with Chantrey tomorrow. With all this extremism, we want a man of principle and common sense.

HARRIS. We want a man that'll grasp the nettle, sir--and that's you.

BUILDER. Hm! I've got a temper, you know.

MAYOR. [Chuckling] We do--we do! You'll say "yes," I see. No false modesty! Come along, 'Arris, we must go.

BUILDER. Well, Mayor, I'll think it over, and let you have an answer. You know my faults, and you know my qualities, such as they are. I'm just a plain Englishman.

MAYOR. We don't want anything better than that. I always say the great point about an Englishman is that he's got bottom; you may knock him off his pins, but you find him on 'em again before you can say "Jack Robinson." He may have his moments of aberration, but he's a sticker. Morning, Builder, morning! Hope you'll say "yes."

[He shakes hands and goes out, followed by HARRIS.]

[When the door is closed BUILDER stands a moment quite still with a gratified smile on his face; then turns and scrutinises himself in the glass over the hearth. While he is doing so the door from the dining-room is opened quietly and CAMILLE comes in. BUILDER, suddenly seeing her reflected in the mirror, turns.]

BUILDER. What is it, Camille?

CAMILLE. Madame send me for a letter she say you have, Monsieur, from the dyer and cleaner, with a bill.

BUILDER. [Feeling in his pockets] Yes--no. It's on the table.

CAMILLE goes to the writing-table and looks. That blue thing.

CAMILLE. [Taking it up] Non, Monsieur, this is from the gas.

BUILDER. Oh! Ah!

[He moves up to the table and turns over papers. CAMILLE stands motionless close by with her eyes fixed on him.]

Here it is!

[He looks up, sees her looking at him, drops his own gaze, and hands her the letter. Their hands touch. Putting his hands in his pockets]

What made you come to England?

CAMILLE. [Demure] It is better pay, Monsieur, and [With a smile] the English are so amiable.

BUILDER. Deuce they are! They haven't got that reputation.

CAMILLE. Oh! I admire Englishmen. They are so strong and kind.

BUILDER. [Bluffly flattered] H'm! We've no manners.

CAMILLE. The Frenchman is more polite, but not in the 'heart.

BUILDER. Yes. I suppose we're pretty sound at heart.

CAMILLE. And the Englishman have his life in the family--the Frenchman have his life outside.

BUILDER. [With discomfort] H'm!

CAMILLE. [With a look] Too mooch in the family--like a rabbit in a 'utch.

BUILDER. Oh! So that's your view of us! [His eyes rest on her, attracted but resentful].

CAMILLE. Pardon, Monsieur, my tongue run away with me.

BUILDER. [Half conscious of being led on] Are you from Paris?

CAMILLE. [Clasping her hands] Yes. What a town for pleasure--Paris!

BUILDER. I suppose so. Loose place, Paris.

CAMILLE. Loose? What is that, Monsieur?

BUILDER. The opposite of strict.

CAMILLE. Strict! Oh! certainly we like life, we other French. It is not like England. I take this to Madame, Monsieur. [She turns as if to go] Excuse me.

BUILDER. I thought you Frenchwomen all married young.

CAMILLE. I 'ave been married; my 'usband did die--en Afrique.

BUILDER. You wear no ring.

CAMILLE. [Smiling] I prefare to be mademoiselle, Monsieur.

BUILDER. [Dubiously] Well, it's all the same to us. [He takes a letter up from the table] You might take this to Mrs Builder too. [Again their fingers touch, and there is a suspicion of encounter between their eyes.]

CAMILLE goes out.

BUILDER. [Turning to his chair] Don't know about that woman--she's a tantalizer.

[He compresses his lips, and is settling back into his chair, when the door from the hall is opened and his daughter MAUD comes in; a pretty girl, rather pale, with fine eyes. Though her face has a determined cast her manner at this moment is by no means decisive. She has a letter in her hand, and advances rather as if she were stalking her father, who, after a "Hallo, Maud!" has begun to read his paper.]

MAUD. [Getting as far as the table] Father.

BUILDER. [Not lowering the paper] Well? I know that tone. What do you want--money?

MAUD. I always want money, of course; but--but--

BUILDER. [Pulling out a note--abstractedly] Here's five pounds for you.

[MAUD, advancing, takes it, then seems to find what she has come for more on her chest than ever.]

BUILDER. [Unconscious] Will you take a letter for me?

[MAUD sits down Left of table and prepares to take down the letter.]

[Dictating] "Dear Mr Mayor,--Referring to your call this morning, I have --er--given the matter very careful consideration, and though somewhat reluctant--"

MAUD. Are you really reluctant, father?

BUILDER. Go on--"To assume greater responsibilities, I feel it my duty to come forward in accordance with your wish. The--er--honour is one of which I hardly feel myself worthy, but you may rest assured--"

MAUD. Worthy. But you do, you know.

BUILDER. Look here! Are you trying to get a rise out of me?--because you won't succeed this morning.

MAUD. I thought you were trying to get one out of me.

BUILDER. Well, how would you express it?

MAUD. "I know I'm the best man for the place, and so do you--"

BUILDER. The disrespect of you young people is something extraordinary. And that reminds me where do you go every evening now after tea?

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