

Characters

- Angela (F)** - A merry widow, 20s-60s
- Sarah (F)** - Angela's maid, 16-60s
- Elsbeth Watcher (F)** - A professional widow, 30s-60s, sophisticated, canny
- Margaret Edith (F)** - Elsbeth's assistant, 10-14, very young, even other-worldly
- The Man on the Doorstep (M)** - 30s-60s

Scene 1 – Dressing Room

(In dark we hear children's voices singing the Mary Ann Cotton nursery rhyme. Lights come up on Angela's well-appointed boudoir: dressing table with mirror, standing full-length mirror, dressing screen, a chair or two, a fainting-couch. Angela, clad in a dressing gown is lying on the fainting-couch. Children's voices continue singing)

Angela: **(Sighing)** Oh, must they go on like that?

Sarah: **(Entering, her arms full of black fabric)** I beg your pardon, Mrs. Springer. Go on like what?

Angela: The children singing that ghastly song. How can they go on like that outside a house of mourning? Do make them go away.

Sarah: Yes, madam.

Angela: Is that the crape?

Sarah: Yes, madam.

Angela: You haven't hung the crape on the door, yet?

(Sarah half-curtseys and heads for the door)

Sarah: I'm going just now, madam.

Angela: But first, have you gotten the newspapers this morning?

(Sarah pivots to pick up the papers and deliver them to Angela, who sighs but sits up. Sarah heads for the door again. Angela rapidly scans the papers)

Angela: Not a word. Not a word about my poor William. Did you not send the notices yesterday?

Sarah: I did, madam.

Angela: Tomorrow then. They must go in tomorrow.

Sarah: I shall see about it directly, madam.

(Angela stabs a finger at one of the papers)

Angela: This, *this*, appears in the paper but no word of my darling William. Ten years dead, she is, and yet worthy of print!

Sarah: **(At the door)** Ten years, madam?

Angela: Since that wretched woman was hanged.

Sarah: **(Intrigued, she returns to her mistress)** Which wretched woman?

Angela: The murderess--Mrs. Cotton. Mary Ann Cotton. Don't you remember? The one the children are singing about. I suppose this is why.

Sarah: Mrs. Cotton. How did she do it? Arsenic, wasn't it? And the red tin box she carried it in. At least, that's what they say.

Angela: The red tin box? I don't remember that part.

Sarah: Wasn't she the one who poisoned all those poor little children?

Angela: Including her own. Except for the last little boy and girl.

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Sarah: And also her four husbands. Just imagine--poisoning four husbands--making their tea--and then tipping the arsenic into it. Stirring it in. Just the thought of it makes me go all shivery.

Angela: Four husbands she had! And I only one! And he, poor dear, smashed up in a railway accident. **(Sighs)**

(SFX. A mechanical door-bell sounds from a distance)

Angela: The crape! The crape! Oh, it will be too late now. She'll have noticed, won't she?

Sarah: **(Exiting once more)** I expect she's seen worse, madam.

Angela: Sarah!

(Sarah stops again at the door)

Angela: I wish only for something very simple. Respectable and simple. Just one gown and veil. Well, maybe two. You know how these women are. It's their business to sell. Do not let her get carried away with our grief. You mustn't leave me alone with her. You know how I am.

Sarah: Yes, madam.

(Sarah exits at last. Angela sets aside the newspapers and smooths her hair and dressing gown. She darts to the dressing-table for a

fresh handkerchief and remains standing in anticipation. Sarah's voice is heard in the hallway)

Sarah: It's just this way, madam. Follow me, please.

(Sarah enters, followed by Elspeth, elegant in full widow regalia, and Margaret, who carries a number of boxes almost too big for her. She doesn't seem troubled by them, however, places them on a table, and stands ready next to it, watching intently, a notepad and pen at the ready. Elspeth goes directly to Angela and takes her hand)

Elsbeth: My dear, dear, Mrs. Springer, please allow me to convey the sincerest condolences of the Inconsolable Grief Department of Watcher, Talker, and Strike. We offer full services for the newly bereaved widow. We anticipate every need. We guarantee your satisfaction.

