

ASSUNTA Aunt Adelaide, I've got all the potatoes prepared, but I'd like you to come and check if you don't mind.

ADELAIDE (*getting up*) Right. I'll just put this sewing to one side for a minute, Donna Amalia. If you want anything else doing, just give me a call, won't you?

AMALIA Well, if Rituccia wakes up . . .

ASSUNTA Oh, I can cope with that. I don't mind. I'm quite happy to sit with her.

ADELAIDE There's a good girl. Isn't she a lovely girl, Donna Amalia? Bless her, I could eat her I could. I could eat her all up. See you later then. Bye. (*Exits*)

ASSUNTA (*hesitantly*) Donna Amalia.

AMALIA Yes?

ASSUNTA There's something I wanted to ask you. What it is, you see, is that . . . Oh I say, what a lovely smell. You're wearing scent, aren't you? (*Goes to the dresser and its multitude of bottles*) Oh, I do love things like this. I like to call them toilettries, you know. (*Picks up bottle of eau de cologne*) Is this what you're wearing? What a gorgeous bottle. Ever so glamorous, isn't it? I suppose Don Errico bought it for you, did he?

AMALIA No, he did not. I bought it myself. With my own money. What's Don Errico got to do with it?

ASSUNTA Well, I mean to say . . . I mean . . . well, everyone's talking, aren't they? They're saying things about you and . . . and . . . Oh dear. (*She starts to giggle*)

AMALIA What are people saying? Come on. Spit it out. What are people saying?

ASSUNTA Nothing. Honestly. It's just me. I'm always putting my foot in it. Honestly. Aunt Adelaide's always going on at me about the way I blurt things out I didn't ought to. She says I talk too much. Don't take any notice of me. Ignore me. It's just the way I am. I'm a bit scatty,

you see and . . . (*Her giggling turns into near hysterical laughter*) Oh dear. It's always the same. I just start laughing for no reason at all.

AMALIA Why?

ASSUNTA Oh, don't say things like that. It only makes matters worse. Oh dear, oh dear, I just don't know what comes over me. I don't. Honestly.

AMALIA Assunta, I have to tell you there are times when you drive me clean up the wall.

ASSUNTA I know. I can't help it. I do it to everyone. I think I must have a weakness somewhere. (*Struggles desperately to control her laughter. Finally succeeds*) There. It's over now. Fingers crossed, eh? Right. Well, what I wanted to ask you was . . . well, I was going to ask Aunt Adelaide, but she knows less than I do about it, and what you being a woman of the world and . . .

AMALIA For heaven's sake, spit it out, will you?

ASSUNTA Yes. Right. Well, what I wanted to know is this - am I a virgin?

AMALIA How in God's name am I supposed to know?

ASSUNTA Well, the thing is, you see, the thing is I got married by proxy.

AMALIA What?

ASSUNTA To Ernesto Santafede on the twenty-fourth of March 1941. He was on military service, you see, and . . . isn't that a lovely dress? Is it new?

AMALIA Yes. The dressmaker came round with it special yesterday. Now get on with it, will you?

ASSUNTA Yes, certainly. Well, the thing is, you see, he had to go off to North Africa while we were engaged, and that was the last I saw of him till after we were married. But we never got together properly as husband and wife, you see, because when he came back home on fourteen days leave, we were supposed to have this room all to

ourselves. Oh, it was a lovely room. Aunt Adelaide had done it up special with clean sheets so we could . . . we could . . . well, you know - so we could be alone. It was so romantic. I'd got myself all dolled up really nice. I used up a whole bottle of scent and then . . . (*Mimics sound of air raid sirens*) . . . well, we had no time to do anything except make a bolt for the shelter. We were down there the whole fortnight he was on leave. And then he had to go back. And I haven't seen or heard of him since. Actually I tell a lie. He did get a message through once. He didn't send it personal. It came via this cousin by marriage of a friend of mine who was in Rome at the time. And he bumped into this old lady who happened to be coming through Naples on her way to Calabria and . . .

AMALIA Yes, yes, yes. But what was the message?

ASSUNTA Well, there was nothing to it really. She said he'd been taken prisoner. And then a friend of his who'd come back from the front said he'd been killed. And then someone else said they'd seen him alive. And then someone else said . . . So what I'm asking is this - am I technically a virgin or not?

AMALIA Of course you are, if you haven't been with your husband properly. But until you know one way or the other what's happened to him, you're still a married woman.

ASSUNTA Oh, I see.

AMALIA You can't get married again, if that's what you're thinking.

ASSUNTA Oh no. I don't want to get married again. I couldn't anyway. Out of respect. (*Shows AMALIA her husband's photograph in a locket she's wearing round her neck*) See? That's him. The one with the bemused expression. That's why I always wear mourning. Except when

someone comes along and tells me he's alive. Then I take it off. Then someone else says, no, he isn't, and so back it goes on again. It's on off, on off all the time. It's making me dizzy. It's ridiculous. I just want to be one thing or the other. Not that anyone notices. Who cares about me? Who gives a fig?

(*Enter ERRICO from the street. He wears a flashy light grey suit with a flower in his buttonhole, an expensive hat, a brightly coloured tie and yellow shoes. He has an enormous diamond ring on his finger and comes in slowly as though he owns the place. He's very pleased with himself and conscious that he has all the women of Naples eating out of his hand*)

ERRICO Donna Amalia! Here I am. All yours.

AMALIA My oh my, Don Errico. Just look at you. Happy birthday, my dear.

ERRICO Thank you. Thirty-six today. Getting on a bit, eh?

ASSUNTA Thirty-six? That's not old. You're still in your prime. You've got years to go before your teeth start to drop out.

AMALIA (*hurriedly*) I was expecting you sooner, Errico.

ERRICO Well, I did try. I wanted to thank you for that enormous bunch of roses you sent round this morning. And, of course, for all the trouble you've gone to over my birthday. I mean, having it in your own house and everything, it's . . .

AMALIA It's no trouble at all, Errico. Good Lord, you can't spend your birthday on your own. You have to spend it here with us like one of the family.

ERRICO I'm very touched, Amalia. But I don't want you putting yourself out on my account. There's no need to. Amedeo and I are seeing to everything. All you've got to