

ASSUNTA Oh yes. She's got a way with them, you see. I think it's her voice and . . .

AMALIA Why don't you nip back home, Assunta, and put that meat out of harm's way?

ASSUNTA Ah yes, the meat. Silly me. I'd quite forgotten. Bye bye then.

AMALIA Goodbye, Assunta. (*ASSUNTA exits to street. As she does so TERESA and MARGHERITA push past her and enter the room. They are two girls of MARIA'S age, heavily made-up and flashily dressed with teetering high heels and short skirts.*)

TERESA Hi there, Donna Amalia.

AMALIA Good day to you, my dear.

MARGHERITA Is Maria ready yet?

AMALIA She was well on the way last time I saw her.

(*Eyes their clothes coldly*) I see you're all dolled up in your

Sunday best. So where are you gadding off to this time?

TERESA Oh, we're just going for a little stroll round.

AMALIA Really? You want to be careful of those little strolls of yours, you know. I keep trying to tell that to Maria, but I might as well be talking to a brick wall. And, by the way, who's this American sergeant I keep hearing about? Why has he never come round here? Why has he never introduced himself?

TERESA I think he's a bit on the shy side, Donna Amalia. But he's a lovely fella. Oh yes, real nice he is. The trouble is he doesn't speak a word of Italian and I think he's a bit worried he might make a fool of himself in front of you, you see.

AMALIA (*coldly*) I see.

MARGHERITA It's not like what you think, Donna Amalia. The thing is he's had to send off for all the papers, you see, because over there you have to get the permission of the President himself in person before you can get married, you see. As soon as he gets the papers

he'll be round here like a shot to ask you properly for her hand. Oh yes, he wants to do everything right and proper.

AMALIA Really? Is that so?

TERESA Oh yes. Now you're not to worry yourself, Donna Amalia. I know you say we've got to watch out and be careful, but it's not like that. Honestly. The point is they have a different way of looking at things, the Americans. They don't see anything wrong in putting their arms round you in the street. It's . . . well, it's just their way of being friendly, isn't it?

AMALIA Strange it's only girls they do it with. You never see them walking round with their arms round each other, do you? Still, I suppose it's their way of looking at things, eh?

TERESA Course it is, Donna Amalia, course it is. They have a whole different outlook on life from us. They're more relaxed. You know, they're more easy-going and . . . I don't know . . . free and easy. Anyway, Maria's got it made. They're going to get married and he's taking her back to America. Actually it was me he fell in love with first.

AMALIA Really?

TERESA Oh yes. Then he met Maria and said he liked her better. He was ever so honest about it. He said straight to my face: 'Your friend is much nicer than you.' Just like that. Wasn't it honest of him? Next evening he brought one of his mates with him and we got on like a house on fire. He fell in love with me on the spot. And I liked him much better than Maria's bloke. He was nicer, you see. So I said to him: 'Look, I've got this friend called Margherita. Can you find someone for her?' So he brought another mate along and now we're all fixed up — three blokes and three girls.

MARGHERITA I can't stand mine. He's too fat.

AMALIA Well, there's no problem there, dear. Have a word with Maria's bloke and tell him to find you something nicer. I'm sure he'd be only too happy to oblige. They're like that, the Americans, aren't they?

(Enter MARIA from her room. She, too, is flashily dressed)

So what time can I expect you back home?

MARIA I haven't a clue. I'll come back when I've done what I'm going out for. Right?

AMALIA (moving towards RITUCCIA'S room) I suppose you know your sister's poorly, do you?

MARIA Yes. I was aware of that.

AMALIA Good. Just as long as you bear it in mind while you're out taking your little stroll. (Exits to RITUCCIA'S room)

TERESA Right then. Are we all fit?

MARIA Yes. But I don't know why. It's a week now since I've seen him. We make a date, and he doesn't bother to turn up.

TERESA Well, maybe, he'll turn up today, Maria.

MARIA It's all the same to me. I couldn't care less. Ah, it's my own fault. I got myself into it, so I suppose I'll just have to get myself out of it. Still, I wouldn't half mind seeing him one last time. One last time and I could give him a real sharracking. A sharracking he'd remember for the rest of his life.

TERESA Well, I asked mine last night and he promised me faithful he'd bring yours today.

MARIA Look, I'm telling you. He's gone. He's vamoosed and he's not coming back. And in a couple of days yours'll have gone, too.

TERESA Well, if he has, good luck and good riddance.

MARGHERITA I can't stand mine. He's too fat.

TERESA Honest to God, Margherita, here we are up to our necks in it and all you can do is gripe about his weight.

MARGHERITA I know. And he's bald, too.

(Enter from RITUCCIA'S room AMALIA and ADELAIDE just as the girls are about to leave)

AMALIA Hoi. You. Maria. Just make sure you're back at a decent time tonight. Understand?

MARIA Yes, mother, yes. As I said - I'll be back when I'm ready. Come on then, you two. Let's scoot. (They exit into street)

ADELAIDE Wasn't it lovely seeing her sleeping there so peaceful, bless her little cotton socks? You know, she doesn't look as feverish to me as she did. She seems better in herself, doesn't she?

AMALIA It's always the same with kids. One minute they're up. Next minute they're down. You never know where you are with them.

ADELAIDE Oh, you're right there, love. You're dead right. Now then, if there's anything else you want, please don't hesitate to ask, will you?

AMALIA Well, as a matter of fact, I was wondering if you'd mind sewing a button on this shirt of Amedeo's. (She brings out a work basket and indicates the shirt and the button) You'll find a needle and thread in the basket.

ADELAIDE I'll do it right away, love. Only too happy to oblige.

(She sits at the table to start the work. Enter from street FRANCO carrying various packages of food. He is followed by the wine man with a cask of wine on his shoulders and carrying a length of rubber tubing for siphoning the wine into bottles. The wine man goes straight through into the scullery)