Angela: Thank you. But I must tell you, I am interested only in one gown and one veil. I am a very simple woman and do not wish to attract attention.

Elsbeth: Of course, my dear. Modesty is most commendable. You are not obliged to make any purchase at all. We pride ourselves on our motto: *For your consideration*. But, oh--oh, no. **(Alarmed)**

Angela: What? What is it?

Elsbeth: Your handkerchief, my dear. Surely you know.

Angela: Yes, of course. No.

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Elsbeth: Even a modest widow ought--nay, I say, must--invest ten pence for a dozen black-bordered handkerchiefs. People do talk, and I do fear they may say that you do not sufficiently care for your loss. Allow me to present a complimentary handkerchief on behalf of my employers--to tide you over until the others can be delivered. Margaret Edith, do note down Mrs. Springer's selections.

(Angela accepts gratefully and disdainfully waves her own handkerchief at Sarah, who takes it from her. Margaret makes a note. She is very professional and remains poised with her pencil and paper)

Angela: Now, I suppose we ought to consider the dresses.

Elsbeth: Indeed, yes. We have brought a number of items *for your consideration*. But first, I am curious as I did not see a notice of your poor husband's unfortunate fate in the newspapers this morning. We are concerned with assuring the most prompt attention to your misfortune. May we notify the newspapers for you?

Angela: But we did notify them. Sarah had the cards delivered yesterday.

Elsbeth: **(To Sarah)** May I see one?

(Sarah takes one from her apron pocket and hands it to Elspeth with a half-curtsey)

Elsbeth: Oh, dear. This--this is what you presented to the newspapers? Oh, I am certain they took no notice at all. You must send new cards.

Angela: Black-bordered ones?

Elsbeth: Yes, indeed. And to be sure to catch the editor's eye, I suggest the latest style--linen with half-inch borders, engraved. Shall we say one hundred? Or two? You will want to notify all of your friends, as well. Five hundred will run five pounds. Of course, you will prefer the new mourning stamps, which your maid can procure at the post office.

Sarah: **(Sotto voce to Angela)** If they read of it in the papers must they also be notified?

Elsbeth: People do value a personal notification.

Angela: I see. Yes, of course.

(Glances at Sarah)

Angela: Two hundred, however, will be sufficient. It is so alarming to receive such cards. I prefer to spare my faint-hearted friends.

Elsbeth: Most thoughtful. Indeed, you are a true friend.

(Margaret makes a note. The mechanical door-bell sounds. Sarah looks at Angela, who hesitates but waves her off to answer it)

Angela: I am not at home to any and all, Sarah.

(Sarah exits)

Elsbeth: And now for the dresses. We have brought ready-made examples according to the measurements you sent us. Any item can, of course, be altered. We pride ourselves on anticipating any need you may have.

I have brought a selection, but I suspect you will prefer the first one best.

(Margaret opens several boxes. Elspeth takes out a black dress, shakes it out dramatically, and hangs it on the dressing screen)

Elsbeth: For your consideration. Bombazine with just a touch of lace at the sleeves and neckline. Very simple, modest. Ten pounds with veil.

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Angela: **(Disappointed but tries not to show it)** It is very simple. The neckline is very high and the sleeves look very tight. Bombazine is exceedingly stiff, is it not?

Elsbeth: **(Taking a long veil and hanging it with the dress)** The veil, too, is simple yet alluring, with matching lace.

Angela: **(Fingering the veil and holding it over her face)** I do not think I can see through it, even in the daylight.

Elsbeth: Ah, that is the charm of it. So many widows wish privacy from the glances of others.

Angela: But I do wish to be able to *see* others. Perhaps you have another option?

Elsbeth: Of course.

(Elsbeth takes out another dress and veil and hangs them next to the first set)

Elsbeth: For your consideration. Polished cotton, trimmed in Venetian lace, with a flounce and silk flowers. The veil to match. Thirty pounds.

Angela: I do like the square collar. It's quite low. Very fashionable, I think. And the flounce is lovely. Thirty pounds is a lot of money, but the veil is light and fresh, and I can even see through it. Yes, this will do.

(Margaret makes a note)

Elsbeth: I admire your taste and reserve. This is perfect for you.

Angela: Thank you. I will have Sarah fetch my purse. I wonder what is taking her so long?

Elsbeth: Shall we assist your dressing in your new gown? We must check the fitting. Have you a proper petticoat for such a gown?

Angela: Yes? No? Must it be--

Elsbeth: Yes, it must match the gown. In the event the hem is caught up by a breeze as you descend from a coach. You won't wish passers-by to misperceive your preparations for appearing in public.

Angela: Oh. Then no. Do you have such a petticoat?

Elsbeth: Of course.

(Margaret takes another garment from a box. Shakes it out)

Elsbeth: Oh dear. No, no. That's not the one. It must be in the other box.

Angela: Wait, wait. What is that?

Elsbeth: Oh, just another gown. It is not your type at all.

Angela: But--I am certain you are right. But may I see it, just to be sure?

Elsbeth: Of course. But I do not think you will like it.

(Elsbeth shakes out a third gown and veil and hangs them over the first two)

Elsbeth: For your consideration. Brocade silk with velvet trim and bows at the sleeves, waist, and hem. Triple-flounce with piping. Veil to match of the finest illusion net. Fifty pounds the set.

Angela: Oh--it is *divine*! Oh--I do wish Sarah would come back.

Elsbeth: I'll put it away. You have already chosen wisely.

Angela: No, no. No, no. No. One must show proper respect for one's bereavement. And truly, *William* would love this best of all.

Elsbeth: You must do what you think most appropriate. I cannot fault your choice.

(Sarah returns just as Angela is trying on the veil)

Angela: Do you like it, Sarah?

(Pause)

Sarah: It looks expensive. But I cannot stay. There's a message I must see to immediately.

(Sarah exits)

Angela: No! Come back this instant!

Elsbeth: Have no care, Mrs. Springer. We shall look after you.

Angela: Well, I think this must be all. I see I must fetch my purse myself. How much is that, then?

(Margaret works out the figures and shows the notepad to Elspeth)

Elsbeth: Fifty-two pounds, ten pence, for the gown and veil, the cards, and the handkerchiefs.

Angela: Oh, but the petticoat, also. And perhaps two pair of silk stockings.

Elsbeth: That will be fifty-seven pounds, ten pence. I fear I must make one further recommendation. For your consideration. Two sets of gloves, six-button for day and twelve-button for evening wear.

Angela: Yes, of course. Why didn't I think of that?

Elsbeth: You have a proper cloak, I presume? And shoes? Fans and a lace parasol with fringe?

Angela: Oh, dear Miss Watcher, how do you think of everything?

Elsbeth: Ah, such is the task of the professional widow.

Angela: Perhaps you would be so kind as to prepare a complete inventory for me.

Elsbeth: I am at your disposal.

(Elsbeth takes the notepad and writes while Angela grows increasingly curious)

Angela: Oh, you must tell me. What more can there be?

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Elsbeth: A necklace, earrings, and a brooch--these must be ordered. But I do happen to have this on hand.

(She presents a choker of jet beads. Angela gasps and takes it from Elspeth, who fastens it around Angela's neck)

Elspeth: For your consideration. A choker of jet beads--traditional, elegant, suitable for day and evening wear.

Angela: **(Admiring herself in the mirror)** Breathtaking.

Elspeth: Indeed. May I also suggest several hats, one for church, and a scarf for chilly evenings at the opera--no sooner than six months, you understand.

Angela: I do so love the opera. And plays. And the exhibitions. And sea-bathing.

Elspeth: Sea-bathing costumes can be had. And you must have a mourning bicycle. It is an admirable method of assuaging grief and getting wholesome exercise. I believe you have two daughters?

Angela: Yes. Just two. But oh--they must have complete wardrobes as well.

Elspeth: A simple thing. And just last week I read of the most charming idea from Paris. Every little girl will love to have a mourning doll dressed just as she is.

Angela: How clever people are!

Elspeth: I hesitate to mention it, but you will want to consider your half-mourning now, so it doesn't become burdensome later.

Angela: Half-mourning?

Elspeth: I admit, few people are aware of the niceties of half-mourning. But you must know that it is quite improper, once the mourning period is over, to return directly to one's wardrobe from before the time of one's bereavement.

Angela: What must I do?

Elspeth: It is very simple. You must have on hand a transitional wardrobe. The most fashionable half-mourning colours of this season consist of pale grays, pearl, violet, lavender, and heliotrope.

Angela: *Heliotrope.* How soon can I go into half-mourning?

Elspeth: The soonest--six months. You must bear in mind that you are a widow, my dear. But I assure you--the time will fly.

Angela: Miss Watcher, I must be frank. The cost for it all--I fear it is beyond my purse.

Elsbeth: Many in your situation face such a fear. But I ask you this--has your husband provided well for you at such a time?

Angela: Indeed, yes. He took out a substantial life insurance policy through the British and Prudential Insurance Company, but his lawyer has yet to deliver it.

Elsbeth: Then you must have no worries. He will have considered everything on your behalf, including your immediate necessities following his unhappy fate.

Angela: William was always so thoughtful. Yes, he will have thought of everything. Dear Miss Watcher, you must place the order as soon as possible. But first--

Elsbeth: Yes, Mrs. Springer?

Angela: I have heard of a garment that you have not mentioned--and I believe I would dearly love to have one.

Elsbeth: **(Smiles conspiratorially)** I suspect you mean--a merry widow?

Angela: Yes, indeed. Just so. What a lovely name--it inspires such a lifting of the heart. It is more of a thing than a mere corset, is it not?

Elsbeth: Indeed, it is. **(Takes a merry widow from a box and holds it up)** For your consideration, the finest silk over whalebone from the Arctic seas, lace woven by nuns at a convent in Florence, satin ribbons embroidered with forget-me-nots, and laces of the most durable cotton cord.

Angela: **(Shivers with anticipation)** I should love to wear it--with my new gown.

Elsbeth: **(Gestures at the dressing screen)** May I assist you?

(During the following, Angela dresses behind the screen. Elsbeth remains visible but helps Angela with buttons, pins, etc. Margaret hands Elsbeth required items, puts away the extra dresses, and exits, taking the extra boxes with her)

Angela: Your little girl is very clever. Such a quiet one, too. Mine are always singing and laughing. Fighting, too, about the most ridiculous things.

Elsbeth: A foundling, I admit, but she's training up very well. Poor creature. She was just a few weeks old when her mother died--of asphyxiation.

Angela: Not to know her mother! How tragic.

Elsbeth: Yes, they say she looks just like her at that age. Despite her early loss, I do believe there is something of her mother in her. She knows things, sometimes. Unspoken, unheard things. Things customers need that they aren't even aware of themselves. She is invaluable.

(Angela steps out from the screen and twirls before the full-length mirror)

Angela: How do I look?

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Elsbeth: Splendid. How right you were to choose this gown, this veil.

Angela: I shall give you a note to present to my lawyer for payment. You may take it today if you like.

Elsbeth: The Inconsolable Grief Department of Watcher, Talker, and Strike is honored by your custom.

(Elsbeth holds out her hand)

Angela: Is that what I think it is?

Elsbeth: This mourning ring? It's the latest thing in New York, but I don't know that London will take to it.

Angela: London may not, but I will.

(Elsbeth nods, smiling, takes the ring from her finger, and gives it to Angela, who puts it on and admires it)

Elsbeth: Good-bye for now, Mrs. Springer.

Angela: Good-bye.

(Elsbeth exits. Angela happily twirls and dances with her veil, takes it off and tosses it on the fainting-couch. Sarah enters)

Sarah: Oh, no. Oh, dear. Oh, no.

Angela: Where have you been?

Sarah: What have you done? Never mind. I've been to the train station and brought you--a package.

Angela: What is it?

Sarah: I'm afraid to say, now. It's on the doorstep.

Angela: Don't be foolish. Bring it in this instant.

Sarah: I thought I should prepare you first.

Angela: Why are you so mysterious? What is it?

Sarah: It's--it's Mr. Springer.

Angela: What? Oh, dear. Why on earth did you bring him here? He should be at the funeral home.

Sarah: But he can't go to the funeral home like this.

Angela: Why? Didn't they embalm him before they sent him back to London?

Sarah: He can't go there because--he's alive.

(Angela staggers and collapses on the fainting-couch)

Angela: Alive!

Sarah: He wants to see you. The train conductor identified the wrong man.

Angela: Go get him at once.

(Sarah exits. Angela happily whirls about the room)

Angela: Oh, my dear William! **(She pauses before the full-length mirror)** Oh, my new gown . . . **(She starts for the door)** Oh, my dear William! **(Clasping her veil)** Oh, my new lovely wardrobe.

William: **(Off)**Angela!

(Angela flings the veil over the screen, along with any other accoutrements. She grabs her dressing-gown and ties it over her new gown just as William enters)

Angela: Oh, my dear, dear William!

(They embrace)

William: Dear Angela! Are those tears? Surely you don't weep to see me?

Angela: No--I mean, yes--that is--

William: Dear girl, what is it?

Angela: Well, dearest, first I thought you had been smashed up in the railway accident. They said so. Then--well, I've gone and ordered a--mourning dress--already.

William: Indeed? I should like to see it.

Angela: It was a little bit expensive. I--I'll--cancel the order.

William: That woman leaving the house just as I came in--she's one of those professional widows, isn't she? She did give me a look when I tipped my hat. And that little girl--I expect she chases cats in the dark. Don't be silly--you mustn't rob them of a whole day's effort. How expensive can one dress be? After all you've been through, you deserve a new dress.

Angela: I--I'll show it to you in a moment. First, I need Sarah to take a message. I'll meet you in the parlour. We'll have tea.

William: **(Laughing)** My dear girl, you mustn't look so grim. It was all a prank--All Fools Day! A week early, so you'd truly be surprised. I sent the message. I intervened with the newspapers so your notice went unpublished. The editors--we all belong to the same club. They thought it a capital joke.

Angela: **(Distracted, a creeping touch of anger)** A joke! How you did fool me. Silly William.

William: Just as in the old days--when we were first married--before the children--you remember. You did love to pull pranks on me. Do you remember the first time I asked you to marry me? You said no!

Angela: Yes, I remember.

(William kisses her on the cheek)

William: I don't suppose you've ordered one of those--hm--merry widows--we gentlemen have heard about?

Angela: **(Blushing)** Well, yes, William, I confess, I have.

William: Oh, I should like to see that! But I shall bide a little while and meet you for tea in the parlour. No salt in the sugar bowl, my dear, just to get back at me. You'll think of something much more clever.

(Taps her head then exits. Angela gazes at herself in the full-length mirror, smooths her skirt and her hair, and heads for the door.)

Margaret enters, and Angela steps back. Margaret curtsies and holds out a small red tin box)

Margaret:

For your consideration.

(Angela takes the box. Margaret curtsies and exits. Angela gazes at the box, then at the audience, then at the door. The Mary Ann Cotton nursery rhyme can be heard as lights fade)